



October 31, 2009

Jets, Lancers aiming to take final step to state

*By Steve Clark
Herald Times Reporter*

MANITOWOC — Manitowoc Lutheran looked sharp in its sectional semifinal sweep of Lake Country Lutheran on Thursday.

Roncalli, maybe, not so much in its four-game victory over Gillett.

But the key fact is that both teams won and now each will be in action tonight shooting for a trip to the WIAA State Volleyball Tournament.

"It was an ugly win — and that's something coaches say a lot — but the final result was a win," said Roncalli head coach Dave Mueller, whose team beat Gillett 19-25, 25-14, 25-23, 25-23 on Thursday. "They came back (Friday) and had a good practice. ... We told the team that we didn't show how we can play, but this is their chance."

Roncalli (21-6) will face Auburndale at Stevens Point in a Division 3 sectional semifinal tonight, with the winner advancing to next week's state tournament at the Resch Center in Green Bay. The Apaches (29-5) are coming off a five-game win over Marathon in the sectional semifinal.

According to Mueller, Auburndale — which lost to Hilbert early in the season may trot a wealth of heavy-handed hitters out on the court, but the Apaches will definitely make an opponent work for every point.

"They are not real overpowering offensively, but they dig everything. They keep (points) alive," Mueller said. "We have to just go and take care of our own business and we have to pass the ball well."

If the Jets can get the ball to setter Cory Paquette on a consistent basis, she will have plenty of options to turn to.

Roncalli has developed into a very balanced offensive team over the course of the season and had four players with at least seven kills on Thursday, led by Maria Grant's 10. Kayla Kasper added eight, while Olivia Krejcarek and Hailey Gill each had seven.

At different times throughout the latter half of the season, though, all four of the Jets' main hitters have led the way and that balance could give Roncalli an edge.

"It's been all four at one time or another and even though we have one player that does lead the stats, the others aren't are behind," Mueller said. "And it's not just kills. It's in all the other areas as well that we're seeing everybody step up and play well."

Manitowoc Lutheran definitely rides into its sectional final on a hot streak. The Lancers have needed only nine games to win three matches in the WIAA postseason and are the only one of the eight sectional finalists in Division 4 that has not been extended past three games in the tournament.

That mark will be tested by a Catholic Central squad that enters the match with a deceiving record. The Hilltoppers, who edged Johnson Creek in five games on Thursday, hold a 23-19 record on the year, but have posted a 5-15 record against Division 1 teams. And its not just that Catholic Central has been playing Division 1 opponents, it has played some of the best. Nine of the Hilltoppers' 20 matches against Division 1 foes have come against teams that are in the sectional finals.

"If you just look at their record, you're not all that impressed. But when you see the quality of teams they played and how they have done, their record doesn't look so bad then," said Lutheran head coach Davie Jirikowic, whose team will face the Hilltoppers at Lake Country Lutheran on Hartland at 7 p.m. today. "We just need to keep playing the way we have been playing — keeping our focus, playing with confidence and playing our game."

One of the keys for the Lancers tonight will be their focus and keeping it from the first point to the last against Catholic Central.

Lutheran struggled with their focus in the tournament opener against Stockbridge and also at different times against Lake Country Lutheran. Although the Lancers were able to dial it back in when needed, any little breaks in focus could be difficult to overcome against a team the caliber of Catholic Central.

"Volleyball is such a game of momentum that if you let your focus drop at all, it gives the other team an opening and then it can be difficult to stop momentum," Jirikowic said. "There is no doubt the team will be focused on Saturday. This is what they have worked so hard for."

One of the Lancers' biggest strengths will be the bevy of hitters and blockers it can throw out on the court. Seniors Kelly Hauf, Brianna Robley and Kelsi Daffner, junior Erin Dittmar and sophomore Brianna Neumeyer give senior setter Emily Pankow plenty of options to set the ball.

On Thursday, it was Hauf leading the way with 12 kills, while Daffner paced the Lancers in their first two tournament matches.

And Lutheran should have a height advantage over the Hilltoppers, however, the Lancers will have to play a complete game if they expect to make the school's first WIAA state appearance.

