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When North Catholic posted a 25-18 win in the third set of its PIAA Class 3A title match against Pope John Paul II, to take a 2-1 lead in the best-of-five encounter, it looked as if the Trojans were on their way to a second straight state title.

But the story had a much different ending as Pope John Paul II rebounded to win the final two sets and claim the school's first PIAA volleyball title.

"I just wanted our kids to represent District 1 as best we could today," Panthers coach Ryan Sell said. "I'm at a loss for words on winning not only a PIAA title, but also an undefeated season."

North Catholic (21-2), the WPIAL champion, was making its third title match appearance in four years and were considered the favorite after winning a PIAA Class 2A title in 2021. Pope John Paul II (27-0), the District 1 champion, was making its title match debut.

"It was heartbreaking," North Catholic coach Amanda Fetter said. "I don't want to take anything away from our opponent, because they are a very good team, but it's real bummer to have our season end that way."

The two teams traded points in the first set until the score was tied 8-8. North Catholic scored the next six points and never looked back in a 25-15 victory. Ally Feczko led the way with eight kills.

Pope John Paul II completely dominated the second set, as North Catholic's serve-receive fell apart. The Panther scored the first ten points, with Gabriella Manza recording three serving aces, and came away with a 25-12 victory.

"We bounced back and served really, really tough in that second set and basically had them running all over the place," Sell said. "Gabriella came up big during that run. Being up 10-0 is not what you expect, especially in a state championship match."

North Catholic rebounded with a 25-18 win in the third set. Feczko was the star again with five kills and three aces. Natalie Ricevuto started making her presence known for the Panthers by recording four kills.

Pope John Paul rebounded in the fourth set with a 25-16 victory, in which the Panthers scored the final five points. Ricevuto picked up four more kills.

North Catholic served for match point three times in the fifth set, but came up short in a 19-17 heartbreaking loss. Ricevuto had four more kills and finished the match with 17.

"We got tight in the fourth set," Fetter said. "We battled back in the fifth set but couldn't finish."

Hutton Cordrey led Pope John Paul II with 17 kills, followed by Ricevuto (14) and Maeve Gallagher (9). Madison Monahan tallied 37 assists.

"It's really, really incredible. I couldn't have asked for a better group of girls to be on here starting with," said Grace Cooper, a four-year starter for the Panthers who had 19 digs. "Every day we showed up, put in continuous work and this is something we wanted so bad. The hard work really paid off."

Feczko led all hitters with 22 kills and recorded three aces. Ella Koziara added 15 kills for the Trojans, while Sydnei Jones and Katie McNelly each had eight. Jones also had 40 assists and two blocks.

"(Jones) is probably the best setter we've seen all year," Sell said. "And (Feczko) is one of the best outside attackers we've ever seen."

Pope John Paul II earned its PIAA berth by winning the District 1 title. The Panthers advanced to the title match with wins over Carver, 3-0 in the first round; Twin Valley, 3-2 in the quarterfinals; and Bethlehem Catholic, 3-0 in the semifinals.

North Catholic claimed its fourth consecutive PIAA berth by winning the WPIAL title. The Trojans earned its title match berth with wins over Latrobe, 3-0 in the first round; Hollidaysburg, 3-1 in the quarterfinals; and Thomas Jefferson, 3-1 in the semifinals.

Pope John Paul II is a relatively young team. Sell used 10 players in the championship match and only three were seniors. The Panthers have their top two hitters (Cordray and Ricevuto) and setter Madison Monahan returning.

North Catholic has a senior dominated squad. The Trojans used ten players in the title match and five are graduating. A total of nine players are seniors, including Jones and Feczko.

"We are losing a group of seniors who have been playing since they were sophomores," Fetter said. "They are some big shoes to fill, but we do have nice group of kids ready to step in and try to fill those shoes."