

By Ken Wunderley

Greensburg Central Catholic dominated three sets in the PIAA Class 1A girls volleyball title match, the first of four finals held at Cumberland Valley High School, but the Centurions had to rally from a one-set deficit twice to claim the title in a five-set thriller against Linville Hill.

"I've worked with this group of seniors and juniors for six years," said Centurions' coach Erin Salas, who has been a member of the coaching staff for 12 years, including the last three as head coach. "I really thought we would win the WPIAL title. We were able to keep it rolling when we entered the state tournament."

It's the third PIAA title for Greensburg Central, as the Centurions also claimed titles in 2014 and 2016.

"I was the middle school coach when we won the other two titles," Salas said. "This title means so much more to me being the head coach and having worked with these girls so long. I'm so proud of what the girls were able to accomplish."

Greensburg Central (21-3) jumped out to a 13-5 lead in the first set, but let it slip away as Linville Hill outscored the Centurions 20-9 to pull out a 25-22 victory. The Warriors were led by junior outside hitter Kaley Higgins and senior outside hitter Desiree Smucker, who each recorded four kills.

"It took us a little time to get the nerves out," Linville Hill coach Kate Stoltzfus said. "Something clicked when we were down 13-5. We had a really good run and caught them off guard."

Salas was not surprised by the opening set loss.

"We've been a little sluggish in the first set of matches in the playoffs," Salas admitted. "We just had to reset ourselves and play our game."

The second set was a different story as the Centurions dominated from the opening serve to record a 25-6 victory. Designated hitter Abigail Dei recorded ten consecutive serving points during the set, while middle hitter Erin Grace recorded five kills and a block.

Linville Hill (22-3) rebounded with a 25-19 victory in the third set to take a 2-1 advantage, despite a six-kill performance by Centurions opposite Ashlyn Black. Higgins led the Warriors with two kills and three serving aces.

Greensburg Central turned in another dominant performance in the fourth set with a 25-10 victory. Black led the way with five kills, while Dei recorded four serving aces.

The Centurions jumped out to a 6-0 lead in the fifth set and were not seriously challenged in a 15-5 victory. Black added four more kills to finish the day with 20 kills and three aces.

"I felt like we were on a roller coaster ride," Stoltzfus said. "We won the first set, they won the second set, we won the third set, and they won the last two sets. We stayed with them as long as we could."

Stoltzfus felt Black was the difference in the match.

"We had not faced a strong opposite like Black all year long," Stoltzfus said. "We really struggled trying to defend against her."

Black was one of three Greensburg Central hitters who recorded 10 or more kills. Senior middle hitter Erin Grace had 12 kills, while senior outside hitter Eva Denis had 11 kills. Senior setter Maura Oslosky recorded 67 assists, while Dei finished with six serving aces.

"I knew this team was capable of big things, so I scheduled as many strong non-section opponents as I could," Salas said. "Facing such strong competition really helped us in the playoffs."

Greensburg Central qualified for the PIAA tournament by winning the WPIAL title. The Centurions advanced to the title match with wins against Clarion Limestone, 3-1 in the first round; West Branch, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and Frazier, 3-2 in the semifinals.

Linville Hill qualified by winning its first District 3 title. The Warriors earned their title berth with wins against Northern Cambria, 3-0 in the first round; Mountain View, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and Faith Christian, 3-1 in the semifinals.

Greensburg Central loses nine players to graduation. Black is the only returning starter.

"Our senior class will certainly be missed and hard to replace," Salas said. "We do have some juniors who saw playing time during the season. And of course, we have Ashlyn back."

Higgins led the Warriors with nine kills, Smucker had seven, and junior middle hitter Courtney Good had six.

"I'm really proud of what the girls were able to accomplish," Stoltzfus said. "We're happy to have made it this far."

Linville Hill used ten players in the title match and only three are seniors.

"We have a nice nucleus of players coming back," Stoltzfus said. "We are certainly on the right track."