"I'm sure they pass well. I'm sure they serve well. And just because a team isn't big, doesn't mean they don't know how to put the ball down," Jirikowic said. "They have a tradition of being at the state tournament so being in a sectional final atmosphere isn't going to bother them.

"They are a very good team. But if we can play well and play our game, we'll see how things end up."



November 1, 2009

WIAA sectional volleyball: Manitowoc Lutheran sweeps Burlington Catholic Central to reach Division 4 state tournament

First sectional title, trip to state in school history for Lancers volleyball program

By Matt Wellens

HARTLAND – Despite all of Manitowoc Lutheran’s success over the past four years, the Lancers had nothing but a few Olympian Conference titles to show for it heading into the 2009 postseason.

No regional titles.

No sectional berth.

The Lancers had never even come close to sniffing the floor of the state tournament once.

That all changed in just less than two weeks.

For the first time in school history, Manitowoc Lutheran High School is heading to the WIAA State Volleyball Tournament after sweeping the three-time defending state champions, Burlington Catholic Central, on Saturday, 25-19, 25-22, 25-22 in the Division 4 sectional finals on Halloween at Lake Country Lutheran High School.

“I think we’ve all worked so hard in practices every day and throughout the summer,” Lancers senior Kelly Hauf said. “We’ve worked so hard and this is our dream and our biggest goal we have. I’m so happy and proud of everyone that we are going.”

The Lancers will take to the court again on Friday against McDonnell Central in a Division 4 state semifinal starting at 10 a.m. at the Resch Center in Green Bay having gone 12-0 in four matches in the regional and sectional tournament.

“We really never talked about (going to state),” Lancers coach Dave Jirikowic said. “We just kept focusing on whatever game was next. Seriously, that’s what we did.

“People would say, ‘You are going to state,’ and they would sometimes say that back to me. I’d say, ‘That is not our concern right now. Our concern is the next game. You can’t get to state unless you win the games going up to state.’ They focused on every game up until this point and that is what we will continue to do.”

The Lancers nearly collapsed in game two where a Division 1, battle-tested Central team picked up an opening ace from Britte Schneider en route to going up 3-1 on the Lancers.

An ace by sophomore Brianna Neumeyer and kills by seniors Kelly Hauf and Kelsi Daffner tied the game at 6-6. All the Lancers were able to do, however, after that was tie the game at 8-8 and 9-9 and the Hilltoppers went up 12-9 to force the first Lancer timeout.

A kill by Hauf and back-to-back aces by Libby Spencer brought Lutheran within one at 14-13. A four-hit violation did the same for Lutheran at 14-15 and after watching a 3-0 Central run put the Hilltoppers up 19-14, Lutheran took nine of the next 10 points including six straight off the serve of Hauf.

A kill by Daffner and long serve by Central put the Lancers within a game of state.

“Obviously we were a little bit down naturally but we came through,” Lancer senior and four-year varsity starter Brianna Robley said. “That is what this team is all about is we find a way to win and now we are going to state.”

Lutheran struggled on the serve all night and put its first serve of game three into the net, but the Lancers were still able to go up 3-1 on the Hilltoppers to start.

Central picked up three straight points, including an ace from Heather Czarny, to knot the game up at 6-6

and the two teams began trading points and the lead.

Three-straight kills from Robley led to a 5-0 run and a 14-9 lead for Lutheran. That cushion evaporated after three Lutheran mental errors – a line violation and two mental lapses allowing balls to hit the hardwood untouched – and the two sides again went back to trading points.

Central was never able to grasp the lead, however, only tying the game at 17, 18, 19 and 21, thanks to Daffner, who served up four kills each time the Hilltoppers tied the game.

Daffner's set over the net put Lutheran up for good at 22-21 and a kill by Neumeyer, a long serve by Central and an ace by Robley on match point sent Lutheran to state for the first time in school history.

"It is indescribable how great everyone feels," said Daffner, who led the Lancers with 15 digs and 14 kills.

For Jirikowic, Daffner was not only the team's most valuable player on Saturday but the MVP of the entire postseason for Lutheran thus far.

"She has found the right time to just go off," Jirikowic said. "With her and Robley and Hauf and (Erin) Dittmar and Neumeyer ... when those girls start heating up, it's hard to stop."

