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FRANSON BANK & TRUST BECKER LUTHER MEDICA

PREP VOLLEYBALL

STATE TOURNAMENT CLASS 3A SEMIFINALS



Emma Schmidt of Champlin Park hammered a spike as Lakeville South's Ava Moore went up to try to block it. Schmidt's Rebels won 3-1 in a Class 3A semifinal.

Christine Jurgens of Eagan tipped the ball against Stillwater. Her Wildcats won a Class 3A semifinal match 3-1 on Friday.

Photos by LILLA MARZI - lilla.marzi@minneapolisstartribune.com

Champlin Park, Eagan set up rematch

The 2018 finalists met for the title in 2016, too.

By JIM HULLIN
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For a team that lost just five sets all season before its Class 3A semifinal match Friday, it was another lost set that lit a spark of confidence for Champlin Park coach John Yunker.

The Rebels led 22-25 in their first set in Lakeville South, but Yunker saw a lot to like in his team during that set.

"They came at us and we needed to respond," Yunker said. "We needed to be the team we've been all season. I'm extremely proud of how they responded."

The No. 2 seeded Reboling in and showed why they're considered among the state's elite teams, posting three consecutive victories to advance to the Class 3A championship match Saturday with a 25-27, 25-18, 25-16 victory.

The victory sets up a title rematch with Eagan, which defeated the Rebels 3-1 in 2016.

"Champlin Park is an excellent team," said coach Stephen Williamson of Lakeville South (28-5). "They're really balanced, they handle the ball well, they're a solid blocking team. We had a game plan coming in that we were able to execute for stretches, but we weren't able to keep it together."

While mega-talented Champlin Park (31-2) goes into nearly every match as a favorite, Yunker makes sure the Rebels never skip an effort. There's always room for improvement.

"We weren't as clean in certain areas as we'd like to be — serve receives, maybe — but we had the battle factor," he said. "We battled. We stuck to our game plan and believed in each other."

Senior setter Izzy Abburn, who was named Ms. Volleyball on Wednesday, is known for deftly distributing the ball among her array of hitters but doubles as the Rebels' conscience. She noted that there's more to Champlin Park than its high-profile offense.

"Everything starts with our defense and our backcourt, and it doesn't get enough recognition," Abburn said. "Like Kaitly (Kaitly Wittenski), our libero, who has been doing a great job. It all kind of goes to our hitters, which people notice."

Abburn finished with 40 set assists while the Rebels had three hitters with double-digits in kills. Emma Schmidt had 16, Jordan Stalpes 12 and Lauren Clark 11. Wittenski was credited with 10 digs and kept consistent balls alive.

Eagan (29-2) had been there before and had a wealth of state tournament familiarity. Stillwater (The Beavers were flaky but just didn't have the background to do so) won 2017, 2018 and 2019. "I'd like to think that being in this atmosphere helps us not get rattled," said Eagan coach Kathy Gillen, whose team was making its fourth consecutive appearance in the semifinals, all of which ended in victory.

Stillwater (27-7), playing airtight defense, rallied from a four-point deficit by scoring 12 of the last 16 points to take the first set 16-21.

"We just couldn't put the ball down," Gillen said. "It made for a lot of long rallies. They were getting up some balls I thought were unattainable."

The match hinged on the second and third sets, both back-and-forth affairs. In the second, Eagan faced a late deficit but rallied to win 25-23.

The Rebel was the match's most competitive. Eagan faced four set points and won them all, eventually pulling out a 28-26 victory. That swung the match in Eagan's favor.

"Our team is always cool in big moments," said Kennedi Gre, who finished with 20 kills, 22 set assists and 13 digs. "We came together when we're facing adversity."

Senior Brooke Aachbrenner said, "You give it so much emotion and aggression and effort, it was a clamp-

"It was a whole of a match," Stillwater coach Bob Fisher said. " Hats off to Eagan. They've been there before."

Senior middle hitter Ellie Hansen, who will play at Minnesota next year, is one of Eagan's most experienced players. A four-year veteran who has made a state championship match every season.

Just knowing we can fight that hard and come out on top in those sets gives us the confidence to propel us forward," Hansen said. "This is it for the best four years ever. I just want to go out and play my best game tomorrow because this is the coolest experience and I'm never going to forget it."

STATE TOURNAMENT CLASS 3A SEMIFINALS

Giant slayer Medford reaches final

The Tigers have already upset two teams and play the top seed next.

For an encore performance after knocking out the two-time defending champs Thursday, Medford ousted the No. 3 seed Belgrade-Brookston-Eros in the Class 3A semifinals on Friday.

The unseeded Tigers (29-5) will play for a state title in their inaugural trip to the state tournament after their 22-25, 25-19, 25-16, 25-16 victory.

"I do not feel real at all," said Medford senior Richard Laebke, who finished with 11 kills. "I feel like there's a big inside roller going on here."

The Tigers came back from losing the first set in a match that was tight throughout. In the fourth set, however, Medford pulled away with a 34-run, winning the last four points with a kill from junior Emma Kaistof and three consecutive kills from Laebke.

"We played aggressive ball, and then we took the momentum away from them," Medford coach Missy Ordebski said.

Kaistof had a match-high 19 kills plus 14 digs. Sophomore Kinsey Cossin added 11 kills.

"They just played lights out," Jagers coach Kevin Waller said. "They kept us out of system. Anything we put at them, they dug us."

Senior Emily Knight led the Jagers (27-5) with 13 kills. She said Medford consistently attacked and that made a difference.

"When our momentum was away from us, we struggled a little bit," junior Brittany Berge said.

REATHER RULE

Medford's Emma Kaistof tried to drive a shot between Belgrade-Brookston-Eros's Karlee Kampen (11) and Emily Knight in a Class 3A semifinal match. Medford won 3-1.

PHOTO BY LILLA MARZI - lilla.marzi@minneapolisstartribune.com

STATE TOURNAMENT CLASS 2A SEMIFINALS

North Branch upsets Kasson-Mantorville

The Vikings knocked off the top-seeded KoMetts, will face Marshall in final.

By HEATHER RULE
Special to the Star Tribune

This time, North Branch didn't have to dig out of a 2-0 hole. But it still needed five sets to get the victory. Oh, and the Vikings also upset the No. 1 seed.

No. 1 seed North Branch defeated Kasson-Mantorville 20-25, 25-20, 25-18, 17-25, 15-13 in the Class 2A volleyball state semifinals Friday night at Xcel Energy Center.

"We came in and... my first words were 'We're not supposed to win this,'" North Branch coach Mike Selbitchka said. "And that really got them going. From then on, when they began that match, they felt that they can do this."

The junior Cassia Selbitchka once again led the Vikings with 30 kills and 14 digs. The 26-4 Vikings finished the third set on 19-21 runs, and three of those points came on Selbitchka kills.

"I can't say it enough, not just as a father but as a coach, amazing job of not absolutely controlling her attack to put the most pressure on them at all times and never backing down," Mike Selbitchka said.

KoMetts coach Adam VanDort cited Selbitchka's play, saying she was "right out" no matter if she was in the front row or back row.

"We got here last year, and second place is something to be proud of, but we'd like to finish on top this year," Jim Fullsen said.

Selbitchka led the 30-1 KoMetts with 25 kills and added 16 digs.

Marshall (3-1) Marshall had a 22-18 lead in the first set but ended up losing 26-24. Although the rest of the match was close, the Tigers didn't lose again.

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