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Maplewood High School has moved up to No. 5 on the PIAA's list of past champions with its 3-0 sweep of West Branch in the PIAA Class 1A title match, held Nov. 19 at Cumberland Valley High School.

Maplewood was making its ninth appearance in the finals and claimed its sixth title. Only four schools have won more titles than Maplewood.

Norwin ranks first with 12 titles. North Allegheny moved up to No. 2 with its ninth title. Farrell is third with 8 titles. Johnstown Richland is fourth with seven titles.

"This is my fifth title and eighth time in the finals," said Maplewood coach Sheila Bancroft, who is in her 35th year at the helm. "I was not the coach when we won our first title in 1985."

Bancroft was coach when the Tigers won titles in 1992, 1995, 2005, and 2017. She was also at the helm with Maplewood lost in the title match in 1993, 2000, and 2007.

"They are all special," said Bancroft, when asked if this year's title meant any more than the others. "It's like asking who is your favorite child. All five titles have special meaning. The relationship I have with the players on those teams make each title special for different reasons. I'm blessed to have played a part in those titles."

It was just the opposite for West Branch coach Terry Trude, who is in his 29th year at the helm.

"This was our first appearance in a championship match," Trude said. "We're disappointed that we did not come home with the championship trophy, but this was a big achievement for our program. Hopefully, this appearance will allow us to take the next step and become a program that is a threat to get here every year."

Maplewood earned its PIAA berth by winning the District 10 title. The Tigers advanced to the title match with wins over Elk County Catholic, 3-0 in the first round; Homer-Center, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and Oswayo Valley, 3-0 in the semifinals.

West Branch claimed its PIAA berth by winning the District 6 title. The Warriors advanced to the title match with wins over Shade, 3-0 in the first round; Mt. Calvary Christian, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and Sacred Heart, 3-0 in the semifinals.

West Branch got off to a good start by scoring seven of the first eight points in the opening set. Maplewood battled back to tie the set at 9-9, but West Branch responded with another rally that gave them leads of 18-14 and 21-18. Despite six serving errors in the set, Maplewood rebounded to pull out a 26-24 victory.

"We didn't serve well in the first set," Bancroft said. "I think the girls had a little bit of the jitters. They had never played in a game of this significance. Fortunately, Sadie carried us with her hitting."

Bancroft was referring to senior outside hitter Sadie Thomas, who recorded eight of her match-high 19 kills in the first set.

"Great players step up when it matters the most," Bancroft said. "We have always wanted that from Sadie, and I think it took her until her senior year to finally finish in a big-time atmosphere, to say, I want the ball. You could see that in her the whole match."

West Branch continued to play well in the second set, as the Warriors held leads of 10-5, 13-8, and 17-14, with junior middle hitter Katrina Cowder leading the way.

At that point, Maplewood scored the next ten points and recorded a 25-21 victory and a 2-0 advantage in the match score. Senior Bailey Varndell led the rally with three serving aces and a backrow kill.

"We didn't handle our serve receive well in the second and third sets," Trude said. "Their setter (Varndell) had a great float serve that really gave us problems. That kept us from getting back into system."

Varndell recorded three more aces early in the third set as Maplewood jumped out to a 6-1 lead. Thomas took charge from that point on with seven kills, one ace, and a block for a point, and Maplewood rolled to a 25-11 win, thus clinching the match victory.

"It is just focus," Varndell said. "You always want to go back there and serve an ace. This is my last game ever of volleyball. If it is not the time to do it now, when is it? I just really wanted to get an ace and score points for the team."

Varndell finished with 9 aces, 28 assists, and 11 digs. Thomas had 19 kills, 8 digs, and 3 aces. Middle hitter Elizabeth Hunter tallied 8 kills and had the honor of recording the last kill. As a team, the Tigers had 16 serving aces.

"They were focused," Bancroft said. "It is just a special group, and they are a close-knit group. They don't give you any problems. And the parents are amazing. The community around them is amazing. It takes a whole community to win. Without the spectator bus and all those people traveling seven, eight hours in the snow yesterday to get here, we may not win this. It is huge."

West Branch was led by Cowder, who recorded 11 kills and two serving aces.

Maplewood used 10 players in the championship match. Seven were underclassmen. The three seniors are: Thomas, Varndell, and libero McKenna Crawford.

West Branch used 12 players. All but three are back. The three seniors are: middle hitter Matayha Kerin, libero Savannah Hoover, and outside hitter Hayley Wooster.

"We will be back next year," Trude said. "With almost everybody back, making it back to the finals will be one of our goals."