El Monte Union High School District
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PRESS RELEASE

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Arroyo High Alumna Returns to Help Lead Volleyball Team on Historic CIF Championship Run

EL MONTE – Twelve years after graduating from Arroyo High School, Melissa Castillo returned to her alma mater for her first season as a volleyball coach, helping lead the Knights to their first California Interscholastic Federation Southern Section (CIF-SS) championship appearance on Nov. 5, ending in a runner-up finish.

Arroyo dominated the CIF Southern Section Division 11 playoffs, sweeping four consecutive opponents to reach its first championship match in school history. The Knights defeated Ambassador Christian, Compton Early College, Mesrobian, and La Sierra Academy, advancing to the finals without giving up a single match. Arroyo ultimately finished as the Division 11 runner-up, earning their first ever spot in a CIF State tournament.

As a member of Arroyo's Class of 2014, Castillo began playing volleyball during her sophomore year before competing in club volleyball and continuing her athletic career at Mt. San Antonio College. Having developed a passion for the sport during her time at Arroyo, Castillo jumped at the opportunity to return to her former campus and share her experience with the next generation of Knights.

“There was no other place I would have wanted to start coaching other than where I went to school,” Castillo said. “I just wanted to share my knowledge of the sport I loved and then the team just took it and ran with it, and we went into areas that we didn't even foresee. It was a shock to most of us.”

The Knights practiced five days a week, from 3 to 5 p.m., beginning in June, dedicating months to developing their skills and confidence. Working alongside Arroyo's coaching staff, Castillo emphasized defensive strategy and mastering fundamentals through repetition. The team’s dedication extended beyond the volleyball court and into the classroom, earning a 3.67 cumulative GPA, with eight athletes achieving GPAs of 4.0 or higher. Coaches prioritized academic success by allowing flexibility for players who needed additional time to complete assignments before practice.

Senior captain Eli Gonzalez, along with co-captain Yatziri Garcia, helped foster team unity and encouraged teammates to build friendships outside of practice by gathering at each other's homes, grabbing food, or spending time together during lunch.

“This whole season has been full of development. We put in a lot of hard work and effort on and off the court.” Gonzalez said. “To be honest, in the final, it felt so surreal, like a movie. I couldn't believe it and I'm very happy to have gone that far with this group of girls. I think we all grew a close bond and connection with each other, which definitely helped us make it to state; we were just one big family.”

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After joining the volleyball program as a sophomore and advancing to varsity her junior year, Gonzalez said the team's strong bond made its historic championship appearance even more meaningful. Outside of volleyball, she also serves as captain of Arroyo's varsity girls soccer team and plans to attend California State University, Long Beach to study psychology and pursue a career in forensic psychology. Inspired by this season, she is also exploring opportunities to continue playing volleyball in college.

"There is something special about seeing an Arroyo graduate return to her alma mater and help the next generation of Knights make history," Superintendent Dr. Edward Zuniga said. "Coach Castillo and the entire coaching staff helped these student-athletes reach new heights, but it was the team's hard work and willingness to support one another that made this season possible. Their achievements on the court and in the classroom are something our entire community can be proud of."

PHOTO CAPTION:

EMUHSD_AHS VOLLEYBALL_1: Arroyo High School's girls' volleyball team celebrated a historic season, advancing to its first CIF Southern Section championship match and earning its first CIF State tournament appearance, marking a major milestone.

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