

Reflections on the LHSAA 2011 Volleyball Championships

They walked off the courts of the Pontchartrain Center sweat-soaked, crying...some uncontrollably, many wrapped in flesh colored bandages holding bags of ice to tender shoulders, knees and ankles. And *these* were the winners! The only thing separating them from their opponents was a dig here, a line call there, a service ace or a heroic save...and, of course, the elation that comes with victory or the ache that comes with defeat.

The 2011 State Volleyball Championships once again brought the best athletes from across the state to Kenner, La., for three days of fast-paced, furious, often nail-biting drama. For some in the often packed Convention Center-turned-gymnasium, it was old hat—almost comforting to see many of the same faces, same teams. For others, like Jamie Courtney of Prairieville, La., it was a first time experience that will likely lead to many more. He came with his son, a sophomore at St. Amant high school in Ascension Parish, to root on their hometown Gators.

“It’s exciting,” said the man who never thought he’d spend a Thursday night watching girls’ volleyball. “I came for my son but I think I’m enjoying it more than he is,” he admitted. The “enjoyment” was short-lived—the Gators lost in what was arguably the best match of the first day, a five-set marathon that saw Dominican win the tiebreaker 15-13.

Day two provided no less drama, though the higher seeds prevailed in every match, except in Division three where third seed St. Louis slipped by second seed Vanderbilt Catholic in three sets. Newman took top seed Notre Dame to four sets in a match that was highlighted by numerous lead changes and heart-stopping exchanges.

And then there was the Ursuline Academy/Parkview Baptist match, featuring All-Stars Jeanette Rimmer and Marci Holstein for the Ursuline Lions and Fayette Adelaja for the Parkview Eagles. While Ursuline Academy won a tight three-set match, Adelaja showed star potential, firing rocket blasts throughout the evening. One of the more exciting points had Adelaja pounding a shot so hard into Rimmer on the back line that the ball immediately careened back over the net for a winner.

As is the case in all matches, the losers could only find consolation in a valiant effort—and in family and friends. After Parkview’s loss to Ursuline Academy, Eagle senior Breana Massey, who likely played her last volleyball match, buried her head in her father’s chest. “You had a good run, baby,” he offered. Bryan Madden, husband of Parkview coach Becky Madden, had been yelling encouragement to the team near the back of the bleachers throughout the match. A huge man with a deep, bellowing voice, Madden is one of the security guards who escorts Les Miles across Tiger Stadium at the end of every football game. He stepped forward to comfort Massey. “It’s ok to cry...I’m crying, too.”

Perhaps the best match of day two was the epic struggle between top-ranked Fontainebleau and Dominican—a classic match-up of great offense versus great defense. Dominican’s challenge was that Fontainebleau has both. The twin towers – Haley Bonneval and Sarah Ulm – combined for 37 kills while Ulm and sophomore Megan Zulli each added five blocks. Collectively, Dominican’s defense spent

much of the afternoon on its stomach. If there were a stat for face plants, Dominican defenders would be in the record books. From an individual standpoint, All-Star Mary Pursell, with 21 digs, kept the ball alive longer than Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*. Bonneval would later say the Dominican match was the most scared she's been the entire year. In the end, however, that fear turned to relief as the Bulldog's relentless offense won the battle...and the right to fight another day.

Division V Finals

Episcopal School of Acadiana vs. Metairie Park Country Day

You can't say Episcopal School of Acadiana was nervous. After all, this is the school that has won 17 overall state volleyball championships and leads every school in the state in championship appearances with 23. But there may not be a better explanation. The Country Day Cajuns took the first 10 points of the first set and looked to blow away the Falcons from the onset. Savannah Becnel had two blocks and a kill in the first four points and would prove to be a major factor throughout the match.

ESA Coach Julie Dawson used her timeouts wisely and the Falcons responded each time by whittling into the Country Day lead. ESA junior Bailey Brown tied the score at 23 with a kill shot that got the Falcon fans off their feet. However, erratic play doomed the Falcons the rest of the way and Becnel ended the first set with a key block that gave the Cajuns a first set win at 26-24.

