

Lakewood Survives Bobble, Gets Bauble

Contributed by John Tawa
Thursday, 06 December 2007
Last Updated Wednesday, 07 October 2009

The Lakewood Lancers filed into the interview room after Saturday evening's four-set win in Division I over Nevada Union gave them their first California state volleyball championship ever. The players displayed ear-to-ear smiles and garish rings that were placeholders until true championship rings, which they earned, could be purchased and worn.

But there was an undercurrent of sadness as well for the school's former head coach Steve Lewis, a mentor to the seniors on the team. Ever jovial and inspirational, and credited with the saying, "Offense sells tickets but defense wins games," Lewis passed away from liver cancer four years ago this week. The Lancers had a bobble or two on the road to their state title, but they now had their bauble. Current coach Mike Wadley, the former assistant coach who took over upon Lewis' death, wanted the same for his good friend.

"I wanted to get him a ring," Wadley said. "Finally, he gets a ring."

Winning state wasn't a serious consideration when Lakewood, ranked No. 21 nationally in the pre-season, stumbled to a 6-3 start as the Lancers tried to blend their veteran seniors with tremendous young talent that had achieved much during the previous club season.

Suddenly the lofty goals that Wadley had written down and for his players to put in their folders or on their walls -- Win league, win CIF, go to the semifinals of the Durango Fall Classic, play well against Orange County powers Esperanza and Mater Dei and win state -- seemed unattainable.

The turnaround came at Durango. Lakewood didn't meet its goal of getting to the semifinals, losing to No. 1 Mira Costa and No. 3 Louisville Assumption, but the Lancers won the Silver Division, beating Buchanan, Los Alamitos and Long Beach Wilson in succession. The talent was learning to play together, the youngsters were maturing and the confidence was growing with every win.

By the time Lakewood reached San Jose, the Lancers were battle-tested veterans. They knocked off tough Santa Margarita in the Southern Section playoffs before losing in the semifinals to Redondo Union, but advanced to the Division I state tournament and rolled on the road, beating La Costa Canyon in San Diego and Buchanan in Fresno before meeting the Miners from Grass Valley for the crown.

Nevada Union came to the finals senior dominated and with state championship experience. The Miners were making their third appearance in the finals in the past five years. They also were red hot. Since losing three times at the Archbishop Mitty Invitational in September, they had won 20 matches in a row, using a dominant hitting attack led by middles Kylie Miraldi and Taylor Japhet and outside hitters Sarah McAtee and Christian Woodruff.

This had all the makings of a down-to-the-wire fight between two heavyweights with strong offenses and it lived up to its billing. Lakewood won the first game, 25-18, using a scoring burst from sophomore middle Taylor Hollins to take an early 7-3 lead. The Lancers maintained the lead with strong serving & aces from Hollins, Megan Johnson and Megan Moenoa -- and superior passing led by libero Gabby Pulig and defensive specialists Madison Moss and Sam Martinez. McAtee and Miraldi had nice moments for Nevada Union, but it wasn't enough, as Lakewood got contributions on offense from senior OH Jessica Thomas, sophomore Jaz Orozco and Moenoa, the talented freshman setter playing on the right side, and was the far better team defensively.

A crushing back row attack from Orozco contributed to Lakewood's fast start in Game 2, but the Miners showed their heart by quickly erasing the four-point deficit. Nevada Union tied the game at 10-10 on a block from senior setter Caroline Reeves, who was a middle until this year, and took the lead on Woodruff's ace. It was Nevada Union's first lead since 1-0 in the first set.

The teams battled back and forth until a two-point run sparked by Orozco's hitting and defense put Lakewood on top 19-18. But with the sensational sophomore in the back row, Nevada Union rattled off six point in a row, starting with a Miraldi block. Two kills and a block from Woodruff finished off the 25-20 Nevada Union win that knotted the match at a set apiece.

