

J-Hawks fall to PV in regional finals

Written by Jim Ecker

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DAVENPORT - One by one, Amanda Ollinger hugged all of her teammates in the Jefferson locker room Tuesday night after the J-Hawks lost to fifth-ranked Pleasant Valley in the regional finals of the Class 5A volleyball tournament at Davenport Central.

There were plenty of tears, but also an underlying sense of accomplishment for a team that made it within one step of the state tournament after winning only four matches a year ago.

Pleasant Valley kept the hard-hitting Ollinger under wraps most of the night and swept Jefferson, 25-23, 25-16, 25-16 to earn a spot at the state tournament next week at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Ollinger led Class 5A in kills this year by a wide margin, but she managed only 12 kills all night against Pleasant Valley defenders who showed no fear of the 6-foot-1 sophomore's powerful shots.

"They're a very good defensive team. They didn't let any balls die," said Ollinger. "That's what a really good defensive team does. You just have to keep swinging and hopefully they'll mess up, but they wanted it really bad."

Jefferson Coach Mary Kay Van Oort gave the Jefferson fans a thumbs-up as the J-Hawks left the court, thanking the Jefferson students and fans for their support in a match that was played 90 minutes from home, but also making a statement about what her team did this year.

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Van Oort consoled her unhappy players in the locker room, reminding them of what they accomplished.

"As you would expect, there were some tears pretty quickly, and so we stopped them from that right away," Van Oort said after her first season as head coach came to an end. "We said, 'That's OK, that can happen. But right now, stop and think about how great it's been, how great of a year we had.'"

Jefferson finished with a losing record at 19-22, but the J-Hawks upset Iowa City West in the regional tournament and made great strides.

"Things were going pretty well," said Van Oort. "We were playing better than we ever thought we could. We were coming together. It was a success, definitely a success."



Ollinger, just a sophomore with a bright future in volleyball and basketball, grasped the big picture after hugging her teammates and shedding a few tears herself.

"I feel a little cold tonight, but the whole season has been fantastic," she said. "The seniors worked their butt off. Everyone worked their butt off all season."

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"We're really sad it had to end this way," she said, "but we wish PV good luck in the state tournament."

Ollinger had her best game in the opener with six kills, giving Jefferson a chance to take a 1-0 lead in the match. An ace serve by Kaylie Zitek gave the J-Hawks a 21-20 edge, but Pleasant Valley ran off four straight points for a 24-21 advantage.

Jefferson pulled within 24-23, but the Spartans won the set on a kill by Emma Whigham, a quick leaper with a powerful right arm.

It was all downhill from there for the J-Hawks. Pleasant Valley dominated the next two sets and soon began posing for pictures with their regional banner.

Ollinger was averaging 6.17 kills per set when the night began, but she averaged just four kills per set against Pleasant Valley. The Spartans foiled Ollinger's blasts with a series of outstanding (and courageous) digs, and they also did an excellent job of blocking some of Ollinger's best shots at the net.

On one telling point in the match, Pleasant Valley handled four straight kill-shots by Ollinger and kept the ball in play long enough to win the marker themselves.

"We knew we would have to step up our defense another notch to stop Amanda," said Pleasant Valley Coach Stacey Ruff. "We just knew what her tendencies were after watching her play. I thought our girls put themselves in position to block the ball."

Pleasant Valley does not have a tall team, but the Spartans have some quick jumpers and powerful kill-shot artists.

"I give them so much credit," Van Oort said about Pleasant Valley. "I wish we had done a few things differently, but I think our girls kept working hard. They were frustrated, but they weren't

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mad at each other. They stayed fairly positive with each other and kept working hard.

"Pleasant Valley played amazing defense," she said. "Defense wins games. I don't know if they always play that well, but they were really good. Maybe they were wearing Amanda out."

Van Oort saluted her assistant coaches for helping with the successful campaign: Her husband Doug Van Oort, Amy Norton, Will Norton, Tammy Siepman and Rachel Henkelmann.

"They were amazing," she said. "Their contributions, their ideas all season have been outstanding."

Five Des Moines-area teams made the Class 5A state tournament. There are two from the Mississippi Athletic Conference and just one (Hempstead) from the Mississippi Valley Conference.

The tournament starts Tuesday at 10 a.m. with Dowling (30-8) facing Ankeny (37-4) and Johnston (32-4) meeting Ankeny Centennial (32-8). The other first-round contests pit Hempstead (34-5) against Bettendorf (34-2) and Pleasant Valley (28-6) against Urbandale (34-5) at noon.