The second set looked to be a duplicate of the first as Country Day broke out to a 13-1 lead. The Falcons were not able to mount a comeback and dropped the second set to the Cajuns 25-10.

Coach Dawson urged her team to start the third set in strong fashion and the Falcons responded with an 8-5 lead. Country Day took over at this point and, except for a few exciting exchanges along the way, the Cajuns never looked back. Country Day was aided by the strong frontline play of Becnel and fellow seniors Nicole Weinmann and Ellie George. The Cajuns wrapped up the third set on a 14-6 run, eventually winning by a score of 25-17.

ESA wrapped up its season with a 38-8 record and was forced into the role of bridesmaid for the fifth straight year, losing for the third straight time to Country Day in the finals. Coach Dawson said she has a young team that would be back and even better next year, but took time in her post-match news conference to thank seniors Kinsley Poppa and Olivia Bramlet for their leadership.

For the Cajuns, who finished the season 37-8, it was their third straight Division V State Championship. Junior Katherine Broussard was named the Most Outstanding Player in the finals as she provided both offensive (12 kills) and defensive (17 digs) excellence. A tearful Coach Julie Ibieta acknowledged afterwards that her team had "been here before" but said, "This win was special because this group of girls is special."

Division IV Finals

De La Salle vs. Notre Dame

Mallory Chiasson, the “five foot nothing” libero for the Notre Dame Pioneers, said before the match with the De La Salle Cavaliers that, “Everybody is bigger than us...but nobody’s better.” Her comments were delivered with a confident swagger that made it all the more unbelievable that on the very first return of serve, Chiasson set up a De La Salle player for the first spike of the game. That, however, would be one of the few mistakes that she would make the entire match. She later served up four service points that would help her team take a commanding 14-7 lead in that first set.

The lead built to 18-9 before De La Salle notched five straight points. The ‘Pios’ Katherine Kirsch ended any hope of a Cavalier comeback when she deftly placed the ball just inside the line for a 25-17 first set win. During the set, Notre Dame had three separate occasions when they went on 5-0 runs—a trend that would continue throughout the match.

In the second set, De La Salle jumped out to an early 3-1 lead when the ‘Pios’ struck back with a 5-0 run of its own. Brittany Deckwa, a talented junior for the Cavaliers, then stepped up to the service stripe and rolled through 10 straight points which included a series where one blast hit the top of the tape and dribbled over for a winner, followed by a screaming ace down the line. Deckwa finally netted a serve, opening the door for yet another 5-0 run by the Pioneers.

With the score 20-14 in favor of the Cavaliers, Notre Dame Coach Tara Young called her team’s last time out. She also called on Alaina Savoy. Every time the Pios needed a point, Savoy was seemingly in the right place at the right time. She led the team with 13 kills, many coming from the hands of either senior Marie Ledet (18 assists) or sophomore Alex Miller (15 assists). Notre Dame scored 11 of the last 13 points in the second set—a run that clinched the set and crushed the hopes of Cavalier fans.

Coach Young continued an aggressive substitution pattern throughout the third set, keeping fresh players in the match while ensuring balance front and back as well as left to right. The final set, a 25-17 score, was never really in doubt as the more experienced Notre Dame squad beat every comeback attempt. Young’s post-match comments were filled with praise for a team of overachievers that did not back down the entire year. She credited senior leadership and a tough out-of-league schedule for giving her team the mettle and desire to win.

As for the Cavaliers, they finished their season with a 36-6 record. Coach Jessica Helgeson, though disappointed, was extremely proud of her school’s first ever trip to the finals. Juniors Jonne Porter (12 kills), Chelsea Pritchett (23 assists), and Sarah Oster (18 digs) led the Cavaliers on a historic run to the finals.

The ‘Pios’ balanced attack made it difficult for an individual to stand out—a true team effort as Finals Most Outstanding Player Alaina Savoy would later say. Coach Young clearly agreed. Afterward, while enjoying her second straight State Championship (first in Division IV), she made a special effort to speak privately with each senior. When it was her turn, Chiasson reached high to hug her coach for a long, tearful embrace. Mallory was right. Everybody is bigger...and on this day, nobody was better.

