

Hard Work Nets High Point Christian 2-A State Volleyball Crown

No sweat: Hard work nets HPCA state title
by Steve Hanf, High Point Enterprise, 11/01/09

When Asheville Christian Academy sent the game-winning point into the net, High Point Christian Academy's players rushed the floor and skidded to a halt in a happy dog pile.

After all, what's a few more floor burns, bumps and bruises now?

"More than anything, I know the sweat, the tears, the skin that these girls have left on the floor over the past four years," Cougars coach Michelle Wilkerson said when asked what that moment meant to her. "The joy in their faces and the tears in their eyes right now, it's priceless."

The Cougars broke through for their first state championship Saturday after knocking on the door the past four seasons. Even the first-year varsity program reached the N.C. Independent Schools Athletic Association 1A finals in 2005.

When Wilkerson shifted from junior varsity head coach to varsity leader in 2006, bringing along an impressive eighth-grade hitter named Bethany Gesell and talented freshman setter named Megan Fary, she guided the Cougars to a 23-6 mark and No. 6 seeding in the 2A playoffs.

HPCA lost in the quarterfinals of the tournament that year, and again in 2007 during a 24-8 campaign, setting up last fall's exciting run.

Just one problem: Asheville Christian, the nine-time defending state champion, got in the way in the semifinals, ending the Cougars' season at 26-2.

"Last year we thought we were going to win," senior Victoria Barnett said. "It hurt us a little bit, but we came back even stronger."

And virtually intact. The Cougars also added impressive sophomore libero Ellen Fay this season, which opened with high hopes that never dimmed. High Point Christian's 34-3 record included losses to Cary Academy ? the undefeated NCISAA 3A champ ? along with private school quarterfinalist Wesleyan Christian Academy. The Cougars also stepped up to play public school 4A power Northwest Guilford and got an "L" for their troubles.

It all led up to last week's tournament finals at The O'Neal School in Southern Pines, and of course it would come down to No. 1 HPCA vs. No. 2 Asheville Christian.

In Saturday's first game, Gesell's cannon of a left arm put down seven kills, Meredith Morris served four straight points in the middle of the game and Barnett ended it with an ace for a low-key 25-17 decision.

Game 2 would be anything but. Fary's impressive serving gave HPCA a 14-10 lead before the Lions battled back from a 17-12 deficit to stave off game point when Gesell's big block landed just out of bounds. Asheville responded with four straight points for a 26-24 win that dramatically changed the tone of the match.

"It just made me want to come back harder," Barnett said. "Serve harder, hit harder, play harder. We were not going to let them win."

For all of Gesell's flying kills - the 6-foot junior with Division I scholarship offers mixed in slams and tips over the net for 30 in all ? HPCA needed help in Game 3 to turn the tide. Sophomore Kathryn Cox came through with three big kills, and Barnett and Fary got hot from the service line as the Cougars roared to a 22-12 lead that became a 25-14 decision.

"Megan and Victoria, they were solid, consistent," Wilkerson praised. "When we need them, they'll get their serves in."

Toss in the play of Morris, Cox and Gesell up front in an offense powered by Fary, and it added up to a big advantage entering the final game.

"There were times in the game where Bethany would say, 'Push me out a little, I want to go angle,' or 'push me more toward the antenna, I want to go line,' " Wilkerson said of Fary's impressive play that netted 59 assists. "To be that precise and that confident in your ability... She's a senior and she's said all year, refuse to lose."

The Cougars did just that, although Asheville refused to go quietly, leading 14-10 in the fourth before a run by Barnett evened things. With the match still in doubt at 23-22 Lions, Gesell sent a kill to the back line and Fary scored an ace to make it 24-23 Cougars.

Asheville tied it before two straight mis-hits gave HPCA a 26-24 victory to set off the celebration.

"It's the best feeling in the world," Fary said. "I've never felt this excited before, especially knowing all the girls are in it together and we worked so hard together. I've dreamed of this ever since I started playing volleyball in sixth grade."

Between those first hugs and the next ones that involved the championship trophy, Gesell, Fary and Morris were awarded their certificates for being named to the all-state team. The honor was the second straight for Fary and third for Gesell.

The trophy was the first for all of them.

"Everybody has been giving everything they've got," Gesell said. "Everybody's got the bruises and scars to show it. It was a team effort, big-time."

They may have a few more dings in the aftermath of that celebration. It's doubtful they'll notice.

HPCA takes state crown

SOUTHERN PINES - The tears came early for Asheville Christian Academy.

A spike to the face, after all, is a painful thing, especially when delivered by Bethany Gesell.

High Point Christian Academy shed only happy tears Saturday - and not many of those, even, for all the squeals of excitement and joyous hugs - after winning the N.C. Independent Schools Athletic Association 2A volleyball title.

The Cougars, ranked No. 1 all season, topped perennial power Asheville Christian in four games at The O'Neal School to win HPCA's first volleyball championship and third overall after baseball and boys swimming crowns last year. HPCA (34-3) played steadily throughout for a 25-17, 24-26, 25-14, 26-24 decision against an ACA squad in its 11th straight title match.

The Lions (24-4) took nine championships in that span, pushing aside the Cougars last year in the semifinals.

"We've had the potential, we've had the team, and something would always happen," said Gesell, whose monster kill on the second point of the first game sent the Lions' Grace

George to the bench for several minutes. "This year we pushed through it, got over the hump, and we won. That was the best feeling in the world. I've never felt like this before because I've never won. I'm so excited."

The junior finished with 30 kills, but got plenty of help. Senior Meredith Morris notched 12 kills and sophomore Kathryn Cox had eight, most coming from the pin-point sets of senior Megan Fary. She finished with 59 assists and also starred from the service line with six aces. Senior Victoria Barnett also came through with several huge runs from the service line and tallied seven aces. Sophomore libero Ellen Fay controlled the back line with 10 digs and solid passing.

"It's incredible to be with all these girls," Barnett said. "They mean so much to me. To know we worked so hard and finished so strong, it just means everything.

We had the feeling that we were going to come out No. 1 in the end. That's what pushed us."