

Cougars pace Metro at MVC volleyball

Written by Tom Fruehling

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CEDAR FALLS – In the power-packed Mississippi Valley Conference volleyball tournament Saturday that featured way more nail-biters than blowouts, coming close was almost as good as winning.

The home team Tigers of Cedar Falls captured the crown by taming Iowa City West, 25-19 25-19, in the finals.

But five of the six Metro teams in the 14-school field won two of their three matches in pool play, and four of them advanced to the championship bracket.

Only Prairie (16-17) could be said to have had a disappointing day, losing all three morning matches and then splitting two in the consolation bracket.

Tough-luck Linn-Mar (23-13), also relegated to the lower bracket due to a quirk in the scoring system, ended up with the best record of them all at 4-1 after beating Dubuque Wahlert in the consolation finals.

“It was a tough field,” said Kennedy Coach Michelle Goodall, whose team lasted the longest by making it to the semifinals. “But that’s an advantage going into the regional tournament. It’s better to have a lot of knockdown drag-outs than some cakewalks.”

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After starting the morning with two wins, the Cougars (17-14) played three straight three-set matches. Even though they thoroughly dominated Xavier in their first game 21-7, they lost the final two 21-13, 15-12.

They bounced back to oust Iowa City High in a slugfest 25-20, 24-26, 17-15 before dropping the semifinals matchup with Iowa City West 25-22, 16-25, 15-13.

“It was kind of unusual for us to only win one of those three (three-set matches),” said Cougar senior leader Maddy Meier. “We usually win those.

“But this tournament was a huge step for us. Last weekend at Jefferson we didn't play at all well. We had five good practices this week and played really well in all of our games.

“This weekend was something special. I think it's going make people take notice of us,” said Meier.



Young teammate Anna Fluent agreed.

“We finished first in our pool,” said the sensational sophomore setter. “And we played a lot better against teams we'd played before.

“We stayed positive even when we got down. All around, I think we played the best we've

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played all year.”

Goodall said it was the mental mindset of her squad that carried the day.

“We were more in synch than we have been,” she said. “We just played really sharp. I thought we showed a lot of growth this weekend.”

Her counterpart at Jefferson, first-year Coach Mary Kay Van Oort, was more than pleased with the performance of her team. And why not?

The J-Hawks finished with a 4-32 record last year, and after splitting four matches Saturday sit at 17-20 this season. They won two out of three in pool play, but fell to Iowa City West 25-15, 26-24 in the quarterfinals.

“We started out on top of our game by beating Prairie,” Van Oort noted. “They beat us earlier in the year, so avenging that loss set the tone for our day.

“Winning that game gave the girls a lot of confidence. And then for us to take Hempstead (ranked No.3 in Class 5A) to 26-24 in our second game was like a moral victory.

“It was huge for us to get in the gold bracket this year and be in the top eight, that was something to be excited about,” Van Oort said. “I’m telling you, the girls felt a lot of pride.”

It showed in their showdown with West, too. Down 14-7 in the second set, the J-Hawks rallied to tie it 16-16 and then again at 24-24.

“The girls could have said, ‘OK, we’ve played good enough’ and then quit. But they came back,” said Van Oort.

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Jefferson's little 5-foot 2 libero Keanna "KeKe" Pledge knows the difference a year can make.

"In this tournament last year, we finished last," she said. "We didn't win a game. We wanted to play at a higher level and now we're doing it."

"We're playing like a team. We don't give up on each other. That would be like giving up on your family. And that's we are – like a family."

The Washington Warriors (15-19) also made a statement Saturday, advancing 2-1 out of pool play and then putting up a valiant effort against Hempstead in two 25-19 losses.

"We hung tough against some of the top teams in the state," said Warrior Coach Amy Faulkner. "We're just getting better all the time."

"The one thing we've got to work on is not letting up after we get some four or five-point runs. We have to finish our set."

Washington's all-state striker Dani Franklin said the team was "definitely happy" with their overall play.

"We lost a couple of close ones with some really good teams," she said. "But we communicated a lot better and stayed strong. I think we're playing our best right just at the right time."

Xavier, the only ranked Metro squad at No.4 in Class 4A, had an up and down day. While the Saints lost to Linn-Mar in pool play, they advanced to the championship round on the basis of more points.

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They then sleep-walked through a first-set 21-7 thrashing from Kennedy before righting themselves and taking the match 21-13, 15-12. Held in check in game one, Saints' spike specialist Kayla Torson notched 12 kills in the last two sets to rally her troops.

In the quarterfinals, Xavier challenged tourney champ Cedar Falls in a three-set dual but dropped the tiebreaker, 15-13.

"I don't know what was wrong in the first game with Kennedy," Saints Coach Krista Johnson admitted. "They came out fired up and with a lot of energy. We were really tight and just not mentally ready to play.

"But I'm proud of the way we bounced back. Instead of folding or just playing not to lose, we got more aggressive.

"Cedar Falls came out with tons of energy. They were at home, and they wanted to win their own tournament."

At the very least, the Saints can say they made them earn it.

MVC VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT

QUARTERFINALS

Hempstead def. Washington, 25-19, 25-19

Cedar Falls def. Xavier, 25-10, 21-25, 15-13

Kennedy def. Iowa City High, 25-19, 20-25, 17-15

Iowa City West def. Jefferson, 25-15, 26-24

SEMIFINALS

Cedar Falls def. Hempstead, 27-25, 25-16

Iowa City West def. Kennedy, 22-25, 25-16, 15-13

FINALS

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Cedar Falls def. Iowa City West, 25-19, 25-19

POOL A RESULTS

Hempstead def. Jefferson, 26-24, 21-11

Hempstead def. Wahlert, 23-25, 21-13, 15-8

Hempstead def. Prairie, 21-17, 21-15

Jefferson def. Prairie, 21-18, 21-12

Jefferson def. Wahlert, 21-12, 21-11

Wahlert def. Prairie, 11-21, 21-18, 16-14

POOL B RESULTS

Kennedy def. Linn-Mar, 22-20, 21-16

Xavier def. Kennedy, 21-7, 13-21, 15-12

Kennedy def. Dubuque Senior, 21-18, 21-10

Linn-Mar def. Xavier, 21-14, 17-21, 15-12

Linn-Mar def. Dubuque Senior, 21-19, 21-10

Xavier def. Dubuque Senior, 21-9, 21-7

POOL C RESULTS

Iowa City West def. Washington, 22-20, 21-18

Iowa City West def. Waterloo East, 21-8, 21-7

Iowa City West def. Waterloo West, 21-17, 21-18

Washington def. Waterloo East, 21-8, 21-12

POOL D RESULTS

Cedar Falls def. Iowa City High, 21-18, 21-19

Cedar Falls def. Waterloo West, 21-11, 21-13

Cedar Falls def. Waterloo East, 21-9, 21-11

Iowa City High def. Waterloo West, 21-11, 21-15