Division III Finals

St. Louis Catholic vs. Ursuline

Ursuline Academy has been to the state volleyball finals the past two years. They lost in the finals in 2010. Jeannette Rimmer remembers. The senior All-Star said she **never** wanted to feel that way again. So when their 2011 state finals match with the third-seeded St. Louis Catholic Saints began, Rimmer had to put the past behind her. It didn't take long for her and fellow senior Marci Holstein to take charge. A couple of early 6-0 runs helped give the Lions a 14-6 lead.

The Saints were clearly playing tight—a point that was confirmed by Coach Luke Pousson in a post-match interview. Critical errors on the part of the Saints allowed Ursuline to double-up its opponent by a 22-11 score. After a brief comeback by the Saints, Emily Calloway, another one of the talent-laden seniors for the Ursuline Lions, sent a blistering liner onto the other court for a first set score of 25-15.

The second set saw the emergence of the Saints' Tory Knollmeyer, an outside hitter with a knack for stuffing the opponent. Knollmeyer was quiet the first set but erupted the second set both offensively and defensively. Both teams traded side-outs throughout the set with neither team holding more than a three-point advantage at any time. After numerous ties and lead changes, it quickly became clear that this was going to be the best set of the final day's matches.

With the score 23-22 in favor of Ursuline, the stars of each team went toe to toe. Knollmeyer called for the set three straight times and each time her blast was dug out by Rimmer. But despite the defensive heroics, the Saints eventually won the point, tying the match at 23. The two teams traded side-outs for the next three points, with Rimmer and Knollmeyer both playing large roles in the outcomes of each point. In the end, Rimmer's blast over two defenders won the set for the Lions 28-26.

One would think the Saints were ready to march homeward after such a devastating second set loss, but one would be wrong. St. Louis again came out strong in the third set, taking a 7-3 lead. Sarah Tyson (22 digs) kept the Lions close with save after save. Ursuline Coach Jay Jay Juan, already known for being quite animated on the sidelines, kicked it up a notch. He was often imitating Tyson as she stretched for seemingly impossible saves. Then, with the score tied at 15, Calloway's kill put Ursuline up for good. With match point on the line, Coach Juan turned around to the Lions fans behind him and emphatically urged them to cheer on the team. The loudest roar of the evening was saved for Sophomore Lauren Barre, who ended the match with an emphatic blast which sent the Lions' faithful roaring in victory.

The 25-21 final score didn't accurately reflect the closeness and intensity of the match. Nor could it mask the pain in the hearts of Saints players and fans. Pousson acknowledged the youth and inexperience of his team but also expressed great pride in the fact that this team has won the second most matches ever in school history...perhaps a sign of greater things to come.

Speaking of signs, those in attendance had to notice the sign that read, “We Juan 1 More!” which was an encouragement to the Ursuline team and a tribute to its likeable coach. This is the third year in a row that Ursuline has been to the finals, winning two out of three. And for Jeanette Rimmer, who was named the Most Outstanding Player in the finals, the impact of victory had not fully sunk in. However, the past was now truly in the past. “I feel like I’m dreaming,” she said. Sweet dreams, no doubt.

Division II Finals

Cabrini vs. St. Thomas More

The best serve in the entire tournament, perhaps, came off the hand of Shellie Landry, a senior from the St. Thomas More Cougars. It doesn’t always come off as she would like, but when it works, when she leaps high into her delivery and spins a blistering sinker ball into the opponent’s court, it can be a thing of beauty...or frustration, depending on which side of the net you are standing. Landry helped earn the top seeded Cougars five points while serving in the first set—a span that allowed her team to take an 11-4 lead early in the first set against the #2 ranked Cabrini Crescents .

Cabrini had its own weapon—Ashlee Foret. The Crescents’ senior has been a leader all year, earning All-Star honors while giving opposing coaches sleepless nights. Along with junior Dominique Cleggett, the two help make up one of the most imposing front lines in the game.

With the score tied at 19 in the first set, Cleggett put away one of her team-high 17 kills, switching momentum to the Crescents, who had been having a difficult time defending Landry’s powerful shots. As the teams approached set point at 24-22, Cabrini’s favor, Landry fired what looked like a sure winner. Senior Megan Resendez dove left, barely keeping the ball alive so that Cleggett would later be able to put the game away.

