

Langdon Area/Munich continues to dominate in region volleyball semifinals

By Mojo Hill

DEVILS LAKE — No team in the region can seem to crack Langdon Area/Munich's code.

Occasionally, an opponent will play a close set. New Rockford-Sheyenne did just that in the opening set of Tuesday's region semifinal match, with a 25-20 Cardinals win. But LA/M still cruised to another 3-0 victory, with 25-11 wins in the next two sets.

"We got contributions from everybody," head coach Rich Olson said. "That's the key to our team. We have go-to players just like any other team, but we got contributions from everybody to score. And obviously our defense tonight was excellent."

The defending state champion Cardinals (34-5-1) have now won 24 consecutive sets. They haven't lost a set to anyone in their district all year. Their only match losses have come during in-season weekend tournaments.

And now they're going back to the region championship.

"They just focus on each other," Olson said. "They focus on their teammates from start to finish. And I think good teams do that. And I think their goal out there is to bring energy to the other players that are on the floor. That's what they're out there for as players, and I think that helps us through some

tough times.

"We also have a lot of highly competitive individuals. Girls that just don't like to fail at what they're doing. And when you're around girls like that, it's a lot of fun every day. And it's just allowed them to go out and make some plays and handle the situation that they're in."

The Rockets (25-12) made LA/M work for the first set. They won five straight points to take a 5-1 lead right away. Alivia Yri had back-to-back aces, and Ava Peterson hit a kill into the Cardinals' block.

Down 8-3, the Cardinals took four points in a row, highlighted by a kill from Hallie Overby.

NR-S fought back with two consecutive kills by Emmie Belquist, who was able to find space in the middle of the floor. Belquist was responsible for four Rockets points in a row, helping them cling to a 12-9 first-set lead. Peterson's second kill made it 13-10.

Four consecutive NR-S errors helped the Cardinals gain control. After back-to-back kills by Hilary Haaven and a block by Kemi Morstad, LA/M had a 7-0 run and a 17-13 advantage in the set.

Taya Feist blocked a Peterson hit to help the Cardinals stretch their lead to 20-14.

Peterson, who was named Senior Athlete of the Year in District 4, came back with two kills in a row — one into the



Kemi Morstad, #12 making a play. (Photo by Cameron Carlson)

corner and another down the middle. She tallied six kills in the opening set.

NR-S had two separate 3-0 runs to make it as close as 23-20. The Cardinals won the final two points off kills from Feist and Emma Hall.

"We showed a fighter's mentality in the first set," Olson said. "We were down. Things weren't going well. Our serve-receive was struggling. And they just kept fighting back. ... I just thought we believed in ourselves, believed in each other."

LA/M returned to typical territory in the second set. A 9-0 run shot the Cardinals ahead 9-3.

Yri was a pest on the Rockets' side, making a nice instinctual block and a running save on the right side. Both those points ended in kills by Haaven and Morstad, respectively.

Morstad pretty much did it all on Tuesday. The sophomore setter, kind of the under-the-radar glue to the Cardinals' offense, surpassed 1,000 career

assists in Monday's quarterfinal.

"She's humble. And she's just a little bit of a perfectionist," Olson said. "I think you gotta be a perfectionist, to a degree. And she's a tireless worker. Just another girl that puts in a lot of time, and her confidence has grown as the season's gone on."

Mya Swanson added three aces in that 9-0 run. The freshman totaled five aces on the night.

"She's worked really hard at getting good at it," Olson said. "We have a lot of faith in her, and we don't care if she's a freshman. We don't care how old she is. It's all about what she can do. And she's been a playmaker for us all year long."

Kaci Weisenburger helped get two points back for the Rockets. Her second kill, making it 10-5, followed a tremendous effort by Belquist on multiple hard hits by Haaven throughout the point.

LA/M still ran away with the set, stretching

its lead to 21-9. Morstad had a dump shot for a kill, while Raeleigh Ratzlaff chipped in with an ace.

Peterson hit a sharp kill to respond to one of Haaven's. But the Cardinals took the final three points of the 25-11 beat-down.

And the third set didn't start any better for NR-S, with a 10-0 Cardinals run to open things up. Haaven had three kills in the first four points.

The Cardinals defended numerous hard hits from Peterson, both up front and in the back. They managed to hold Peterson to two kills in each of the last two sets.

"We did the best we could," Olson said. "You just want to get quality touches on her and let her know that hands are in her way all night long, that she's not gonna have just a free net to pound it on you. She's just such a playmaker — jeez, she's a great player. And I thought we did a good job just kind of neutralizing her a little bit, with getting a lot of good touches with our block."

On the serving side, Peterson had two consecutive aces to trim LA/M's lead to 14-6. The Cardinals held a timeout there. When they retook the floor, they got a kill and an ace back-to-back from Haaven, and then a kill by Overby.

