Yes!!! The Lady Trojans celebrate winning a big point during their semifinal match with Lake Linden-Hubbell Nov. 6. From left: Lexi Gussert, Maria Stankewicz (6), Gina Graff, Mindy DeNell (7), Libby Shamion and Mary Grandahl. The girls and coaches in back are excited, too.

KINGSFORD—Forest Park's lucky number during last week's regional volleyball tournament was nine. __PUBLIC__

Nine as in the nine-point service run by Maria Stankewicz that wrapped up the semifinal win over Lake Linden-Hubbell Nov. 6.

Nine as in the nine-point run by Gina Graff that ended the regional title match with Superior Central two nights later.

Nine as in the number worn by Lexi Gussert, whose skills all over the floor dominated the tournament.

Nine will still be the big number for the Lady Trojans this week. That's how many sets they still need to win to take home Forest Park's first-ever state volleyball championship.

This week: On Tuesday, Nov. 13, they play in the Class D quarterfinal match against Onaway, at Manistique. It starts at 5 p.m. Eastern Time—a Class C quarterfinal will be played right after that.

If the Lady Trojans win at Manistique, their next stop will be the state Class D semifinals at Kellogg Arena in Battle Creek. They would play in the first semi at 1 p.m. Central Time (2 Eastern) on Friday, Nov. 16, probably against the top-ranked team in the state, Battle Creek St. Philip, which would be playing just blocks away from their home.

The Class D state championship match starts at 9 a.m. Central on Saturday, Nov. 17. (The MHSAA website says the semifinal and finals matches will be streamed live on mhsaa.tv. There will be no live TV.)

Coach Kim Bjork's team earned the regional title with a pair of 3-0 sweeps at the Class D tournament here. They defeated Lake Linden-Hubbell in the semifinals (25-23, 25-17, 25-23) on Nov. 6 and turned back Superior Central 3-0 in the title match Nov. 8 (25-13, 25-15, 25-16).

That adds still another trophy to their long row of display cases.

Finals flurry: Against the Cougars, who defeated North Dickinson in the semis two nights earlier, it was all Red and Black. Stankewicz's six-point run on serve gave FP an early 8-3 lead. The Cougars played well but couldn't earn more than a point on serve in the first set. Graff later served five, and Gussert added the final three, getting the set-winner with an ace to the middle of the floor.

The Cougars got an early lead in the second set, but it didn't last long. Graff struck for three to put the Trojans ahead 5-3. Superior Central stayed close until Gussert and Mindy DeNell each served in five winners, putting FP in front 20-11. Gussert nailed down the second set win with a kill down the right side, for a 2-0 lead.

Set three was more of the same—at first—when Stankewicz struck for seven early and a 9-2 FP lead. But after that, the Lady Trojans seemed to back off, and the Cougars attacked, cutting the lead to 10-9. Back-to-back twos by Lindsay Richmond and Kyle Johns gave the Cougars

had their first lead of the night, 16-15.

Time for nine: But after Sam Nylund's kill won the serve back, Graff took the ball at 16-16. Nine serves later, the match was over. Graff dismantled the Cougars on nine straight serves, including three aces, while Gussert used a variety of kill shots—power spikes, dinks, touch kills, soft hits. The Cougars didn't know what to expect, and that's just the point. Gussert's vast repertoire of attacks makes her extremely difficult to defend.

Coach Kim Bjork sounded happy enough with the regional title, though she didn't like Superior Central lulling her team into a slower-paced game. "We didn't move, and we weren't as crisp as we were against Lake Linden.

"I think the girls did fine. We did what we needed to win—that's all you can ask at this point." But she went on to warn, "There will be no more slow-paced matches in the future."

Numbers: Lexi Gussert, 21 kills, 10 digs, 2 aces; Mindy DeNell, 4 k, 6 d, 3 aces; Gina Graff, 19 d, 3 aces; Abby Sommers, 6 d; Maria Stankewicz, 2 aces, 22 assists; Libby Shamion, 2 d; Kendra Campbell, 3 k.

Lakes again: Two nights earlier, on Election Night, the Lady Trojans took on Lake Linden-Hubbell in the semifinals. In set one, Abby Sommers struck for four early, but the Lakes cut the lead to one point, and it stayed tight, with defenses dominating. After Gussert served two for a 19-13 lead, the Lakes battled back and tied it at 21 and 22 before two Gussert kills gave FP the win.

The Lakes led early in the second set, but Graff and Gussert each served three to put FP in front. After Sommers served three for a 15-10 lead, the Lakes' Ciara Larson got four to tie it at 15-all—only to see four from Graff and three by Stankewicz put the set out of reach. An LLH hit into the net put the Trojans in front 2-0.

Two by Stankewicz and four by Gussert boosted FP to an 11-4 lead in the third set, but the Lakes battled back again. Five points by Brittni Kisul and four from Brooke Corrigan put LLH in front 15-12. When Larson served another four for a 23-15 Lakes lead, the match seemed certain to go to a fourth set.

Turnaround: But it didn't. Gussert's kill gave Stankewicz the serve at 23-16, and she went to work. With Gussert making big plays at the net, Stankewicz's deliveries whittled the lead down. Nine points in a row. Lake Linden never got the side-out it needed so badly. A FP serve that was returned into the net gave the Trojans the match-winner.

Coach Bjork said her team knew Lake Linden would give them a battle. "They pushed us," she continued, "but I didn't expect it to be 3-0. I expected them to take at least one from us.

"The girls showed resilience at the end and just pushed through. Each one of our girls contributed in some way tonight. A great team win."

Numbers: Gussert, 21 k, 23 d, 4 blks, 3 aces; DeNell, 9 d, 2 k; Graff, 33 d; Sommers, 6 d, 2 aces; Stankewicz, 24 asts, 4 d, 2 blks; Shamion, 8 d, 2 k; Mary Grandahl, 2 blks.

Coming up: One week to go. Up to three matches: the quarterfinals, semifinals and state finals. In 2011, the Lady Trojans reached the semifinals. The girls who returned this fall know their mission.

"This has been our goal all year," said DeNell after the Superior Central match, "to get downstate and play with the bigger teams. It's pretty exciting."

Coach Bjork: "We know everything's going to get tougher. We've been there before."

She acknowledged that she has a young team. "But sometimes it's good to be young. You don't build up things as much, and you don't realize how big some things are until it hits you later.

"Younger girls flow through it and do what they need to. As you get older, you think more of what happened and what you need to do."

Whatever happens from here, "We've got a lot of young girls who are just going to continue to improve. This experience is going to be great for us in the future, because a lot of these girls will be coming back, even after our tournament run.

"I always say every year, if we can get past the regionals, it just keeps building our program every year and making us more hungry for, hopefully, someday, a state title.

"Someday … we hope."