Every coach preaches the importance of winning the first set. The admonition held true as every state champion in the 2011 tournament had won its first set. St. Thomas More wanted desperately to prove that theory wrong, but Cabrini broke out of the gates on an 8-1 run. While the Crescents looked in control, the Cougars battled back on the strength of kills by Landry, Emily Bordelon and Kourtney Blackwell. However Landry’s power serve, which evoked such wide-eyed amazement from defenders throughout the tournament, found the net far too often. As the set progressed, hitting errors by St. Thomas More became more frequent and more demoralizing. The Cougars ended a 4-0 Cabrini run at set point when Callie Butcher fired a winner down the line, but Landry’s kill shot on the next possession fell just wide as the Crescents won set two, 25-21.

Cabrini Coach Greg Castillo later said he was feeling good about his team at this point, but not overconfident. His counterpart for the Cougars, Jessica Burke, said she knew her team could play better. She also knew they had the heart to play better. And they did. After falling behind early, St. Thomas More scored five straight points to take a 6-3 lead. The teams exchanged side-outs for the next few points with Landry and Foret often going toe to toe at the net. It was clear the Cougars were not going out without a fight.

Landry had changed from a jump serve to a more traditional serve—safer but still deadly. With the score at 16-13 in favor of St. Thomas More, Landry fired a service ace, and then led the team in a chorus of screams that rattled the rafters of the Pontchartrain Center. Cabrini, fought back to tie at 21, as Foret dropped a shot between three sprawling Cougars. STM scored the next three, but Cabrini countered with three of its own off the serve of Taylor Conaway. Several side-outs followed as Landry and Butcher teamed up against Foret and Cleggett for classic net play. There were seven ties and five lead changes in the set. When St. Thomas More walked off with a 29-27 third set victory, it was fitting to note that Shellie Landry was standing at the service line for set point.

Coach Castillo of Cabrini said that he still felt good about his team at this point. Concerned? “Not really,” he said. Bravado? Maybe. Confidence? Absolutely! He said the team had no stars but they had heart and played as a team.

The Crescents shook off the dramatic third set loss and jumped out to an 8-4 lead. Cougar Coach Burke would bemoan the fact that her team simply had, “Too many mistakes.” It was never more evident than the fourth set as Cabrini stretched its lead to 20-12. Castillo’s Crescents played incredibly sound, well-positioned, passionate ball. Every shot was contested. Every player contributed.

The Cougars made one, last, valiant effort to get back into the match. An 8-2 run made the score 22-20, Crescents. But a hitting error by STM and a kill by Cleggett brought about match point. The St. Thomas More/Cabrini Division II Volleyball match would likely be remembered by participants, fans and coaches for quite some time. They say you live by the sword and die by the sword. Senior Charley DeAgano put a dagger in the heart of Cougar fans and players alike as she ended an incredible, four-set high school volleyball match, 25-20 in favor of the Cabrini Crescents...fittingly, with a service ace!

How does one determine a number one seed from a number two seed? In the end, it didn’t really matter when it came down to the Division II finals because virtually everyone expected St. Thomas More and Cabrini to be right there. The top two teams in Division II were on a collision course virtually the entire year. But unlike a wreck, this clash was a thing of beauty and provided fans with the best match of the final day.

St. Thomas More was the defending Division II state champ. Cabrini was runner-up in 2009, won the title in 2008. Neither team is a stranger to the tournament finals—Cabrini holds a 5-3 edge in that historic category.

In the interview room after the match, STM Coach Jessica Burke spoke favorably of her worthy opponents, their disciplined coach, and their balanced talent. But it was obvious that she felt her team could have played better. The phenomenal senior All-Star Shellie Landry sat next to her, sometimes sobbing. The grieving had begun. 25 kills, two service aces and 18 digs were not enough. And she clearly didn’t want to talk about it.

The mood in the Cabrini interview was, obviously, much different. Ashley Foret opened the news conference by giggling, “I’m bleeding,” as she held up her blistered and battle-scarred hands. Coach Castillo reiterated his belief that his was a team without a star, that every player contributed and

that it was an unselfish attitude and teamwork that made his team successful. Foret agreed, though she was awarded the division's Most Outstanding Player award for the tournament. C'mon coach...Somebody had to win it.

