

Marion stuns Xavier for title

Written by Tom Fruehling

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All season long, the Marion High School girls have seemed to lack the killer instinct on the volleyball court.

“We've been struggling putting teams away,” acknowledged star defender Abby Phillips.

It looked like it might be more of the same Saturday in their own eight-team invitational tournament.

They reached the championship final with an upset over highly regarded Grundy Center, but quickly lost the first game to an even more formidable foe in Xavier.

The Saints had defeated them handily, 21-12, 21-16, earlier in the day and appeared poised to do it again.

Xavier all-stater Kayla Torson notched seven kills (including the first and last of the game) as the Saints cruised, 25-14, in the first set in the finals.

“They were gettin' us good,” said Phillips.

Then something clicked.

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Instead of folding, the young Indian girls took charge of the match. When they took a 13-12 lead in the second set, it marked the first time they'd been ahead of Xavier since scoring the opening point three games before in their first match.

"I don't know, it was like we suddenly started playing with heart," according to Phillips. "We really started playing with passion."



With tall hitters Johanna Steggall and Alyssa Thomas delivering key kills, Marion nursed its lead to 21-17. And while Xavier's gutsy Madsy Richards staved off defeat with three straight kills of her own, the Indians prevailed 25-20 to even the match.

"We stepped up when we needed to," said veteran Marion Coach Roxanne Paulsen of a roster laden with juniors and sophomores. "Our downfall this year has been losing close games. I'm really proud of the way the girls came back today."

The tiebreaker set was tight all the way, going back and forth but never by more than two points either way.

Taylor Wade's spike brought the Indians even at 13-13, and ace server Amanda Sahm finished off the 15-13 victory to finish the upset and claim the title.

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"The heart of this team finally came through," said Sahm. "We were reaching for every ball. We were getting kills. And we limited the number of errors."

Unforced errors, in fact, cost them in their morning match with Xavier. In the opening round of afternoon play against Grundy Center, however, they were almost flawless as they kept the ball in play until the other side made a mistake.

The Indians won out against Grundy, 28-26, 25-16, handing the No.8 team in Class 2A only its second loss of the season.

"Winning those games gave us a lot of confidence," Sahm said. "Those were big, big wins."

For Xavier, meanwhile, Coach Krista Johnson said her squad may have come into the championship final against Marion with too much confidence. The morning match was a fairly easy win, and the second meeting started out the same way.

"Then," said Johnson, "we seemed to lose our focus."

The Saints were short-handed since starter Erin Neuwohner sat out with a mild concussion and star setter Britni Scholtes played only part of the time due to a gimpy knee.

"We had to change our rotation," Johnson said. "But I thought our girls played very well overall."

"Marion is ranked for a reason. They're a very good team. And today they played with a lot of emotion."

The Indians (ranked No.12 in Class 4A) are now 10-7 for the year. Xavier (ranked No.8 in Class 4A) is 14-5.

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MARION INVITATIONAL

Pool A

Marion def. North Linn, 21-12, 21-9

Xavier def. Cascade, 21-11, 21-16

Marion def. Cascade, 21-11, 21-14

Xavier def. North Linn, 21-13, 21-7

Xavier def. Marion, 21-12, 21-16

Cascade def. North Linn, 21-19, 21-16

Pool B

Union def. Benton, 21-11, 21-15

Grundy Center def. Durant, 21-13, 21-17

Union def. Durant, 21-9, 21-11

Grundy Center def. Benton, 21-6, 21-10

Grundy Center def. Union, 21-14, 16-21, 15-11

Benton def. Durant, 21-12, 21-19

Semifinals

Marion def. Grundy Center, 28-26, 25-16

Xavier def. Union, 25-18, 25-16

Championship

Marion def. Xavier, 13-25, 25-20, 15-13