There was no panic in the Lakewood huddle. The Lancers had been down 2-1 to La Costa Canyon before winning and dropped Game 1 versus Buchanan before rallying. They weren't about to let a lost set rattle them.

Game 3 was intensely played from the start, as both teams recognized how important it was to the match. Tied at 4-4 after a Japhet kill for Nevada Union, Orozco and Hollins scored off of great Johnson sets to give Lakewood the lead. Three long runs soon followed. Lakewood authored two of them, which gave the Lancers control of the set. The first, a 5-0 run capped by a quick kill in the middle from Kirstie Bender, made it 13-6 Lakewood. But Nevada Union responded with a 4-0 run highlighted by strong Alexis Moser defense and Kristin Dahle's ace. Lakewood's answering 3-1 run, featuring a great second-effort athletic play from Thomas, extended the lead to 16-11. Nevada Union could get no closer than four the rest of the way. Two Thomas kills and a final one from Orozco finished off the 25-18 win that put the Lancers in the driver's seat up two sets to one.

I wrote on the PrepVolleyball.com message board after Game 3 that the match still felt like a five-gamer and Nevada Union made me feel prophetic early on by racing to an 8-4 lead on kills from Dahle and Miraldi. But Lakewood won the next very long point, which was critical, and turned the game around, going on an 8-1 run to take a 12-9 lead. Thomas, an athletic attacker headed to Oklahoma, had three of her 17 kills in the run.

There was no quit in Nevada Union, however. A kill from McAtee and a kill and block from Japhet got the Miners even at 15-15. Lakewood kept the pressure on both at the net and on defense, however, and never let Nevada Union take the lead. The teams were tied three more times, including at 23-apiece, after Nevada Union rallied with three straight just as it appeared that a combo block from Thomas and Bender would be the last nail; and at 24-apiece, when Reeves's winning joust with the Miners staring at a match point against countered Thomas's right side kill one point earlier.

With the score knotted at 24-24, Johnson took the next set and had all of her options, including Orozco, who had a match-high 18 kills on the left, and Hollins, who'd delivered 13 kills on 16 errorless swings in the middle. The Wyoming-bound senior instead went behind her head to the freshman on the right and Moenoa delivered with a cross-court crusher. Lakewood cashed in its second match point on a Hollins block that Nevada Union covered initially but could not play over in three. Miner players were forced to watch as the ball flew agonizingly close to breaching the net but did not, ending their title hopes.

"I thought the difference was unforced errors and we had a few more than the other guys," said Miner head coach Bob Rogers. "Other than that it looked like a toss up to me. Our block got us the second game. I think we missed a few more serves than we liked to. All in all I thought our effort and hustle was every bit as good as we've seen from high school volleyball and so was our opponent."

Asked if he was frustrated to have come up short in the finals again, Rogers responded with class.

"This is our third time in the finals," he explained. "All have gone four games and could easily have gone five. We're knocking on the door. I'm not frustrated. I think it's great the achievement we've made. We've had an incredible season and came that close to topping it off with a state championship."

"Everyone wants to win state," said McAtee, whose 13 kills led three Nevada Union players in double figures. "That would be the biggest accomplishment the school has probably ever seen. It would have been awesome to pull this out the last game for our seniors. It would be an awesome finish to an already awesome season but I'm really proud of this team for getting this far."

Wadley lauded the discipline of Nevada Union's middles and the Miners's ball control, an area he thought his team could exploit, but in the end, he pointed to several reasons why Lakewood, which became the first Moore League team ever to win a state volleyball title, was the better team.

“I think we’re more athletic,” he said. “We’ve got bangers and we proved it all year long. We served and passed really well in Games 1, 3 and 4. We have a motto: ‘Offense sells tickets but defense wins games.’”

And with that his thoughts went back to Lewis. Cancer may have taken him four years ago, but his coaching style and philosophy lived on. And the result was a state title everyone could celebrate with a smile and a ring.