

Phillips sparks Marion at state tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

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Abby Phillips was hit flush in the face by a vicious kill in the Class 4A state volleyball tournament Tuesday afternoon at the U.S. Cellular Center and simply wiped the sting off her kisser and smiled.

After all she's been through the past month, a little slap in the face was nothing.

Phillips returned to the court after missing four weeks with a broken hand Tuesday and helped the Marion Indians survive Charles City, 27-25, 28-30, 25-21, 25-20, in a seesaw match in the quarterfinals of the state meet in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Broken hand? Slap in the face? A little pain? Phillips just shrugged it off.

"Yeah, she's pretty tough," said Marion Coach Roxanne Paulsen, who was delighted to have the 5-foot-7 libero back in action for the biggest match of the season. "She's a competitor."

It took a supreme team effort by all the Indians (34-7) to earn a date in the semifinals against West Delaware (44-2) Thursday at noon in a battle of Wamac Conference powers, but there's no doubt having Phillips in the lineup was a big boost for Marion.

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"The energy that she has," marveled junior Alyssa Thomas, who had a series of crucial kills for the Indians. "I have so much trust in her on the court. It's just amazing.

"I love having her able to play again. I would give everything for her to play. I'm glad she's back."

Phillips was cleared to play Monday afternoon by her doctor after weeks of uncertainty, even though the broken bone at the base of her ring finger is not completely healed. She slipped comfortably into her accustomed role as Marion enjoyed its first trip to the state tournament since 2009.

"Her senior leadership and her scrappiness and consistent ball control were great," said senior Amanda Sahm, who played a steady all-around game for the Indians.

Phillips took only one Advil for the pain before the match, slipped off the splint on her right hand, taped her ring finger and middle finger together, had soft-foam padding taped onto her bruised hand and took the floor.

"During the game I didn't feel any pain," said Phillips, who will sign with Iowa State on Wednesday. "It's a little tender right now, but I didn't feel much in the game so I was pretty confident."

And that kill-shot that smacked her right in the face in the fourth game? "I try to be pretty tough," she said.

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"I was really happy just to play today," she said. "But I'm more happy that we get to continue.

"It was amazing," she said of the state tournament atmosphere. "I feed off my team, so I really enjoyed being with them."

Paulsen put Phillips right back into the starting lineup, with no hesitation, and said everyone on the team accepted their adjusted roles with their star libero back in action.

"That's a big lift for everybody," Paulsen said of Phillips' return. "She's worked her tail off. And so to have an opportunity to be able to contribute to her team this way, it's so nice to be able to see her out there on the court."



Marion needed all its weapons to defeat Charles City (41-5). The Comets had two stars in their constellation with Hali Hillegas (24 kills) and Meagan Miller (23 kills), but the Indians compensated with contributions up and down their lineup.

"I thought we had a little bit more energy than they did," said Sahm, who will sign with Gardner-Webb on Wednesday. "We wanted it a little bit more. We knew we had nothing to lose, so we were giving it everything we had."

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Charles City had a 24-20 lead in Game 1, but Marion rallied for a 27-25 victory and took the set on a smash by Olivia Frazier. Marion owned a 24-20 lead in Game 2, but Charles City rallied for a 30-28 triumph in a seesaw battle.

Marion held a slight upper hand in Game 3 and Game 4 and finished the match with 25-21 and 25-20 verdicts.

"It was crazy," said Sahm. "We knew it was going to be point for point in every game. We knew they'd get their big runs and we just had to keep pushing. No lead is safe, because there's lots of good teams out there that can push you."

Marion's players were in middle school and grade school the last time the Indians played in the state tournament five years ago. They loved every second of Tuesday's experience.

"It's awesome," said Thomas, a junior who led Marion with 16 kills. "This is what you want to do at state. You want to play good competition and have fun with your team. That's all I've been looking forward to."

Isabella Sade, a 6-foot-1 string bean, collected 14 big kills for Marion. Caitlyn Smith had 28 assists and Sahm contributed 19 assists. Phillips had 16 digs and Sahm had 10 digs. Sade blocked five shots.

West Delaware beat Marion, 2-0, during the regular season. West Delaware swept Indianola, 3-0, in the opening round at state Tuesday.

"We've played them before, so we know what we're going to come against," said Sahm. "It will be a lot of fun."