

CALEDONIA – It's hard not getting caught up in the momentum swings in a volleyball match.

But if the Caledonia High School players ever worried about flying too high or sinking too low, all they needed to do was to look at teammate Sophie Johnson.

The senior setter wouldn't divulge much, as if she was secretly holding four aces and didn't want to let anyone in on her secret. Johnson's ability to maintain a deadpan expression in any situation prompted Caledonia High volleyball coach Samantha Brooks to use the word "chill" to describe her.

"I think I am," Johnson said when asked if she felt she had that quality. "I haven't gotten too excited over everything because I try to keep the peace."

Johnson's demeanor is just one quality that should serve her well next season when she moves on to Northeast Mississippi Community College in Booneville to continue her academic and athletic careers. Johnson celebrated her decision Friday with family, friends and teammates at a signing ceremony at Caledonia High.

Johnson said it is important to keep a "poker face" when you're on the court, especially as a setter, the player who usually receives the first pass, selects a hitter and then passes the ball to set up a kill attempt. Setters are always moving and talking to

their teammates, so it is crucial that they manage the ebbs and flows that often come quickly in a match.

“It is definitely natural,” Johnson said. “I have never really thought about keeping my composure. I just have naturally done it.”

Johnson has played setter since she was 12 years old. In 2022, she transitioned from setter to right-side hitter and grew into the position as the season progressed and Caledonia moved closer to securing its first state championship. Brooks said Johnson never complained and finished fourth on the team in blocks, kills and hitting percentage.

“It was impressive for somebody to come in and play a completely different position that she was used to playing, and just the fact she was so open to changing positions and went with it,” Brooks said.

This past season, Johnson transitioned back to setter and was part of a senior class with Mary Beth Edmondson, Brianna Holliman, Wiselee Collier, Emma McKee, who was named the inaugural C Spire Miss Volleyball for Class 4A, Rylee Jernigan, Hailey Harris, Kaitlyn Truelock and Jessica Horton. The seniors helped lead Caledonia to a 28-11-1 record and the third round of the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 4A State Tournament, where they lost to Newton County. In 2022, that group played an integral role in Caledonia’s historic state title.

Collier and Holliman will continue their volleyball careers at Itawamba C.C. in Fulton, while Edmondson will play at Beville State C.C. in Alabama.

At Northeast Mississippi C.C., Johnson hopes to get an opportunity to play setter in the front row and be a part of the team's blocking. Johnson recalls dreaming about playing volleyball in college when she was younger. She said those feelings grew stronger as she moved through high school and developed more confidence that she could compete at that level.

Sophie also talked to her older sister, Camryn, who played volleyball at Caledonia High and recently completed her career at Mississippi University for Women, about Northeast Mississippi C.C. and received positive feedback.

Brooks said Sophie is a lot like Camryn in that she is a smart, athletic player who does anything the coach asks her to do. She said Sophie remained calm and exuded confidence that her teammates picked up. As a result, Caledonia had another strong season that helped Johnson earn an opportunity extend her volleyball career.

"I have not seen anything get Sophie flustered," Brooks said. "I am pretty calm as a coach, but even in club games I have seen her in, I have not seen her get flustered. She is pretty chill."

“She wasn’t one of our captains, but she certainly was one of our leaders. She did a good job of setting the tone as a setter.”