

## J-Hawks clip Lions in regional opener

Written by Tom Fruehling  
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Fueled by three dozen spirited Jefferson male athletes who gave the Linn-Mar gym a homecourt feel, the J-Hawk volleyball girls steamrolled past the Lions, 3-1, Monday night in the first round of the Class 5A regional tournament.

They claimed the first two games 25-21, 25-19, lost a third-set squeaker, 25-23, and finished with a 26-24 nail-biter.

The resurgent Jefferson team (18-21) will go to Iowa City West (26-9) Thursday night for a semifinal contest against a squad that won two earlier matches this season.

"We stayed with them both times," first-year J-Hawk Coach Mary Kay Van Oort noted. "It won't be an easy rematch, but our girls are playing with a lot of confidence right now."

They played like The Little Engine That Could on Monday.

Facing a much-taller Lion frontline with only one of their own over 5-foot-9, the J-Hawks just kept chugging along. In every set, they took leads but then had to withstand Linn-Mar rallies.

"Linn-Mar is so good that it's just what I expected," Van Oort admitted. "I wasn't sure if we could stop them. But we stayed level-headed, didn't get intimidated or get down on ourselves and didn't back down. The girls believe in themselves and know that they can win."

"It's kind of new to us to win big games like this, but the girls did it. All the credit goes to these girls."

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For a group that finished 4-32 last year, this has been a monumental turnaround.

“Mary Kay and our other coaches have really given us confidence,” said senior Cierra Maas. “We just have a whole new attitude.”

Her new-found optimism was echoed by fellow senior Kaylie Zitek.

“Teams that beat us in the past are now a little scared to play us,” Zitek pointed out. “They know we're going to be competitive.”

This was the only meeting of the season with Linn-Mar, and right away the undersized but spunky J-Hawks set the tone.

Six-foot-1 super sophomore Amanda Ollinger hit some thunder spikes, as usual, but other scoring came from unlikely sources. Senior Kayla Jaschen, who stands just 5-foot-4, notched two crucial kills down the stretch as Jefferson pulled away from an 18-18 tie.

Jaschen had nine kills for the night, second only to Ollinger's 26, and also recorded 18 digs. The versatile Ollinger, who is a threat all over the floor, led the team with 28 digs.

The second set was also knotted at 18-18. The 5-foot-9 Maas then stuffed a block in the middle and the J-Hawks scored six straight to go up 2-0.

“We started out slow, and Jefferson came out really, really hard ” said Teresa Kehe, also a first-year coach at Linn-Mar (23-15). “They were much more aggressive.”

Her young Lions did rally back to take the third set after being down 19-11. But the J-Hawks still made a game of it, tying it up at 23-23 on a spike by Ollinger.

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"We had a gut-check after losing the first and came back," Kehe said. "But we just were not able to sustain any momentum. And having Ollinger in the front line was a huge bonus for them. She's an outstanding athlete and a great player."

In fact, when points were needed all through the match, Ollinger always seemed to deliver. She had the final two kills to put the J-Hawks over the top in the deciding set.

"I know my teammates look to me to put it down," Ollinger said. "They're very unselfish, and we're definitely playing as a team."

Most of her monster shots were the result of perfect passes to the outside by Zitek, who had 38 assists for the evening. Zitek, for one, said it was a big motivator having the large contingent in the crowd of cheering fellow J-Hawk athletes.

"They were really loud," she said. "We have a lot of school spirit."

For their part, the boys said they were just returning the favor.

"A lot of kids came here last year when we played Linn-Mar in basketball," said Jake Van Oort, who happens to be the coach's oldest son. "We beat them for the first time in like nine years. It's always good to beat Linn-Mar."