Lexi Gussert plays a shot forward during Forest Park's semifinal match with Bessemer Oct. 31. Maria Stankewicz (6) will do the setting, and either Sam Nylund (3) or Mindy DeNell (7) will take it from there.

CRYSTAL FALLS—After putting its 13th consecutive Class D district championship in the bag last week, Forest Park's volleyball team will go after its third straight regional title this week in Kingsford. __PUBLIC__

Playing on the friendly Eddie Chambers Gym floor, the Lady Trojans had no problems at all defeating Bessemer and Ewen-Trout Creek at the District 127 tournament.

FP defeated Bessemer 3-0 in the semifinals Oct. 31 and then disposed of Ewen-Trout Creek 3-0 in the title match Nov. 1.

Deeper water: This week, Coach Kim Bjork's team advances to the Class D regional at Kingsford, and the competition gets much tougher right away—the Lady Trojans face Lake Linden-Hubbell in the second semifinal on Nov. 6. The teams last met in the title match of the Forest Park Invitational in September.

Superior Central and North Dickinson are in the other half of the bracket. The semifinal winners meet for the regional title on Nov. 8. The winner earns a date Nov. 13 at the state quarterfinal match in Petoskey. After that: Battle Creek.

Step one: The Lady Trojans didn't mess around in their semifinal match with Bessemer, crunching the Speedgirls 3-0 (25-11, 25-14, 25-19).

In all three sets, Forest Park took a big early lead. Abby Sommers led off with three in set one, and Maria Stankewicz followed with seven. The lead quickly grew to double digits, with Lexi Gussert's kills complemented by work at the net by Mindy DeNell and Mary Grandahl.

The Speedgirls got first serve in set two, but the ball went into the net. Next up: Sommers, who struck for five and a 6-0 lead. DeNell added three later, and Sommers came on for another five near the end.

In the third set. Sommers started with four, but it stayed close until freshman Libby Shamion took the ball. She served in six, including three aces, and DeNell followed with two more for a 17-6 lead.

On fire: At that point, Coach Bjork put in some of her younger girls. Bessemer rallied and got to within one, 20-19, before FP's star freshman, Stankewicz, came on with four winners to wrap up the match.

"We came out fired up and stayed fired up through the whole match. Everybody stepped up and played well. That's nice to see that this time of the year."

Bjork also said she was glad to give some of her reserves time on the floor. "It's good to get all of our girls experience. You never know. If something freakish happens—if somebody goes down or is having a bad night—we have girls to come off the bench and provide some serves or passes for us."

Numbers: Lexi Gussert, 16 kills, 7 digs, 2 aces, 2 blocks; Mindy DeNell, 10 k, 8 d, 3 aces, 2 assists; Gina Graff, 28 d; Abby Sommers, 10 d, 2 aces; Maria Stankewicz, 27 asts; Libby Shamion, 3 aces; Mary Grandahl, 2k; Sam Nylund, 3 k.

Panther hunt: Twenty-four hours later, Forest Park came out just as hot in its title match against Ewen-Trout Creek, which topped Watersmeet in the other semifinal. FP won 25-5, 25-12, 25-23.

If the first set was devastating, the scores show the Panthers had more success in the second and third sets.

“We came out playing strong,” Bjork said about the first set, “but we faltered in the second and third sets. Our energy dropped.” Still, the Lady Trojans again had the luxury of using most of their reserves in the season’s final match before the home fans.

Numbers: Gussert, 16 k, 10 d, 5 blks, 3 aces; DeNell, 7 d, 3 k, 2 aces; Graff, 17 d, 2 aces; Sommers, 7 d, 2 aces; Stankewicz, 21 asts, 3 k; Shamion, 2 k; Nylund, 6 d; Michaela Steiro, 2 k.

Coming up: No more cupcakes on the plate. The bill of fare at the regional tournament will be much tougher, starting with the Lakes on Nov. 6.

“We know it is going to take our best effort to beat Lake Linden,” Bjork said. “We are going to get focused and drill hard.”

The Lady Trojans won their finals battle with the Lakes at the FP Invitational, but it took three grueling sets (21-17, 18-21, 15-13). Nobody should be surprised if the rematch is just as close.

Earlier, Superior Central and North Dickinson play in the first semi. FP’s match should start at about 6:30.

The championship match is Nov. 8 at 6 p.m. The regional champion advances to the Class D state quarterfinal match at Petoskey on Nov. 13 against the St. Ignace regional winner.