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Under Jeff Bissell, the Foothill College women's water polo team has been a regular participant in the playoffs this decade. But this year could be the Owls' best chance yet at claiming that elusive Northern California title.

The team is teeming with talent and off to a sizzling start that has Bissell believing this could be the season.

"This is maybe our best shot at winning a NorCal championship, which is exciting," said Bissell, in his ninth year as coach.

Foothill appears to be on its way to winning the Coast Conference for the fourth year in a row. The Owls finished in first place five out of the last six years, automatically qualifying for the postseason. They advanced as far as the NorCal final once, falling to Sierra in 2004.

Bissell acknowledged it won't be easy to reach the regional final, but the Owls don't lack for motivation after getting bounced in the opening round by eventual champ Santa Rosa last year.

"Our main goal at the start of the season was to win the conference and qualify for postseason play and set ourselves up from there," said Bissell, Coast Conference Coach of the Year in 2008.

So far, so good. Foothill is 2-0 in the conference, 12-2 overall. The Owls have outscored their opponents 148-79.

"It's a good start," Bissell said.

Two of Foothill's best players graduated from local high schools. Leading scorer Kendall Preston is from Mountain View High and standout goalie Lauren Pye comes from Los Altos High.

Preston not only tops the team in goals (39) and assists (17), but the freshman utility player also leads the state in steals (58).

"She's one of my go-to girls," Bissell said. "Kendall guards the 2-meter position, which is usually the other team's best offensive player, and does a great job stepping up."

Preston recorded five steals and four goals in last week's 10-9 win at second-place Merced.

Pye made 14 saves in the Oct. 7 win, in which the Owls rallied from a four-goal deficit in the third quarter. The sophomore's 150 saves this season are the second-most in the state.

"She's doing great," Bissell said of Pye, a 2008 second team all-conference pick. "She and Kendall are like our battery on defense; they work well together."

Foothill has received sizable contributions from other players as well. Three freshmen starters are closing in on 30 goals each: center Jen Sandstrom (29), defender Mara Blikslager (28) and driver Melissa Sullivan (25).

"The balance in scoring for us is pretty amazing," Bissell said. "That's one of the things that helps us - teams can't focus on stopping one player. Take one away, and we have second, third and fourth options."

Sullivan is a Homestead High grad, Sandstrom is out of Independence High and Blikslager is an international student (Holland).

Defensively, Foothill has benefited from the experience of Tatiana Sheikhezai. The sophomore driver from Menlo-Atherton High is second on the team in steals with 30. Sheikhezai also has 16 goals, along with 16 steals.

Although this isn't one of the bigger rosters Bissell's had, he's happy with his team of 10.

"It's a small group and they all know their roles," he said. "I really think this is one of the top groups I've had in my nine years here. They all get along and enjoy each other in and out of the pool."

Foothill is scheduled to visit Cabrillo 3:30 p.m. today.

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