Haaven's team-high 17th kill ended another 25-11 set, putting the last touch on the sweep.

LA/M now heads to

the region championship, where it beat Benson County last year. This time, with the expanded region in the new class system, Benson County lost to Park River/Fordville-Lankin 3-1 in the semifinals. Lauren Bell led the Aggies with 31 kills unofficially. NR-S and Benson County will duel for a spot in the state qualifiers on Thursday at 5:30 p.m. in the third-place match.

Then, the Cardinals will face the Aggies at roughly 7 p.m. LA/M has actually had some trouble against them this season. PR-F/L beat the Cardinals 2-1 during an in-season tournament. The Cardinals won the regular-season region matchup, but they lost a set.

It's the only set that LA/M has lost all year outside of in-season tournaments.

"We were coming off of an injury when they beat us in that [tournament]; no excuses," Olson said. "They have one of the top hitters in the state in Lauren Bell. Flat-out, one of the toughest girls to stop in the state. When she's in system and she's in rhythm, she's a very, very dangerous hitter. And they have a well-rounded crew, a solid setter and a great libero. They're getting contributions from everybody right now, and they showed a lot of grit and fight tonight themselves in coming back from being down one set against Benson. A really good team."

Benson County keeps season alive with win over familiar foe New Rockford-Sheyenne

By Mojo Hill

DEVILS LAKE — On Friday, many of the kids in the New Rockford and Maddock areas will cheer for the same football team in the Fargodome.

But first, they had to square off in volleyball on Thursday.

It wasn't the first intense showdown between Benson County and New Rockford-Sheyenne. They'd played each other twice this season, with each team winning

a five-setter against the other.

Both teams lost in the Region 2 semifinals, meaning they had to win to keep their season alive in Thursday's third-place game at the Devils Lake Sports Center.

In the end, Benson County (30-4) earned the last triumph, beating NR-S (25-13) by a score of 3-1. The Wildcats advanced to a state qualifier match Saturday. The Rockets' season came to an end.

"We were obviously really familiar with them. I think they're really familiar with us," Benson County senior Aubrey Kenner said. "They're a great team. And I think that we just came out with the momentum today, and it was super fun that we get a second chance here. And I'm really excited for Saturday."

Kenner and teammate Liberty Streyle were all-region selections at the end of the night. Ava Peterson and Logan Cud-

worth represented NR-S on the all-region team, with Peterson winning Region 2 Senior Athlete of the Year.

"I've played AAU basketball and club volleyball with Ava for years, and so we've really had that friendship," Kenner said. "And now we're co-opped with them for football. Tonight, we're all heading over to Fargo for the state championship football game tomorrow. So I think that it's just really fun to connect with people through sports. And sometimes people forget that it's not just all about winning, but it's about those connections and those friendships that you make along the way."

Benson County had taken the most recent matchup between these teams, back in the district semifinals. But it was NR-S that came out hot.

The Rockets had a first-set lead as large as 17-9. Peterson and Emmie Belquist led their attack, while Kaci Weisenburger helped out in the middle. Belquist tallied five kills in the opening set.

NR-S wrapped up a 25-16 win to take a 1-0 lead in the match.

"We just didn't have energy," Benson County head coach Sheri Stuberger said. "We didn't have any communication. We were just sluggish. Didn't look like we wanted to be there, even."



Aubrey Kenner (Photo by Noah Clooten)

After opening the second set in a 5-5 deadlock, Benson County won 10 of the next 11 points. Kenner slammed a kill down the left sideline, and Brylee Stuberger blocked a hit from Belquist.

Streyle, the team's setter, even got in on the action. After catching NR-S off guard with a hit in the first set, she volleyed one deep into the court to run the Wildcats' lead up to 15-6.

"We don't make it easy for her sometimes," Kenner said with a laugh. "She's running all over the court, and she plays all the way around. And so she gets those miles on."

The Rockets fought back with a 5-0 run. Peterson had two kills in that stretch, while also sharing a block with Weisenburger.

They nearly crawled back in it. NR-S' setter, Alivia Yri, tipped a kill of her own to make it as

close as 19-17.


But Benson County ended the set on a 5-0 run. The 25-18 win was capped by another kill from Streyle — this time, on a full swing like a hitter would typically have.

"She has the best ball contact of any of our players, period," Stuberger said. "So she could play any position, I think."

In her main duties, Streyle totaled 39 assists on the night. She added 20 digs.

The Wildcats edged out the Rockets in the third set, 25-19, despite seven kills from Peterson. It doubled Peterson's total on the night thus far.

Benson County fended off an early 5-2 lead from NR-S, after four consecutive kills between Peterson and Belquist. It was tied as late as 15-15. Stuberger had two kills and a block down the stretch of the set.



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