

Freshmen spark No. 17 Eagles to victory

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood volleyball coach Jill Williams has been waiting all season for her freshmen to click on the same night and help the Eagles win a big match.

It happened Wednesday night.

Freshman Morgan Grimm collected 25 kills and the 17th-ranked Eagles survived Southwestern, 3-2, in the dramatic semifinals of the Region XI-B tournament at Johnson Hall.

Grimm wasn't the only rookie to shine for Kirkwood. Madsy Richards, a Xavier grad, contributed 13 kills and 17 digs. Henna Laxton contributed 28 digs. Alex Miner blocked six shots and had three kills. And Erica Armstrong had four kills.

"Morgan Grimm was huge tonight," said Williams. "She put the ball away, she played defense, she had a couple of aces. She really picked it up."

The freshmen blended nicely with sophomores Halle Lueck and Erin Wenzel, who have led the team all season. Lueck, who ranks among the national leaders in assists, rolled up 49 more Wednesday. Wenzel had 11 kills and 13 digs.

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Kirkwood (27-15) will face Iowa Central (22-13) in the Region XI-B finals Saturday at 2 p.m. in Estherville.

Southwestern trimmed Kirkwood, 3-2, in a conference match Oct. 7 in Creston. This time, the Eagles were the stronger team in the fifth and decisive set.

"We played more as a team," said Lueck. "The last time we played them we had some individuals that were doing well and some that weren't doing well. I think this was definitely a team effort. Everybody was really on and we were all working together."

Southwestern won the first set, 25-20. Kirkwood rebounded with victories in the next two sets, 25-21 and 25-16, but Southwestern took the fourth set, 25-22, to square the match 2-2. That set the fifth set and the race to 15 points.

The visitors nosed in front 7-5, but the Eagles scored straight points for an 11-7 lead. Wenzel served two aces during the 6-0 spurt and Wenzel, Miner and Richards all had big kills.

Southwestern clawed within 12-9, but the Eagles clicked for three straight points and finished the match with a kill by Grimm.

"It was exciting. It was awesome," said Williams. "Being here, with our crowd ... They got into it. Their support kind of brought the momentum back to us when we may have let it slip a little bit."

The crowd fed the Eagles, and the Eagles fed the crowd.

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"We knew we had to come out with a little excitement and communicate all night and we really brought it," said Wenzel. "Everybody's swings were on. It was so exciting. We had so many blocks tonight. It really gets you fired up."

Kirkwood beat Iowa Central, 3-1, on Sept. 9. Now they'll meet again for the Region XI-B title.