

Prairie sweeps into 5A regional finals

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kate Busswitz was in grade school the last time the Cedar Rapids Prairie volleyball team made it to the state tournament.

"I was like 11 years old," she said Thursday night, smiling at the distant memory.

Now a polished 6-foot-1 high school senior, Busswitz and the Prairie Hawks need one more victory to reach the state tournament for the first time since 2008 and for only the third time in school history.

Prairie swept Waterloo West, 27-25, 25-18, 25-13, in the Class 5A regional semifinals Thursday to get one step closer to the promised land.

The eighth-ranked Hawks (31-7) will host 12th-ranked Dubuque Hempstead (24-11) in the regional finals at 7 p.m. Tuesday, with the winner advancing to the state tournament No. 12-15 at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids

"Oh my gosh. I can't even explain how bad we want it," Busswitz said. "It will be a tough one. We've got our whole student body ready to come to support us. It will be a close one."

Prairie has a 2-1 record against Hempstead in three matches this season. The Hawks lost to Hempstead early in the season, but they've won the last two meetings and beat them at the Mississippi Valley Conference tournament

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Busswitz said it will take "dedication and drive" to defeat the Mustangs a third time and make the state tournament.

Three other Metro teams will be playing in the regional finals Tuesday night.

The ninth-ranked Kennedy Cougars (28-9) will host 15th-ranked Ankeny, and the 10th-ranked Linn-Mar Lions (28-8) will host No. 11 Iowa City West in Class 5A matches.

The fourth-ranked Marion Indians (30-8) will meet Fort Madison in a Class 4A regional final on a neutral court in Washington (Iowa) on Tuesday night.

Prairie lost in the regional finals last year, but coach Lynnette Stecklein has thought all along that the Hawks had a good shot at making the state tournament this season.

"Absolutely," she declared. "This group has been steady into volleyball since they were in the sixth grade and they've really had a passion for it. They had some success as youth and then last year they took that step forward a little bit and gained that confidence.

"Coming in, we really had hopes of being in the state tournament," she said. "They've taken all of the steps that we've needed to take and now we just have to finish..

"I think the girls will seize the moment. I'm really very confident that this group is going to come in and make it happen. It's been their goal

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for a long time."

Prairie had some trouble seizing the moment in the first game against Waterloo West Thursday night. The Hawks trailed, 25-24, and were just one point away from a setback, but they regrouped and ticked off three straight points for a 27-25 victory.

Busswitz had a big kill for a 26-25 lead and the Hawks got the winning point when Waterloo West committed an error.

"I think we probably did have a few nerves," Stecklein said. "We played them twice and handled them pretty easily. They've been playing very well lately, too.

"We just had to settle down and play our tempo of ball. I felt we were a little tight the first set."

The Hawks pulled away from a 16-14 lead in the second game for a 25-18 victory, then had a much easier time in the third game for a 25-14 conquest.

"Our communication got better and our flow on the court got better," Stecklein said. "We got back into our tempo, our style of volleyball and that made a big difference."

Busswitz, who will play volleyball at the University of Northern Iowa, had a series of ferocious kills as the match moved along. She has a terrific vertical leap and the ability to hang in the air before bringing the hammer down.

Megan Oldenburger, Jenna Wagemester, Kenzie Soeken and Maddie Bell also collected a fair

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number of impressive kills in the match. The Hawks also got good work from Kendra Gaskill, their assist leader, along with Taylor Fisher, Rylee Blood, Haley Stecklein and Kristin Wahlert.

Waterloo West finished the season with a 14-25 record.