

Prairie Hawks stopped by Hempstead

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 03 November 2015 23:30 -



The Cedar Rapids Prairie volleyball team accomplished some terrific things this year with a conference title and the most victories in school history, but the season ended in sadness and abundant tears Tuesday night.

The eighth-ranked Hawks were bounced by No. 12 Dubuque Hempstead, 25-18, 19-25, 25-22, 25-22, in the Class 5A regional finals at Prairie and denied a spot in the state tournament.

Prairie and Hempstead were no strangers this season, with the Hawks holding a 2-1 edge during the regular season in three meetings, but the fourth confrontation belonged to the visitors from Dubuque.

The Hawks were still crying 15 minutes after the match, following a closed-door meeting in a classroom.

"I'm just disappointed," senior kill-shot artist Kate Busswitz said after wiping away the tears. "We built up for it (a trip to state) to happen, we worked so hard all year expecting it.

"We thought it would be the year that we could actually pull through. It's just sad that it's over."

The last point of the match left the Hawks stunned and deflated, partially because it was the final point of their season and partly because of the way it happened.

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Rylee Blood bumped a shot by Hempstead into the air, but instead of the ball heading to one of Prairie's setters for the next shot, it popped between Megan Oldenburger and Busswitz, a pair of hitters who were looking for someone else to set them up. Nobody took charge and the ball fell between them to the floor for the end of the match and the end of the season.

"We lost communication," Busswitz said softly.

It happened quickly and left the Hawks a little mesmerized as reality sunk in. In retrospect, the Hawks needed one of their big hitters to become a setter and it didn't happen.

"I don't think it was really anyone's fault," coach Lynnette Stecklein said. "It was just a lack of communication."



That point did not cost Prairie the match, but it left a final impression as the Hempstead players jumped into each other's arms and the Hawks looked around in disbelief.

Hempstead (25-11) was simply the better team Tuesday night in just about all facets of the game - hitting, setting, digging, blocking, serving and communicating. Not a lot better, but just enough.

"This is the fourth time we've seen them. They're a great team," Stecklein said.

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"We knew it would be a really big defensive battle. They did a great job of keeping the ball alive, and I thought we did a good job of keeping the ball alive. Sometimes when the sets are that close, it comes down to a little better luck."

Prairie finished the season with a 31-8 record and a share of the Mississippi Valley Conference title. The Hawks were seeking their first trip to the state tournament since 2008, but fell a victory short of their goal.

"The thing we have to remember, one game doesn't define a season. That's what they really have to take home," said Stecklein, who was red-eyed herself after the emotional defeat.

"It hurts now, but it can't take away from what they did throughout the season. They became the winningest team at Prairie this year with 31 wins. I'm so proud of what they did through the season.

"We set our goals and set our themes of 'We Before Me.' All the things they said they were going to commit to, they did. I couldn't ask for a better group of girls. They're not only great volleyball players, but they're good people."

Buschwitz plans to play volleyball at the University of Northern Iowa. Kenzie Soeken has committed to Upper Iowa for volleyball and track. Kendra Gaskill plans to play volleyball in college, but has not made a final decision. The other seniors on this year's squad were Kristin Wahlert, Sydi Velky, Blood, Makenzie Stoffer and Amber Frazier.

"This senior group was phenomenal for us," Stecklein said. "They really took charge of this season and they were great leaders for us, on the court and off the court."

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"They're the ones who molded the team into the family it was. They really were a family and it started with the seniors."

Hempstead will face Dowling in the first round of the Class 5A state tournament on Tuesday. The other first-round pairings are Johnston vs Ankeny Centennial, Bettendorf vs Iowa City West, and Cedar Falls vs Kennedy.