

## Prairie takes flight at MVC volleyball

Written by Clete Campbell

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DUBUQUE – This is the state's proving ground of whether a team is playoff ready. History's proven if you win at the Mississippi Valley Conference volleyball tournament, you can win anywhere, even under the bright high-pressure lights of the U.S. Cellular Center at the state meet.

"This is the end of a battle of attrition," said Iowa City High coach Craig Pitcher. "The conference has been rock, paper, scissors all year."

"It's a long, trying day," Linn-Mar all-state outside hitter Amanda Ollinger said. "You know going into every game it's going to be a battle, especially since you're playing the teams you face all year."

"It's the longest day of the year," Kennedy setter Anna Fluent said.

And after the way they dug, set, spiked and weaved their way to the title match of Saturday's rigorous and taxing nine-hour MVC Tournament, the surging Prairie Hawks – who've already captured their first MVC divisional crown since 2008 – look ready for anything the road to the Class 5A state tournament may bring their way.

"I told them if this doesn't help your confidence beating all these ranked teams, I don't know what will," a thrilled Hawks Coach Lynnette Stecklein said. "It was a great day."

"This team got better today."

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Prairie made a loud statement you can hear all the way in Sioux City. For a team with little MVC Tournament tradition, Prairie nearly outplayed everyone in a winner's bracket boasting eight ranked teams.

The No. 7-ranked Hawks claimed their pool, outlasted No. 9 Kennedy in a thrilling three-set all-Metro semifinal match and pushed No. 3 Cedar Falls hard before falling 26-24, 25-19 in the MVC championship match at Dubuque Senior High's Nora Gym.

"We finished second, but that doesn't matter because we played together as a team today," defensive specialist Rylee Blood said.

Kennedy Coach Michelle Goodall called Prairie one of a "handful of teams" that can win Class 5A. The Hawks (30-6) went 5-1 on their impressive, exhausting day, but were left lamenting their energy tank hitting empty in the title match. Prairie played three quarterfinal matches in a two-hour block on its way to the finals.

"At some point, their legs got tired," Stecklein said. "As their legs go, their minds start to go a little bit."

Up 23-20, Prairie had Cedar Falls on the ropes in Set 1, but the Hawks couldn't land the putaway shots as their passing fell apart. Alicia Harrington's bullet shot tied the match at 24, the Tigers swung ahead on a critical Prairie attack error and Abby Hendrickson's ace won it. Cedar Falls (33-4) – which ran the MVC tourney table 6-0 – had an answer for every rally attempt Prairie threw at them.

"We knew what we had to do," Harrington said.

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After this stunning performance, the Prairie Hawks now know they're capable of much more than just playing with the state's best teams.

"We know the road to the state tournament is the most important thing," Blood said. "We're going to do whatever it takes to get there."

The match of the day may have been the much anticipated semifinal showdown between Mississippi Division co-champion Prairie and Valley titlist Kennedy. The Hawks won this one with their better closing technique.

With injuries limiting the Cougars to what Goodall called "one live arm" and the Prairie hitters pouncing with strong accuracy, Prairie rallied from a first set loss to outlast Kennedy 20-25, 25-22, 15-12.

"They changed some things (offensively) and did a good job exploiting our weaknesses," Fluent said.

Kennedy (25-9) couldn't get any kind of steady hitting rhythm going against Prairie in the decisive third set.

As Goodall said, "you can't do anything with one arm."

For Linn-Mar coach Teresa Kehe, this wasn't the performance she was looking for on the eve of the postseason.

The No. 11 Lions made a solid 2-1 push through pool play and bounced a scrappy Iowa City West club 25-23, 25-14 in the quarterfinals. But Linn-Mar couldn't make any inroads against Cedar Falls, the foe that's been their

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kryptonite lately.

In control from first serve to last, the Tigers prevented the explosive Ollinger from taking over the match in a 25-19, 25-12 Linn-Mar loss that Kehe called the result of a failure to communicate. Cynthia Wolf's match point ace finished off the Lions.

"We didn't look like a better team than when we started (the tournament)," Kehe said. "We didn't have the leadership and communication we needed. When you communicate, the hesitation goes away and you can execute your offense.

"We didn't do that today."

Ollinger muscled home a team-high 45 kills for the day, Ellie Anderson dished out 91 assists and Ellie Von Lehmden made 28 digs to pace the Lions (26-8). Linn-Mar has work to do, but has the potential to make some big noise in the playoffs.

For as Iowa City West Coach Randy Dolson put it, Linn-Mar is a team "you can't take plays off against. Ollinger's a top gun. Physically, they can play with anybody in the state."

Xavier was nobody's pushover Saturday.

The Saints rallied from a third-place pool play finish to run to the consolation bracket championship match. Waterloo East denied Xavier a trophy with a hard-fought 25-22, 25-20 triumph in the consolation final.

It was a long day, but not a fruitless day for Jefferson, which rallied from a third-place finish in

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Pool D to reach the consolation semifinals.

Waterloo East ended the J-Hawks' run with a 25-20, 25-23 triumph in the consolation semifinals.

Washington (3-29) went 0-4 for the tourney, falling to Jefferson in the consolation semifinals (25-13, 25-15).

## CHAMPIONSHIP BRACKET

### Quarterfinals

Linn-Mar 2, Iowa City West 0 (25-23, 25-14)

Cedar Falls 2, Dubuque Wahlert 0 (25-16, 25-23)

Kennedy 2, Iowa City High 0 (25-11, 25-16)

Prairie 2, Hempstead 1 (25-22, 21-25, 15-11)

### Semifinals

Cedar Falls 2, Linn-Mar 0 (25-19, 25-12)

Prairie 2, Kennedy 1 (20-25, 25-22, 15-12)

### Finals

Cedar Falls 2, Prairie 0 (26-24, 25-19)

Kate Busswitz led Prairie with 51 kills in the tournament. Megan Oldenburger had 31 kills and Kenzie Soeken finished with 29. Kendra Gaskill rolled up 130 assists and Taylor Fisher had 42 digs.