Lutheran withstood a late 6-0 run by the Hilltoppers in game one to take a 1-0 lead in the match after nearly blowing a nine-point lead.

The Lancers jumped out to a 3-1 lead in game one off an ace by Daffner and a kill by Robley.

A block by Dittmar, kill by Neumeyer and another block, this time from Hauf, gave the Lancers their largest lead up until that point at five, 14-9.

Following a Hilltoppers timeout, the Lancers extended that five-point advantage to nine off three kills by Hauf, and led by as much as nine points still at 20-11 following a Central kill that went long.

The Hilltoppers went on the late run that forced two Lancer timeouts in a span of six points but kills by Daffner and Robley sealed the win, 25-19.

"They just played one game at a time, one point at a time," Jirikowic said. "They played hard. We were down a couple times middle to late part of the games and they really stepped up and never quit. This team has done that all year. They have never quit. They are the most composed team I ever seen and that is what has carried them this far."

Notes: Daffner led the Lancers with 15 digs and 14 kills. ... Hauf had 14 digs and 12 kills while Robley totaled 11 kills and two aces. ... Emily Pankow had a team-high 36 assists. Hauf and Dittmar led with four blocks. ... Spencer and Robley each had two aces.

Additional Facts

WIAA Sectional Final

Division 4

At Lake Country Lutheran, Hartland

Manitowoc Lutheran def. Catholic Central, 25-19, 25-22, 25-22. Highlights: Manitowoc Lutheran – Libby Spencer, 2 aces, 9 service points; Brianna Robley, 2 aces, 11 kills; Kelsi Daffner, 15 digs, 14 kills; Kelly Hauf, 14 digs, 12 kills, 4 blocks; Brianna Neumeyer, 6 kills; Emily Pankow, 3 blocks, 36 assists; Erin Dittmar, 4 blocks



November 3, 2009

WIAA state volleyball: Daffner shines in clutch for Manitowoc Lutheran

*By Matt Wellens
Herald Times Reporter*

MANITOWOC — It's nearly impossible to pin point just a single player on the Manitowoc Lutheran roster as being responsible for getting the Lancers to their first WIAA State Volleyball Tournament in school history but the clutch play of Kelsi Daffner this post season has made her tough to ignore.

The Lancers senior outside hitter has led the team in kills in three of the four playoff games, totaling 44 kills in regionals and sectionals.

"Kelsi had a great way of placing it in all different spots," Lancers senior Kelly Hauf said. "I just don't know where she is going. She's a great athlete and awesome.

"She would hit it line and get a kill. Hit it cross and get a kill. She is a great hitter and had a couple clutch shots."

In the sectional semifinals, it was Daffner that ripped off consecutive kills in game three to bring the Lancers within one point of Lake Country Lutheran. Daffner then posted two more kills during a Brianna Neumeyer serving run to put her team up 23-20 en route to victory.

In the sectional finals, again in game three, it was Daffner who came up with the clutch hits against the three-time defending state champions, Burlington Catholic Central.

Daffner ended an extended rally early in the match on her second kill attempt of the rally to tie the game at 8-8. Later in the match with the Hilltoppers attempting to take the lead, Daffner delivered three strong kills to prevent Central from taking leads at 17-17, 18-18, and 19-19. Central tied game three a fourth time at 21-21 but a strong set by Daffner over the net found open hardwood and Lutheran never trailed again en route to state.

"Kelsi Daffner, I'd say she is our MVP of the playoffs so far," Lancers coach Dave Jirikowic said. "She has found the right time to go off."

Tip of the hat

Catholic Central may have been the reigning three-time defending WIAA Division 4 state volleyball champions heading into Saturday's sectional final but the Hilltoppers that took the floor at Lake Country Lutheran were a far different team than last year.

The Hilltoppers roster featured only two seniors and two juniors while the Lancers, who competed in Division 3 up until this year, had six seniors and four juniors.

Still, it wasn't just experience that unseated the defending champions, according to Hilltoppers coach Carol Van Henkulum.

Talking with The Journal Times of Racine, Van Henkulum compared the Lancers to her seasoned team of a year ago that won state.

“They had good hitters who could hit around our blocks,” said Van Henkulum on JournalTimes.com. “We played really well, but they’re a very seasoned team. They were physically stronger than a lot of my players.”

