

By Ken Wunderley

The numbers 3 and 74 sum up the performance of Pope John Paul II in the PIAA girls volleyball finals at Cumberland Valley High School.

The Golden Panthers claimed a third consecutive Class 3A title with a 3-1 win over Mars. The victory capped a third consecutive unbeaten season for Pope John Paul II and increased its winning streak to 74 matches.

"It's great to win three in a row and continue our winning streak," Pope John Paul II coach Ryan Sell said. "It's a tribute to our girls and their dedication to our program."

The Panthers finished the season with a 24-0 record after posting a 25-0 mark each of the past two years.

Pope John Paul II featured a balanced attack in the first set as three Panthers combined for 15 kills, led by junior middle hitter Norah Busch, who had six kills in a 25-21 victory. Senior opposite Josie Arizena added five kills and senior outside hitter Maeve Gallagher had four.

"We got them down in the first set, but couldn't keep them down," said Mars coach Tami Caraway, referring to the fact that Mars held a small lead until the midway point of the first set. "In the second set, we got off to a good run and put them back on their heels. We were able to take them out of their system."

Mars jumped out to a 10-1 lead and held on for a 25-21 victory. Middle hitter Cecelia Christy led the Planets with four kills and one block.

"We fell apart in second set," Sell said. "Mars played great, but we did put on a late push to make the match close. The momentum from that late rally carries over to the third set."

That would be the only set Pope John Paul would lose. The Panthers posted a 25-17 victory in the third set, led by Maeve Gallagher's six kills.

"They put a lot of defensive pressure on us and got us out of system," Caraway said. "It was one of our lower hitting matches of the year."

The Panthers capped their victory with a 25-18 win in the fourth set. Busch recorded four kills to finish with a game-high 18 kills. She also led the Panthers with 5 blocks and 2 serving aces.

Busch was one of four Panther hitters who had 9 or more kills. The others were: Gallagher (15), Arizena (10), and sophomore middle hitter Haley Maloney (9). Gallagher and sophomore defensive specialist Mia Mobley each had 14 digs.

Pope John Paul II qualified for the PIAA tournament by winning the District 1 title. The Panthers earned their title berth with wins against Carver E&S, 3-0 in the first round; Southern Lehigh, 3-1 in the quarterfinals; and Big Spring, 3-0 in the semifinals.

Mars earned its PIAA berth by winning the WPIAL title. The Fighting Planets advanced to the title match with wins against Central Mountain, 3-0 in the first round; Hampton, 3-2 in the quarterfinals; and Beaver, 3-0 in the semifinals.

Planets outside hitter Lily Javor had six kills in the final set and finished with 13. Christy had 10 kills and junior outside hitter Rylee Wooldridge had nine. Freshman setter Gabi Weidemann recorded 33 assists and junior libero Alaina Graham had 16 digs.

"It was a great experience for our program," Caraway said. "The school and our fans were so supportive throughout the season."

Caraway played nine players in the title match and only three are seniors.

"We have something to look forward to with such an experienced group of kids coming back," Caraway said. "We are looking forward to getting back in the gym in the spring."

Sell has led the Panthers to the PIAA tournament 11 times in 12 years. He used 10 players in the title match and six are underclassmen.

"We are certainly on the right path to winning another title," Sell said. "But we have a long way to go to match North Allegheny's streak of eight consecutive titles."