

Lady Trojans add trophy, head to 'D' quarterfinals

Written by Peter Nocerini

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Forest Park's volleyball team, coaches and managers pose proudly with the Class D regional championship trophy that the Lady Trojans won at Negaunee on Nov. 14.

NEGAUNEE—The water quickly got a lot deeper for Forest Park's volleyball team during the Class D regional tournament here last week.

After breezing through their district and winning the semifinal match 3-0, the Lady Trojans suddenly found themselves on the defensive against a determined, aggressive Stephenson squad midway through the championship match. PUBLIC

But the Lady Trojans regrouped around the cool, determined play of their leaders, earned a 3-1 win (25-14, 25-15, 22-25, 25-18) and will play in the final rounds of the state tournament this week.

"I told the girls," Coach Kim Bjork said during the happy post-game hubbub, "I don't know what you guys are trying to do to us coaches, but you're really putting years on our age."

But she was smiling as she said that. "We responded and pulled it out in the end. That's all that matters."

Next, the Lady Trojans face Brimley in a Class D state quarterfinal match at Manistique on Tuesday, Nov. 19. The winner advances to the state semifinals and finals in Battle Creek later this week.

The regional tourney started Nov. 12 with a 3-0 semifinal win over Lake Linden-Hubbell (25-22, 25-21, 25-16).

In the first set, the Lakes led 16-12, but a three-point turn on serve by Libby Shamion and four from Lexi Gussert rallied FP to the win. In the second, a four-point haul by Kendra Campbell and three from Shamion put FP ahead 16-11. Lake Linden rallied to tie it at 17-17, but Campbell came back for another three to end that match.

The Lakes never got any momentum on serve in the third set, and Shamion's three-point strike put the Trojans ahead 6-3 early, and the Trojans kept rolling. Hannah Marinoff finished the match off with a seven-point spell.

That was an exception. "We didn't put together any long scoring runs," Coach Kim Bjork said later, adding that her team couldn't get in rhythm and had too many unforced errors.

In the end, though, the team came through. Gussert finished with 19 kills, Kendra Campbell backed her up with another nine. Maria Stankewicz set up 26 kills.

Lexi Gussert 19 kills, 4 digs, 3 blocks, 2 aces; Kendra Campbell, 9 kills, 2 aces; Libby Shamion, 3 aces, 2 kills, 2 digs; Maria Stankewicz, 26 assists; Kelsi Hendrickson, 3 digs.

Stephenson won a district title in its first year in Class D and beat Munising 3-1 in the other regional semifinal.

The first two sets of the regional title match was all Forest Park. The Lady Trojans never trailed in the first set and got a five-point spell from Kelsi Hendrickson and four from Marinoff. In the second, Shamion struck for three early, and Stankewicz followed with six.

"I couldn't ask for a better performance from them in the first two," Bjork said.

Trailing 2-0, Stephenson stepped up its play and soon had the Lady Trojans scrambling. Forest Park only had one bad serve in the third set but won just two points on serve after Stephenson

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tied it 13-13 on three by Karlina Johnson. The Eagles later got a pair of twos to force a fourth set.

"They made adjustments," Bjork said about Stephenson. "They tipped the ball, found holes."

The Eagles went after the Trojans again early in the fourth set, taking a 7-2 lead on a five-point haul from Amelia Starynski. Gussert's kill won the serve back for Stankewicz, who fought back with four including Adel Isaacson's clutch kill. That tied it 7-7.

After a series of singles put Stephenson in front 15-13, Shamion took serve—and changed momentum for good. She served in seven points, as Gussert worked hard at the net, putting shot after shot—some screamers, some delicate—where the Eagles couldn't keep them in play.

By the time Shamion was through, Forest Park was back in front 20-15 and had its momentum back. Stankewicz followed with three more points, and Gussert's kill fittingly ended the set, the match and the regional tourney.

"They did a great job of never giving up," Gussert said about her teammates. "We were on our heels after the third game, but we stepped it up and covered the floor nice."

In the fourth set, Gussert took matters in her own hands. "Being a senior leader, Kimmy expects that of us," she said. "I don't get those great hits without the great passes and the great sets by Maria. It's a team win, but I'm glad I can make the finishing touch."

Stankewicz, only a sophomore but already a team captain, was a steady hand for Forest Park and a cool customer in the clutch. "It's really tough when a lot of people get down on themselves," she said. "I really try my best to pick everyone up."

About her seven points in the third set, Stankewicz said, "I was really trying for those deep corners, because that's what they had open. I was focusing on, first—like my coach, Kimmy, says—you do consistency, then power. You get your serves in, and then work on progressively getting your hits better and harder."

Lexi Gussert, 29 kills, 8 blocks, 4 digs; Campbell, 6 kills, 4 digs, 2 blocks; Stankewicz, 3 kills, 3 aces, 4 digs, 38 assists; Shamion, 6 aces, 4 kills, 6 digs; Hendrickson, 6 digs; Marinoff, 4 digs, 2 aces; Adel Isaacson, 7 kills, 4 assists.

- Forest Park will battle Brimley in the Class D quarterfinals on Thursday, Nov. 19, at 6 p.m. Eastern Time (5 Central) at Manistique High School.

The winner goes to the Kellogg Arena in Battle Creek to face the winner of the Battle Creek St. Philip-Hillsdale Academy match in the second Class D semifinal Nov. 21 at 3:45 p.m. Eastern (2:45 Central).

The state championship match will start at 10 a.m. Eastern Time (9 a.m. Central) on Nov. 23. All matches at Battle Creek will be streamed live on www.mhsaa.tv and will also be archived there. They will not be carried on Fox Sports Net.