All alone

For Lancers’ setter Emily Pankow, being a state volleyball qualifier is quite a weird and at times a lonely experience.

“It’s been so much fun,” Pankow said. “It’s been weird because other teams are done, yet we still keep playing. It feels like it’s never going to end. I’m just so excited to play on Friday.”

The Lancer volleyball team has found themselves alone in the locker room this week with every other fall sport done. While other friends on other teams are at home, the Lancers are still heading to practice after school every day.

In Manitowoc County, the only other fall sports team remaining are the are swim teams at Manitowoc Lincoln, Two Rivers, Kiel and Valders.

If not for Lutheran’s theatre group practicing after them on Monday, the Lancers may have had the building to themselves.

At least there are plenty of congrats going around from all over the place to help stem the loneliness at times.

“It’s unbelievable,” Pankow said about going to state. “It doesn’t even feel real half the time.”

Additional Facts

WIAA State Semifinals

At Resch Center, Green Bay

Division 4

Friday’s games

Newman Catholic vs. Highland, 10 a.m.

nMcDonell Central vs. Manitowoc Lutheran, 10 a.m.



November 4, 2009

A formidable foe

Lutheran faces tough challenge in WIAA state volleyball semifinals

*By Matt Wellens
Herald Times Reporter*

On paper, Manitowoc Lutheran should be one and done in this year's WIAA Division 4 Girls Volleyball State Tournament.

If paper decided things, Lancer fans shouldn't plan on being at the Resch Center in Ashwaubenon for Saturday morning's Division 4 title game.

The Lancers have no shot, on paper.

For the first time this year, they are the underdogs.

That's their story, and they are sticking to it.

"McDonell Central is very, very good, so for the first time we are not the top dogs, which is cool for us because we don't have that target on our backs," Lutheran senior Brianna Robley said with a smile less than 48 hours after beating the three-time defending state champion, Burlington Catholic Central. "Now we just have to go in, play our best and who knows?"

Unfortunately for McDonell Central, paper has no voice when it comes to deciding winners and losers.

That will be left up to the Macks (40-3) and Lancers (31-3) on Friday when the two sectional champions hit the floor at 10 a.m. in a state semifinal match.

McDonell Central of Chippewa Falls won the Cloverbelt West Conference after compiling an 11-0 league record.

The Macks, led by first-team all-conference selections Christi Schoch, Karley Wiensch and Ashley Zumbrock, only dropped two games in regionals and sectionals - and both came in a five-game win over Eau Claire Immanuel Lutheran in the regional finals.

The one common opponent between the two schools is Oostburg, which the Macks beat twice. The Lancers, on the other hand, fell to the Flying Dutchmen twice this season.

Lutheran head coach Dave Jirikowic said he spoke with Dutchmen coach Scott Greupink earlier in the week and, according to the Oostburg coach, the Lancers will have the size advantage at the net.

What Lutheran needs to watch out for is the Macks' ability to dig up everything thrown their way, Jirikowic said.

"They are extremely well-schooled defensively," Jirikowic said. "They dig up everything. I see a lot of coaches in the paper say they dig up everything. Scott ... has seen it all. They've been down to state. He said this team is fan-tastic at playing defense."

On the other side of the bracket, Wausau Newman Catholic will face off against Highland in the other Division 4 state semifinal.

Newman Catholic, like Manitowoc Lutheran, competed in Division 3 last season. Newman topped Mishicot in the sectional finals to reach state but was ousted in the state semifinals. Newman comes into the Division 4 state semifinals having lost only one game in a four-game win over Valley Christian

in the sectional semifinals.

Highland High School, located in a town of about 800 people, 60 miles west of Madison, is the lone public school in the Division 4 field.

Highland dropped only two playoff games thus far, both coming in a five-game win over Potosi in the sectional semis.

The Lancers come in to state having gone 12-0 in their two regional wins and two sectional wins and dethroned the defending champs.

While Lutheran may be the hottest team coming into state, McDonell is still the favorites, according to Jirikowic, and that is fine by him.

"They are top ranked. They beat Oostburg twice and Oostburg beat us," Jirikowic said. "On paper they should win. We're happy being the underdogs."

