

Marion cruises to 4A state tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

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MAQUOKETA - Roxanne Paulsen has been operating a successful volleyball program at Marion High School for many years and won a state title in 2008, but none of the players on this year's team had ever played in the state tournament when the season began.

That changed Tuesday night.

The third-ranked Indians dominated DeWitt Central, 25-13, 25-13, 25-18, in the Class 4A regional finals and claimed the school's first trip to the state tournament since 2009.

Marion (33-7) will face Charles City (41-4) in the quarterfinals of the state meet next Tuesday, Nov. 11 at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids at 4 p.m. on Court 2.

"It's been five years," Paulsen noted. "None of these girls were part of the high school squad the last time we went, so it was nice to be able to do it tonight.

"They've been building toward this the last couple of years. It's nice to have these girls realize their dream, too."

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Marion cruised in the first two sets against DeWitt Central, but the Indians had to rally from a 12-10 deficit in the third set before gaining control again.

"It's really exciting. We worked all season for this," said sophomore Morgan Swanger, who led a balanced attack with nine kills. "We really wanted to do our best and play for Abby."

Abby is Abby Phillips, one of Marion's top players who has been sidelined for several weeks with a broken right hand. Paulsen said there's a chance Phillips will be able to play in the state tournament, but her status is unknown at this point.

Amanda Sahm played a strong match for the Indians with 18 assists, six kills and six digs. As a senior, this was her last chance to participate in the state tournament.



"I'm so excited," Sahm said after dissolving in tears. "We've worked so hard for it. The last three years we had the chance to make it, and this year we had the confidence and knew we could."

Sahm will continue her volleyball career next year at Gardner-Webb University, a Division I program in North Carolina, and now she'll finish her prep career in downtown Cedar Rapids on the biggest high school stage in the state. "We just know we have nothing to lose," she said. "We're going to play free. It's going to be exciting, with a lot of people supporting us. It's going to be great."

This will be Paulsen's fifth trip to the state tournament with Marion and the sixth in school history. She wasn't sure what was going to happen after Phillips got hurt and the Indians struggled in the final rounds of the Wamac Conference tournament, but they quickly regrouped and upset Iowa City High in the final match of the regular season.

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"Until they clicked against City High, we weren't 100 percent sure how we were going to handle things," said Paulsen. "I think the City High game gave us a lot of confidence. That was a really critical time."

Marion played a tough schedule this season against Class 5A schools like Johnston, Dowling, Linn-Mar and City High along with some difficult matches in the Wamac Conference, and all that stiff competition helped get the Indians to state.

"I think the really hard tournaments really helped us," said Swanger. "It challenged us."

"We learned a lot in those matches," agreed Paulsen. "One thing we learned is how to handle pressure. We needed work on that."

Alyssa Thomas and Isabella Sade had eight kills against DeWitt Central. Olivia Frazier finished with six kill shots.

Tanea Westhoff was 19-for-19 on serves and had seven digs. Caitlyn Smith was 15-for-15 on serves and provided 15 assists. Johanna Steggall had six digs and Ashley Ohl had five digs.

Harlan (38-2) will face Lewis Central (23-14), West Delaware (43-2) will meet Indianola (32-9) and Heelan will play Clear Creek-Amana (26-9) in the

other first-round matches at the state tournament Tuesday afternoon. The semifinals are scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 13 at noon with the finals on Friday, Nov. 14 at 12:15 p.m.