

Kennedy spikers hold off Saints, 3-2

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Maybe it was Kennedy's rich tradition in volleyball that made the difference. Or maybe it was Kennedy's tough early-season schedule that gave the Cougars a slight edge over the Xavier Saints Tuesday night.

Or maybe the Saints simply didn't play very well. That's what Xavier Coach arb Sullivan said in her post-game remarks.

Kennedy trimmed Xavier in a five-set marathon, 26-24, 27-25, 17-25, 23-25, 15-11 in a Mississippi Valley Conference match at Kennedy.

"We had moments that were wonderful," said Sullivan, "but I think we kind of forgot about the basics for awhile.

"I think we were very tentative. We were afraid somebody might dig one of our balls or block us. You just have to be aggressive and swing away all the time.

"I really think we didn't play our game. The intensity that we have in practice wasn't there."

Neither coach could remember the last time Xavier defeated Kennedy in volleyball. "Not since I've been with the program, so it's been over four years," said Sullivan.

It almost happened Tuesday, but not quite.

"It would have been a big deal for them," noted Kennedy Coach Michelle Goodall. "That was a slugfest."

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Kennedy (9-7, 1-2) reached the semifinals of the state tournament in 2009, 2010 and 2011. The Cougars are rebuilding somewhat this season and it appeared the Saints might be able to get the upper hand in their 42nd Street rivalry, but the Cougars had a little more power at the net at decisive moments.

"It was a really good match," said 6-foot-1 Kennedy senior Jordan Calef, who finished with 19 kills, four blocks and four aces.

Kennedy was ranked No. 2 in Class 5A when the season began, but the Cougars faced a string of tough opponents and fell out of the rankings last week. They think the tough schedule will pay dividends as the season unfolds, however.

"I think it will," said Calef. "Playing the tougher competition showed us what our weaknesses are. We knew what we needed to work on. I feel like the tougher competition will make you stronger."

Goodall said a softer schedule might have been better with new players on the team, but she's seen steady growth.

"Our schedule is probably one of the toughest in the state, as far as RPI or whatever you want to look at," she said. "It's really, really strong."

"It's going to benefit these kids in the long run. They're hanging in there."

Alexus Rogers finished with 16 kills for Kennedy and Erin Coker had nine. Kayla Torson and Audrey Richards had a series of big kills for Xavier.

The Cougars got perfect serving from Calef (21 for 21), Rylee Mitchell (18 for 18) and Madison Meier (18 for 18).

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The Saints (9-4, 2-1) are ranked No. 7 in Class 4A.