

Prairie spiked by Iowa City High

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Spirited students from both Iowa City High and Prairie packed the south stands of the Linn-Mar gym Tuesday night, cheering on their schools' volleyball teams in a Class 5A regional and trying hard to out-yell the other side.

Except for the fact that the Little Hawks brought with them a 6-foot tall Big Bird mascot, the outcome of the dueling students section seemed to be a draw.

Would that the match on the floor been equally close as eighth-ranked City High (24-10) dominated Prairie (23-14) in three sets and punched its ticket to next week's state tournament in Cedar Rapids.

The up-and-coming Prairie girls took a short-lived 12-11 lead in the first game but ended up losing, 25-20. They didn't lead again until briefly at 3-2 in the third game but lost that one as well, 25-19.

In between, the young and vastly improving Little Hawks led all the way in game two as they coasted 25-14.

"I thought we had a great game plan coming in," said Prairie Coach Lynnette Stecklein, who saw City High surprise the field by winning the MVC tourney championship on the same floor two weeks ago. "But they took us out of our game right away, and I thought we got a little tentative."

Though slightly undersized, the Little Hawks' front line pretty much neutralized the Hawks' big hitters. Prairie kills were few and far between.

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"Iowa City did a great job at the net," Stecklein said.

Sophomore Shannon Stamp was a fierce blocker all night for City High, and fellow sophomore Alexa Aldrich-Ingram seemed to play all over the court.

"They just never let the ball die," inspirational first-year coach Stecklein pointed out. "They kept the ball alive and won most of the long allies. And we had too many unforced errors.

"That was the difference: They just did a better job of taking care of their side."

Still, Stecklein said her junior-dominated squad made considerable headway this season by falling just one match short of the state tournament.

"This will give us confidence next year knowing we can compete at a high level," she said. "I think we'll be a little more relaxed in these types of situations.



"But these girls have been awesome. I'm very proud of them."

Hawks senior setter Mallory Jones, one of few to graduate, shares her coach's optimism about the future of the Prairie program.

"We've been focused and really improved this year. I couldn't ask for a better group of

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teammates," she said. "Tonight, the other team just hit the ball where we weren't."