

Saints claim volleyball title at Washington

Written by Tom Fruehling
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The back of Xavier volleyball coach Barb Sullivan's jersey reads, "No limits."

And after her Saints defeated Class 4A third-ranked Solon Saturday afternoon to win the Washington Warrior 12-team tournament, she's even higher on her veteran squad's prospects this season.

Ranked 10th in 4A coming into the 21st annual tourney, the Xavier girls dropped their opening match in pool play to Solon but then sailed back to win their next four outings to force a rematch in the championship final.

They took the deciding match in three sets, 21-18, 13-21, 15-10, denying the perennially powerful Spartans their second straight Warrior Invitational title. Solon had defeated Marion last year in the finals.

"In the first tournament of the year like this, you like to get a sense of where your team's at," said Sullivan, now in her fourth year of guiding the Saints. "There was a lot of good competition today, so it was a good test.

"And I thought the girls played really well. They have excellent team chemistry. Instead of trying to be stars, they really play for each other. It was a great team effort."

After losing to Solon 21-13, 21-11 to start the day, Sullivan said she tweaked the lineup a bit.

The Saints proceeded to take straight-set wins over Dubuque Senior, North Fayette and Oskaloosa before meeting Class 5A 10th-ranked Johnston in the semifinals. Against the experienced Emily Hanson-led Dragons, they eked out the opening game 21-19 and then coasted 21-12.

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Solon reached the final, meanwhile, by cruising through pool play without losing a set.

The Spartans had a tussle with rival Marion in the quarterfinals, winning 21-15, 26-24, and faced a sterner test yet against host Washington in the semis. They squeaked by the Warriors 23-21 in the first game and were crushed in the second, 21-6. Solon took the rubber game, 15-7.

“They have a great team,” said Washington Coach Kari Lombardi, whose team opened up with four straight wins, including a two-set upset of Johnston. “Solon has a lot of big girls and some very good athletes.”

First-year Spartan Coach Peter Gustin said he was pleased with his team’s effort, despite suffering the first loss of the year.

“They played hard all day, but by the end I thought they were a little tired,” he said. “We came out real sluggish in the first game of the final. We played our game in the second one, but in the last one we just couldn’t sustain it.”

The Saints’ Sullivan, on the other hand, said her girls put it all together when it counted against Solon. Facing a rugged front line, Kasey VandenBosch smashed seven kills past the Spartans and Audrey Richards had six. Kara Zwanziger recorded three blocks.

Sarah Homan led the team with 21 assists in the final, while Halle Heying notched 15 digs.

“Our motto this year,” said Sullivan, “is, ‘Mary, we say yes to the impossible.’ Right now, the girls are rolling along with that.”