

Cougars' upset bid falls short

Written by Clete Campbell

Tuesday, 05 November 2013 23:04 -

DUBUQUE – The young Cinderella's spike had a sometimes sharp edge Tuesday night.

Her defense was often money, even against great odds and adversity. Her poise was perfect. Her resolve to pull the sizable upset was unshakeable.

"We really wanted it," sophomore setter Anna Fluent said.

The only thing Cedar Rapids Kennedy didn't have was a victorious closing technique.

Emerging as anything but a pushover to a Class 5A No. 8-ranked Dubuque Hempstead team that had easily swept them during the regular season, the green Cougars came within a few points and a couple defensive stops short of the Iowa state tournament.

Gritty Hempstead attacker Lauren Streets, playing hurt, scored the breathless match's final four points and put up a season-saving block of fearless Kennedy freshman Paige Franck at 13-13 of the decisive fifth set, allowing Hempstead to outlast the Cougars, 3-2 (25-14, 23-25, 23-25, 25-18, 15-13), in a sensational regional final at Senior High's Nora Gym.

"Kennedy played a great match," Hempstead Coach Randy Dolson said.

But controlling the net when they had to despite working with a banged-up and patch-work front line, the Mustangs froze the Cougars a match short of state for the second year. But Kennedy put the fear of a season's death into a much more seasoned Hempstead team playing for its third Elite 8 ticket in four years.

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"Our improvement from Day 1 to here" is the story of the 2013 Kennedy Cougars, Fluent said. "We've just gotten so much better."

How much? The Cougars nearly pulled off a monumental upset, rallying from a first set loss to put Hempstead on the brink. Kennedy went to the wire with the Mustangs in an electric fifth set that featured eight lead changes and 12 ties, and was on the cusp of reaching the U.S. Cellular Center when Streets' attack error gave the Cougars a 13-11 lead in Set 5.

But Streets regrouped with a vengeance, keeping Hempstead off match point by rocketing a fastball through the Cougars block to draw the Mustangs within 13-12 before tying the match at 13 with another rocket ball.

"It was hard to hit over the block because they just had such a great block," Fluent said.

Streets then read the aggressive Franck perfectly, coming up on the net close as Fluent fed Franck a tight set. Streets then teamed with Makayla Doyle to thunder block Franck, give Hempstead a 14-13 lead and put the Cougars on the ropes. Streets, playing unhindered despite working with a badly sprained ankle, followed it up with a tip block to seal the victory and Hempstead's return to Cedar Rapids.

"We were told on tight sets to go after (the ball)," Streets said. "At that point, I can't be nervous about my ankle. I can't be nervous about anything when we're that close (to state). You've got to lay it all on the floor, whether it works or it doesn't, the (effort) has to be there."

Cougars Coach Michelle Goodall said Hempstead's deft defensive response on Franck's strong attempts to put them away was perfect.

"They knew she can be aggressive and confident behind the ball and they leaned in (with their defense)," Goodall said. "It's kind of a chess game. They guessed right on that one."

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Some folks have cars older than the average age of these 2013 Cougars. Heck, some folks may have stuff in their fridge older than this Kennedy team.

But Kennedy (which closed play 20-15) played beyond its years Tuesday night while playing arguably its best match of the season with its season on the line. With a rotation that was 50 percent underclassmen (hardly the formula for success in the rough-and-tumble Mississippi Valley Conference), the Cougars went point for point with a 34-victory juggernaut.

Hempstead jumped to the early edge by controlling Set 1 from almost first set to last with Karrah Davis' game-point cross-court shot sealing a 25-14 victory. Kennedy was playing nerved, frayed, disconnected volleyball at the start.

But that theme didn't last.

Set 2 saw Kennedy match Hempstead (34-5) point for point early before the Mustangs' Maddie Coleman went on a three-point service run to elevate Hempstead to an 8-4 lead.

From there, though, Kennedy was the aggressor. Terrific in-system passing kept Kennedy out of danger of falling down 0-2 and kept the Cougars matching Hempstead clutch kill for clutch kill. Brinley Milbrath then started baffling an off-balance Mustang defense with a series of tide-turning tip kills that proved essential to Kennedy squaring the match at 1 set all. Niki Dean's hard kill shot broke a 23-all tie and Jasmine Raue followed her, delivering an emphatic message that Kennedy was here to play with her set point winner.

Set 3 was the affirmation of Kennedy's serious upset potential. A see-saw set that saw the Cougars neutralize Streets and No. 2 Hempstead hitter Karrah Davis with smart serving swung Kennedy's way at the end on Fluent – who delivered a brilliant 36-assist performance -- shooting a ball into an empty backcourt over a drawn-in Hempstead defense. The play of the night gave Kennedy an unlikely 2-1 set lead.

“We served smart to jam up some of their favorite attack targets,” Goodall said.

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But the Cougars couldn't keep the momentum rolling. Hempstead took control of Set 4 when Rachel Cummer's kill shot unlocked a 16-16 tie. The Mustangs, re-establishing their front block, scored 9 of the game's final 10 points with Streets curving a fastball past the Cougars block in set point.

Macy Anderson's 14 kills and Milbrath's 10 kills paced Kennedy. Madison Meier's 26 digs helped keep the Cougars in the game to the finish.

For Goodall, a rough season that began with her losing her father in August ended with maybe her most over-achieving Cougars club coming within a couple shots of state.

"I'm proud of all of them," Goodall said. "I think they all grew an amazing amount this season. I told them I couldn't be more proud of you, because looking at our roster, nobody's going to be thinking we're going to be in this position to go to state."

But that's exactly where the Cedar Rapids Kennedy Cougars were Tuesday night.