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November 5, 2009

Tight-knit group

Lutheran heads to state volleyball tournament with a wealth of team unity

*By Matt Wellens
Herald Times Reporter*

YARN.

The four letters have been plastered in large, bold type on the backs of the Manitowoc Lutheran volleyball team's warm-up T-shirts all season long.

Yarn is not an acronym for anything. The four letters mean exactly what they spell out, as in string or thread.

Yarn is a reminder for the Lancers. It is much more than just the stuff your grandmother uses to knit scarves and sweaters.

Yarn is the fabric that has held the team together this season. It is what has brought the Lancers within two wins of a state WIAA championship. That quest continues at 10 a.m. Friday at the Resch Center in Ashwaubenon, where they'll face McDonell Central in a Division 4 state semifinal showdown.

"Every time before the game we say, 'We got yarn,' and it reminds us that we are all one team and that we all have to stick together or else we are not a team anymore," Lancers senior Brianna Robley said. "We need team unity to do well in volleyball."

At this point in the season, everyone can hit, everyone can block and everyone can dig. That is why

the Lancers will need teamwork - and yarn - now more than ever if they hope to capture their first WIAA state volleyball championship.

The winner of the Lutheran-McDonell Central matchup will face either Wausau Newman Catholic or Highland on Saturday at 10 a.m. for the state title.

"I know (the Lancers) are going to play hard, and I know they will keep their composure and I know they will have fun," Lancers coach Dave Jirikowic said. "That's all you can ask of your team down there, especially have fun and play hard. Whatever the score says at the end, that's what we'll have to take. But we'll do everything we can to play well."

Lutheran's rallying cry and team motto this season originated with the tossing of a ball of yarn during the opening days of practice.

The team building exercise used by Jirikowic involved each player pitching the ball of yarn to one another while holding on to a thread. With each toss came what was needed to be successful as a team this year. Once every player had a piece of yarn, the connected Lancers pulled the zigzagged formation tight.

"We are tightly knit," senior setter Emily Pankow said of the exercise. "We rely on each other. We hold each other up. If one is gone, it affects all of us. Whether girls are on the court or sitting on the bench, we all hold each other up and help each other through each and every game."

The exercise didn't end there.

With the Lancers held tightly together by the yarn, assistant coach Joy Jirikowic took a scissors and snipped just a single stand of yarn. Just like that, the Lancers' fell apart.

"That is the basis of our team. If one person is down, then we are all going to be down so we need to stick together and be a team," Robley said. "Looking back now, it was a really cool thing. At the time, you are like, 'OK, Mr. J, I don't know what you are thinking?' But it's a cool thing and a good memory."

Like Robley, senior Kelly Hauf found the exercise "cheesy" and "weird" at first. But the message has stuck with her all season long.

"For me, personally, if I make a mistake in the game, I think they need all of us to work together so I can't get down on myself," Hauf said. "I have to keep the team pumped up."

For Pankow, the intensity, pressure, hype and crowds are what fuel the team leading up to the big game Friday.

"Each game, the intensity just comes up even more," Pankow said. "All the hype for this week is just going to keep us energized and keep us working hard. We know what we have ahead of us. We're just going to have fun with it."

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November 7, 2009

WIAA Division 4 state volleyball: Manitowoc Lutheran falls to McDonell Central in state semifinals

Lancers fall in five games to Macks

*By Matt Wellens
Herald Times Reporter*

ASHWAUBENON – No worries.

That has been the philosophy of Manitowoc Lutheran head volleyball coach Dave Jirikowic all season long.

Even when the Lancers lost game one of the WIAA Division 4 state semifinals to McDonell Central, even when the Macks forced a decisive game five, even when the Lancers trailed 14-9 at match point and even when his team wound up two-points short of a berth in the state title game, Jirikowic had no worries.

“This team all year has kept their composure,” Jirikowic said. “Whether it’s been down in a match or in a game, it hasn’t mattered to them. They just keep playing. That’s what they did today. They just keep playing.”

Manitowoc Lutheran saw its historic season come to a close on Friday morning after falling to McDonell Central, 25-20, 22-25, 22-25, 25-19, 16-14, at the Resch Center in Ashwaubenon.

