

No. 9 Cougars rally to oust Lions, 3-2

Written by Mike Condon

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The Kennedy Cougars lost the first two games against Linn-Mar Thursday night and trailed 22-18 in the third set when Coach Michelle Goodall called a timeout with her team on the verge of being eliminated from the Class 5A regional volleyball tournament.

She must have said the magic words.

The ninth-ranked Cougars rallied for a dramatic 23-25, 26-28, 25-23, 25-23, 15-12 victory in the regional semifinals at Linn-Mar.

Kennedy (28-9) will face third-ranked Dowling in the regional finals at Newton Tuesday night, with the winner claiming a spot in the state tournament at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Goodall challenged her players during that timeout with the Cougars just three points away from extinction.

"I told them in that timeout, 'Who believes we're going to win the next three points?,'" she said. "Three or four of them said, 'Yeah, we're gonna.'"

Actually, the Cougars scored five straight points to take a 23-22 lead in Game 3. Linn-Mar tied, 23-23, but Kennedy won the next point and took the game with a kill from Macy Anderson.

That kept Kennedy alive and they kept going from there.

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Brinley Milbrath, who led the Cougars with 24 kills in the topsy-turvy match, tried to keep her teammates loose during that timeout with the season hanging in the balance. She was smiling, laughing and acting a little goofy to try and break the tension.

"I knew I had to find a way to get my team up," she said. "Sometimes acting a little crazy flows into the team. Whatever I can do for the team, I try my hardest to do.

"We played so well as a team," said Milbrath. "I don't know, we just have that desire and passion. It just flows out of us."



The two Mississippi Valley Conference powers were tied in total points, 99-99, entering the fifth and decisive set. Linn-Mar tied the fifth game, 11-11, on a kill shot by Sami Boekhoff, but Kennedy collected the next two points on a kill by Milbrath and a perfectly placed dink by Anderson to make it 13-11.

Linn-Mar pulled within 13-12, but Kennedy won the next two points and emerged victorious on a mis-hit by Linn-Mar for match point.

Anderson did not have any kills for the Cougars in the first two games, but she played well from there and finished with 13 kills. Anderson knew the match was not over when her team trailed 22-18 in the third set.

"I still had confidence," she said. "I knew we could do it if we played strong at the net. It got us through at the end."

Anderson said it was the toughest match she's ever played. "They're all tough," she remarked,

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"but this was definitely the toughest, being down two sets. It's never been that tough before."

Linn-Mar (27-10) and Kennedy split their two matches during the regular season, and just when it looked like the Lions would win Thursday night the Cougars found an answer. No lead was safe for either team and no deficit was too big.

Anna Fluent collected 54 assists for Kennedy. Paige Franck had 14 kills.

Kennedy lost to Dowling in a tight match at the Jefferson tournament this season, but the Cougars are looking forward to the rematch after getting past the Lions in a do-or-die situation.

"This will help us," said Goodall. "This will pay big dividends for us, to be challenged like that.

"I like our odds," she said. "I like our odds."

Kennedy reached the semifinals of the state tournament in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, but the Cougars did not make the tournament the last two years.

"We want it so badly," said Milbrath. "The last time we were at state my sister (Ashlyn) was there. So I'm really, really, really pushing for that. I want to follow in my sister's footsteps and get to state. It's been awhile."