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2 - 11 3 31 .258 .3 - 11 4 34 ~206 4 - 12 10 53 .038

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Bulls kill FSU's bid for NCAA Round 2

Florida State is plagued by errors, while South Florida flies high on the power of Paula Araujo.

By Mark Fitzhenry
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER
GAINESVILLE

After 33 previous matches and after four hard-fought games Friday at the O'Connell Center, what separated Florida State and the second round of the NCAA volleyball tournament would be their ability to stop a savvy, powerful 26-year-old outside hitter.

And when it mattered most, FSU had no answer for South Florida's Paula Araujo.

So FSU's first NCAA Tournament appearance in four years ended Friday with a tough 8-15, 15-4, 15-13, 7-15, 15-9 loss to the Bulls in a first-round Central Region match.

FSU, picked to finish fifth in the Atlantic Coast Conference, finishes 25-9, its best won-loss record since 1992. Among its regulars, only senior defensive specialist Christy Minko won't return.

While South Florida (26-8) prepares to face host Florida (31-3) today at 2 p.m., FSU is left to contemplate how Araujo almost singlehandedly clinched the match. Araujo had 25 kills; the rest of the Bulls had 28.

Four of Araujo's kills came after South Florida took an 8-7 lead in Game 5, which unlike the first four games a team does not have to serve to get a point. Araujo's late kills gave USF leads of 9-7, 11-8, 13-8 and 14-9.

"I always make sure Paula gets her share of sets," said South Florida setter Sarah Runka, whose 5,942 career assists are eighth in NCAA history. "It takes all my hitters, but Paula's obviously the lead one, the big one, the go-to person. She knows that.... I know when to give her the ball."

And the Lady Seminoles knew Araujo, South Florida's only player with double-digit kills, would get the ball. They just couldn't do much to stop her.

"I thought she was very, very good and we didn't stop her too much," FSU coach Cecile Reynaud said. "You just have to try and read her. We cut her off a couple times cross-court, but she's a very, very talented hitter and did a nice job."

The match bucked several trends for both teams. For only the second time in 23 matches, FSU lost after winning the first game. South Florida had lost all five matches that went to five games this season; FSU had been 2-0 in five-gamers. And South Florida won an NCAA Tournament match for the first time in four tries.

Some things don't change, however. FSU dropped to 0-7 this season in matches in which it hit below .200. The Lady Seminoles hit .143 with 32 errors — one error in every five kill attempts.

"We made the mistakes," said middle hitter Aisha Thornton, who led FSU with 17 kills and a .577 hitting percentage. "We didn't play the ball in. I think that was the point of (USF) winning, that we made the mistakes."

Three other FSU players had double-figure kills — Jen Werrick (13, .333), Susan Hawks (12, .108) and Holly Schneider (10, .043). Werrick, a freshman, had a season-high 22 digs for her ninth double-double in 13 matches.

Statistically, FSU had the edge. The Lady Seminoles hit better (.173 to .143), had more kills (61 to 53), dug more balls (74 to 62) and were barely outblocked (16 to 15). But seven receiving errors and a hot Araujo were enough of a difference.

"I think before we came into the tournament we were talking about, it's an even match with Florida State and it could possibly go to five games," South Florida coach Perri Hankins said. "We knew that could be a situation we could be in."