The state semifinals was the furthest Manitowoc Lutheran’s volleyball program had ever gone in the WIAA playoffs and despite falling two-points short of the school’s first ever state title berth, the run the Lancers made this year was still a dream.

“We fight no matter what. I’m so proud of our team,” Lancers four-year varsity starter Brianna Robley said. “We came back from down 14-9. Most teams would give up at that point but we fought back and gave it a run.

“You want to end with a win but only four teams in the entire state end with a win. You have to be thankful for what we had and thank God for everything this season.”

Like Jirikowic predicted, the Macks dug up everything the Lancers threw at them on Friday but the Lancers matched the McDonell dig with a firm block at the net.

Lutheran out-blocked McDonell, 12.5-5.5 with Kelly Hauf picking up four solo and two assisted blocks and Erin Dittmar getting five block assists and a solo block.

“Our blocking was really good today,” Jirikowic said. “They would run some quicks to the middle which held our middle blocker and sometimes made it tough for them to get outside. When we got there, we blocked and even when we had some one-on-one blocks, we got them.”

The difference, however, according to Jirikowic was the Macks serve receive, which picked up everything the Lancers threw at them from the jump serve of sophomore Brianna Neumeyer to the line drives of Robley.

While the Macks scored eight aces in the win, Lutheran was held to three, getting two from Hauf and another from Libby Spencer.

“More than their digging was their serve receive,” Jirikowic said. “Pretty much every serve that we threw at them, they got inside the 10-foot line to their setter. We have some pretty good servers on this team so for them to do that, tip your cap to them. They are a darn good team but our girls took them right to the wire.”

Trailing 2-1 in the match, McDonell used an early 4-0 run in game four to turn an 11-9 Lancer lead into a 13-11 Macks lead.

The four-straight points for McDonell was the start of spurt where 11 of 14 points went to the Macks, leaving the Lancers down by six at 20-14. Four unforced Lutheran errors and a well-placed tip by McDonell evened the match at 2-2, forcing a game five.

The Macks jumped out to a 4-0 lead in the race to 15 -- or in Friday's case, 16 -- only to see the Lancers march back and tie the game at 7-7.

Hauf put away a kill to tie game five again at 8-8 and an ace by Hauf on the ensuing serve put Lutheran up 9-8.

It was the last time the Lancers would lead at the state tournament because the Macks would go on a 6-0 run to reach match point.

Lutheran fought off five-straight Macks' match points to tie the game at 14-14 but a Lutheran kill that landed out of bounds and an ace by Sarah Schoch sent the Macks to their first ever Division 4 state title game where they will meet Wausau Newman Catholic on Saturday at 10 a.m.

“It was a great match,” Jirikowic said. “When you go five games at the state tournament and the final score is 16-14 in the fifth game, you know it's a good match. It could have gone either way. They made a few less mistakes than we did and that's what it came down to.”

Notes: Hauf led the Lancers with 22 kills, followed by Robley and Kelsi Daffner with 14 kills each. ... Daffner also made 20 digs to lead Lutheran, followed by Neumeyer with 15 and Hauf with 12. Robley and Emily Pankow each had 10 digs. ... Pankow also totaled a team-high 53 assists. ... Christi Schoch led the Macks with 17 kills, followed by Jenn See with 12 kills and Ashley Zumbrock and Sarah Schoch each with 11 kills. ... Ari Gardow led the Macks with 22 digs, followed by Karley Wiensch with 16 digs to go with her 58 assists.

Additional Facts

WIAA State Semifinals

Division 4

At Resch Center, Ashwaubenon

McDonell Central def. Manitowoc Lutheran, 25-20, 22-25, 22-25, 25-19, 16-14. Highlights: McDonell Central — Ashley Zumbrock, 11 kills; Karley Wiensch, 58 asists, 16 digs; Sarah Schoch, 11 kills, 3 blocks; Christi Schoch, 17 kills; Jenn See, 12 kills; Ari Gardow, 22 digs. Manitowoc Lutheran — Kelly Hauf, 22 kills, 12 digs, 6 blocks; Emily Pankow, 53 assists, 10 digs; Brianna Robley, 14 kills, 10 digs; Kelsi Daffner, 14 kills, 20 digs; Erin Dittmar, 6 blocks.