

Linn-Mar wins Wash volleyball title

Written by Tom Fruehling

Saturday, 05 September 2015 20:25 - Last Updated Saturday, 05 September 2015 20:41



Youth was served Saturday at the Warrior Volleyball Invitational at Washington High School.

With a number of Metro schools re-stocking their rosters this year with underclassmen, for the most part they acquitted themselves quite well in an 11-team tournament that featured five teams ranked in the top 10 of their class.

Linn-Mar, one of the least experienced of all with just one starting senior, claimed the championship by winning five of its six matches.

Ranked No. 8 in Class 5A, the Lions coasted over Class 3A second-ranked Union, 21-10 and 21-13, in the afternoon final. They also defeated the Knights in three sets in the morning session.

Linn-Mar's only loss of the day was a 21-13, 21-10 setback to Class 5A powerhouse Johnston in pool play, and that was without the services of 5-foot-11 freshman right side hitter Megan Renner.

The first-year starter missed the match against the state's No. 3 team for her confirmation ceremony but returned in time for the championship final.

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"It's difficult anytime you have to make adjustments to your lineup," said Linn-Mar Coach Teresa Kehe. "But I thought our kids stepped up.

"We played a lot of tough teams. And I think we gradually got better throughout the day.

"It wasn't always pretty. But the girls are feeling good. They gained a lot of confidence and trust each other."

The Lions' lineup includes only two juniors from last year's varsity. And the sole senior, all-stater Amanda Ollinger, is in her first season at Linn-Mar after transferring from Jefferson.



"Overall, I thought we played really great today," said Ollinger, who dominated the front line with her rocket-like kill shots. "We lost to Johnston, but they're a really good team and they didn't make many mistakes. We're just having so much fun."

To reach the finals, Linn-Mar prevailed in a three-set tussle with Class 4A Xavier. The equally inexperienced Saints started the day with back-to-back hard-fought losses to Johnston and Union.

But they rebounded with victories over 5A Davenport Central and 3A ninth-ranked and defending state champ Solon.

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“We gave Johnston a tough battle,” said second-year Xavier Coach Katie Bailey, whose roster is filled with sophomores and juniors. “And beating Solon was a huge, huge win. We were kind of up and down, but that’s characteristic of a young team.”

The Jefferson volleyball program was turned around during the two-year tenure of Mary Kay Van Oort, but she left a week before the season started to begin a new men’s program at Mount Mercy University.

Her assistants Amy and Will Norton have inherited a mostly underclass roster, but the youngsters topped Dubuque Senior Saturday morning and surprised Solon in two sets to crack the championship bracket. They were dropped by Union, however, in the quarterfinals.

“It was a good tournament for us,” said co-coach Amy Norton. “We’re young and sort of learning as we go. We’re working out the kinks.”

She thought the J-Hawks’ defense was a key to Saturday’s performance.

“The girls are learning that we have to be scrappy defensively,” Norton said. “We have to keep the ball in play.”

Added her husband Will, “We’re going to get better. We’ve made big strides.”

Having lost two college Division I players in Amanda Sahm and Abby Phillips, Class 4A second-ranked Marion is re-loading from last year’s group that lost in the state semifinals.

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The Indians still have all-state senior middle hitter Alyssa Thomas, however, and she almost willed her team to three straight victories on Saturday.

They first beat 5A Dubuque Senior, then dispatched traditional rival Solon and came from behind twice to edge mighty Johnston, 24-22 and 22-20.

"We had to scrap for every point we got against Johnston," said veteran Marion Coach Roxanne Paulsen. "They have those big girls (one signed by Iowa State and the other by the Air Force Academy), and we couldn't allow them to attack us.

"It helped, I think, that we didn't go into the match afraid of them. And winning the first set really put the pressure on them."

Thomas, a free spirit who can match Ollinger in ferocious spikes, said she relishes facing a big school favorite like Johnston.

"They are so good, but I love playing against them," she said. "They're so powerful and balanced. But they pushed us to play our best.

"We got down in both games. But we're not a team that lets that get in our heads. We just play our game and have fun."

After the upset of Johnston, the Indians suffered a letdown by losing in the semifinals to Union in three sets.

"We just didn't play very well," said Paulsen.

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Of all the five Metro teams in action Saturday, host Washington had the least success. The Warriors lost their first two matches in close straight sets to Solon and Dubuque Senior. They rallied to top Davenport Central in the consolation bracket before falling to Oskaloosa in the consolation final.

POOL RESULTS

Jefferson def. Dubuque Senior, 21-12, 21-9
Linn-Mar def. Davenport Central, 21-15, 21-5
Solon def. Washington, 21-16, 21-12
Johnston def. Xavier, 22-20, 21-16
Marion def. Dubuque Senior, 21-16, 21-12
Union def. Xavier, 21-16, 21-18
Johnston def. Oskaloosa, 21-7, 21-17
Marion def. Solon, 21-9, 21-14
Linn-Mar def. Union, 22-24, 21-15, 16-14
Oskaloosa def. Davenport Central, 21-8, 19-21, 15-12
Dubuque Senior def. Washington, 21-17, 21-15
Jefferson def. Solon, 21-16, 21-10
Johnston def. Linn-Mar, 21-13, 21-10
Xavier def. Davenport Central, 19-21, 21-15, 15-7
Union def. Oskaloosa, 21-13, 21-13

Quarterfinals

Union def. Jefferson, 21-15, 21-14
Marion def. Johnston, 24-22, 24-22
Xavier def. Solon, 21-15, 21-12
Linn-Mar def. Dubuque Senior, 21-16, 21-15

Semifinals

Union def. Marion, 21-18, 13-21, 15-11

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Linn-Mar def. Xavier, 21-15, 19-21, 15-9

Finals

Linn-Mar def. Union, 21-10, 21-13