

By Ken Wunderley

It was a record-tying performance for North Allegheny at the PIAA girls volleyball championships, which were held at Cumberland Valley High School.

The Tigers tied the PIAA record for the most consecutive titles with a 3-1 victory against Spring-Ford in the Class 4A title match.

It's the eighth consecutive title for North Allegheny, which ties the record Norwin set with eight titles from 1976 to 1983.

North Allegheny was making its 13th appearance in a title match and claimed its 11th overall title, which is one short of Norwin's PIAA record of 12 titles.

"Every time you win a championship it's an amazing experience," said sophomore outside hitter Molly Robertson, after collecting her second PIAA gold medal with the Tigers.

"This title means a little more to me than last year because some people didn't think we could win again after losing ten starters to graduation. Our motivation from the first practice was to add another number to the banner."

North Allegheny coach Russ Hoburg had an interesting way of looking at the streak of eight straight titles.

"That's two senior classes that won four state titles. They never experienced a loss in the state playoffs during their time in high school. That's impressive," Hoburg said. "This senior class just added another chapter to our history."

But it was much tougher than expected for North Allegheny, as Spring-Ford, the fifth-place finisher from District 1, gave the WPIAL champions all they could handle.

Spring-Ford recorded nine consecutive points in the first set en route to a 25-19 victory. The Rams, led by Lila Olsen's seven kills, took advantage of seven hitting errors and four serving errors by the Tigers.

"We started slow out of the gate and Spring-Ford came out strong," Hoburg said. "They served us very tough and got us out of system. We got stuck in a rotation for 13 points. That forced us to make a few adjustments."

North Allegheny rebounded with a 25-21 victory in the second set with Robertson leading the way with six kills.

The third set featured five lead changes with North Allegheny coming out on top with a 25-19 victory. The Tigers capped their title with a 25-16 victory in the fourth set with Alicia Mokube posting seven kills.

"North Allegheny hasn't won seven titles in a row for no reason," Spring-Ford coach George Fuller said. "We poked the bear in the first set and may have woke them up. You just can't give away points on unforced errors in close games. Good teams will take advantage and beat you. We played well, but you must play an almost error-free game against North Allegheny."

North Allegheny (21-1) qualified for the PIAA tournament by winning the WPIAL title. The Tigers advanced to the title match with wins against Manheim Township, 3-0 in the first round; Bishop Shanahan, 3-1 in the quarterfinals; and Landisville Hempfield, 3-0 in the semifinals.

Robinson led North Allegheny 19 kills and 10 digs, while Mokube had 12 kills. Junior Keely McMahon-Regan (26 assists, 8 digs) and senior Mackenzie Jones (14 assists, 3 aces) shared the setting duties. Senior middle hitter Bridget Murphy had 8 kills and 4 blocks.

Hoburg used 11 players in the title game, including all six seniors. The Tigers have a good nucleus returning next year with Robertson, Mokube and McMahon-Regan coming back.

Spring-Ford (21-8) had an amazing postseason run. The Rams placed fifth in District 1 after being seeded No. 12. They advanced to the PIAA finals with upsets of Unionville, 3-2 in the first round; Parkland, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and Central Dauphin, 3-1 in the semifinals.

"We were flying under the radar all season," Fuller said. "I don't think the kids realize just how significant it is to make it to the finals for the first time and be a part of a match in which a PIAA record is tied. We may have lost, but it was a proud moment for me, the team, and the athletic department."

Olsen, a junior outside hitter, led Spring-Ford with 19 kills and 3 blocks. Senior outside hitter Lauren Angelucci had 16 kills. Sophomore setter Marley Angelucci had 36 assists. Lauren Angelucci is the only senior which bodes well for next season.