

Lions nip Saints in MVC thriller

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kangaroos don't jump as much as the Xavier Saints and Linn-Mar Lions did Tuesday night in a spectacular volleyball match at Xavier High School that left both clubs exhausted.

The Lions jumped last and prevailed in a five-set thriller, 25-23, 25-22, 19-25, 33-35, 15-11, in a battle of premier Mississippi Valley Conference teams.

The fourth set alone was worth the price of admission as the Saints stormed back from an 18-11 deficit, staved off five match points and prevailed 35-33 on a kill by Lexi Noonan.

"Both teams were battling so hard for every point," Linn-Mar Coach Teresa Bair remarked. "That's the kind of volleyball that you want to see."

Linn-Mar is ranked No. 7 in Class 5A with a 20-5 record, while Xavier is ranked No. 5 in Class 4A with a 23-4 mark. The Saints handed the Lions two of their five losses at the Cedar Rapids Washington tournament - once in pool play and again in the finals - but the Lions got the upper hand this time with a lineup packed with college-bound players.

"I'm proud of our group. We battled," said Xavier Coach Austin Filer. "Linn-Mar is a fantastic team and I think that's one of the toughest teams in the state."

"We've talked all year: We are not scared of losses," he said. "We embrace what comes from that. We're getting better and I cannot wait to see this team in a couple of weeks."

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Linn-Mar had three future college volleyball players on the floor with 6-foot-2 junior Carly Spies (Northern Iowa), 5-foot-8 senior Ellie Anderson (Denver) and 5-foot-5 senior Emilee McGowan (North Dakota State).

And that does not include 6-foot-1 sophomore Megan Renner, who is in "hot pursuit" of a college scholarship herself, according to her coach.



All of those Lions - and more - played an extraordinary game, with super kill shots, fantastic digs, diving saves and great hustle.

None of the Saints have picked a college yet, but Charlotte Richards and Ellie McDermott - a pair of talented 5-foot-11 juniors - also played at an extremely high level Tuesday night. Richards, who leads the Mississippi Valley conference in kill shots, had 27 against the Lions and was a monster all night.

"She probably hit 100 balls for us tonight," said Filer. "Everybody played great, but Charlotte really led the way at times."

Filer had to give Richards a short rest in the fifth set - her only break of the night - but she sat for only two points before Filer rushed her back onto the court with the outcome hanging in the balance.

"I was out of breath a lot," Richards said after the two-hour match. "By having a little break, I was able to regain my energy and come back in ready to go."

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McDermott finished with 20 kills, according to unofficial stats kept by the Metro Sports Report, and gave Xavier a powerful 1-2 punch at the net with Richards. The rest of the determined Saints got into the act as well.

Richards and McDermott smiled graciously after the contest, but there was pain inside.

"It hurts," said McDermott. "But you really can't win every game and we know that.

"It's hard to beat a team three times. It really is," she said. "They're a good team."

The Saints began the season with 18 straight victories before tapering off a tad against more fierce competition, compiling a modest 5-4 mark in their last nine matches, but the stiff schedule is for a good cause.

"We may be losing now, but I think it will really help us because it will push us to be a better team and work harder to win these kind of games," said Richards.

Xavier has an 8-4 record against ranked teams this season. The Saints have a tough schedule in the conference and also play in elite tournaments.

"It builds us and forces us to be better than we think we're capable of," said Filer. "Night in and night out, we play the best teams in the state. And every single day we know we have to get better and grow."