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MECHANICSBURG - The PIAA Class 4A championship match between North Allegheny and Bishop Shanahan took the two teams, their coaches, and their fans on a roller coaster ride that ended with a 16-14 score in the fifth set.

The two schools were facing off for a third consecutive time in the finals, and second straight year at Cumberland Valley High School, and North Allegheny came away with its third consecutive title, but just barely.

"I am just speechless. I think I just had a heart attack," said North Allegheny junior setter/outside hitter Paige Morningstar, who had the pleasure of serving on the final play of the match. "All the emotions hit me at once, especially serving at the end of the game. It was crazy. It was overwhelming."

Morningstar's serve began a volley that ended with a dump by teammate Abby Miller, a senior setter/outside hitter, that recorded the winning point in North Allegheny's 16-14 victory.

"I haven't even comprehended it yet," Abby Miller said. "I'm trying not to cry. This is the last match I will play with the seniors, my best friends. It feels so good."

While North Allegheny (23-1) collected its third championship trophy, Bishop Shanahan (23-1) felt the pain of accepting a third consecutive runner-up trophy.

"This has been an unbelievable season," said Shanahan head coach Greg Ashman. "We graduated six starters [last spring], four of them going on to Division I volleyball, and there was no way anyone could have predicted that this season we'd be here in the fifth set of the state final. Our girls are so resilient, they wanted it so bad, they fought their lives out tonight, they really did."

The loss was especially hard to take for Eagles senior outside hitter Cara Shultz, who was the most dominant player in the four championship matches.

"Against all odds, nobody thought we'd make it to the state finals again," Shultz said. "Our team has a bond unlike any other I've seen before. I truly believe I am at sister status with every girl on this team. I honestly could not be more proud of them because they have defined all odds by making it to this game again. I'm also proud of the coaches for never giving up on us. The one word I can use to describe our team is family."

Shultz, a Yale recruit, completely dominated the match, in the front row and back row. She recorded 30 kills, 24 digs and 11 aces.

"Cara played amazing tonight," said Ashman. "This loss really hurts me, for Cara, because she's played so hard her entire four-year career. She was injured her sophomore year, and I've had to hang two silver medals on her, that hurts, it's really hard to swallow."

North Allegheny coach Heidi Miller agreed.

"Shultz is a senior," coach Miller said. "I'm ready for her to graduate. Last year, she was really good as well. Now she's a senior and a year older and wiser. She brought it again this year."

After being swept in the finals the past two years, Bishop Shanahan had something to prove in the rematch. The Eagles posted a 25-19 victory in the first set by scoring six of the last seven points. Shultz led the way with seven kills and two aces.

North Allegheny, the District 7 runner-up, rebounded in the second set, led by Abby Miller's four kills, to post a 25-22 victory. The Tigers took charge in the third set with a balanced attack that resulted in a 25-19 victory.

That's when the match significantly changed. Bishop Shanahan completely dominated the fourth set with a power hitting attack and serving that kept North Allegheny from running its offense. Shultz recorded kills and five aces, while younger sister Coco Shultz added four kills and one ace. The final score was 25-12.

"Our serves, and our passing, picked up a lot in the fourth set," Ashman said. "We were able to run our offense. When we run our offense, there's not a team that can stop us."

Shultz agreed.

"In the fourth set, we just had to keep our foot on the gas," Shultz said. "We took the brake out of the car and just kept rolling with it. We knew that we couldn't let up for a moment against North Allegheny."

Bishop Shanahan, the District 1 champion, opened the fifth set with three straight points, including two on kills by Shultz, but North Allegheny fought back to tie the match. The two teams traded

points until a Shultz kill tied the match at 13-13. Shultz then moved to the back row and committed her only serving error of the match.

"It was a lucky break," Abby Miller said. "She had a really good serve, but we weathered the storm."

After a timeout, Shultz recorded her seventh kill of the set to tie the match at 14-14, but North Allegheny scored the next two points to pull out the narrow victory.

"We just had the will to win," Abby Miller said. "We let them make their mistakes and kept our cool. That really helped us in the fifth set."

Shultz summed up the match perfectly.

"North Allegheny is a great team, a terrific program," Shultz said. "I would like to say that I would not want to lose a match any other way than 16-14 in the fifth set. That game out there tonight, that's what volleyball is all about, both teams fighting for every single point, and it came down to the wire. That's what good volleyball looks like."

North Allegheny's offensive leaders were: Abby Miller (12 kills), Madison Curran (9 kills), Paige Miller (8 kills), and Morningstar (7 kills). Bishop Shanahan's other kill leaders were: Coco Shultz (10 kills) and Brooke Burns (9 kills).

North Allegheny advanced to the title match with wins over Erie McDowell 1 (25-12, 25-17, 25-11), State College 0 (26-24, 25-19, 25-19), and Landisville Hempfield 0 (25-23, 25-15, 21-25, 25-9).

Bishop Shanahan earned its berth with wins over Cumberland Valley 0 (25-16, 25-16, 25-23), Pennsbury 0 (25-16, 25-18, 25-22), and Parkland 0 (25-20, 25-14, 25-21).