Division I

Mt. Carmel vs. Fontainebleau

"Oh my Gosh! Look at them!" How many times have the Fontainebleau Bulldogs heard that from opposing fans as they walked into an opponent's gymnasium?

The first thing you'd notice when entering the Pontchartrain Center for the Division I title game between Fontainebleau Bulldogs and the Mt. Carmel Cubs was the sound during warm-ups; the pounding of dozens of balls—missiles it seemed—directed defiantly at teammates across the net who reached, stretched, even dove to keep shots alive. One would notice that the time span between the explosion of the hitter's kill shot and the amazing recovery of the defenders was just a fraction shorter than in most other games. You'd think, "These are the 'big boys,'" so to speak, and you'd immediately recognize that you are about to watch two of the best teams in the state go at it. Then, you'd notice... "them!"

"Them" would be Sarah Ulm and Haley Bonneval; both are tall, yet agile, strikingly athletic, and as imposing a pair as there may be in USA high school volleyball. Ulm is 6 ft. 2—"and a half," as she likes to say—and a lefty who stalks the net like a panther stalking prey. Bonneval, who reportedly will continue her career at the University of Notre Dame, stands just an inch shorter, but with springs for legs, plays much taller. You couldn't help but look at "them."

Mt. Carmel's feisty coach April Hagadone had done just that. All season, in fact. Though her team went into the finals with a 36-8 record, the Cubs could point to one match, in particular, that would define their season. Mt. Carmel had the unique distinction of handing Fontainebleau its lone loss. 43 wins...one loss. Hagadone knew the Bulldogs would be out for revenge. She also knew that if there was any team in the state that could take down the number one seed, it was her Cubs.

Fontainebleau opened with its strongest lineup—Morgan Todd (the "Toddler" as she was affectionately called by teammates, not just because of her name, but her stature as one of the shortest players on the Bulldog team), Haley Bonneval, Madison Heath, a sophomore, and Sarah Ulm. This formation had been Coach Danny Tullis' most successful formation throughout the season. No need to improve on perfection.

The Bulldogs quickly jumped out to a 17-9 lead as both teams played through early jitters. Defense dominated on both sides as the big hitters had yet to catch their stride. Mt. Carmel came back with a 6-0 run midway through the set but the lefty Ulm's off-balance shot gave her team set point and Bonneval later ended it with a kill down the line. First set, 25-21, Bulldogs.

Coach Tullis admitted that he had an experienced squad. It was notable that he would send his team immediately back on the court after changeovers, as if to say, "These kids don't need coaching.

Let 'em play." Back on the court, the girls, loose and confident, often chanted with the cheerleaders. In an earlier match, Ulm entertained her teammates with a dead-on impersonation of the SNL classic Mary Catherine Gallagher's "SuperStar," to the delight of the home crowd.

Their casual, confident attitude paid off as the Bulldogs again came out strong with a 7-1 run. That lead quickly grew to 16-4, based mostly on Mt. Carmel miscues. Three straight points by the Cubs and Tullis quickly called timeout, asking his girls to focus and not become overconfident.

Message received. The Bulldogs quickly regrouped and took the second set 25-13.

Mt. Carmel has won seven state championships and been to 14 finals. They are the defending state champs. They would not fold. The Cubs started the third set on a 10-5 run. Later, in one incredible point, junior Megan Lasalle blocked booming shots from both Ulm and Bonneval, allowing her team to increase its lead to 14-6. However, Bonneval scored three of the next four points with towering kills of her own. Bonneval was the catalyst for a 9-1 Bulldog run which tied the score at 15.

Each team traded side-outs over the next few points, which were highlighted by long rallies, great blocks, and heroic saves from each team. The Cubs finished with their strongest series of the match, a 6-0 run built on the service game of Regina Baxter and the strong outside hitting of Jade Sorrell. Both are juniors and will be part of a strong foundation for the 2012 team. The Cubs 25-18 third set victory was a testament to the character of their team and an encouragement to their fans. It also served to wake-up the proverbial giant.

Fontainebleau wasted no time in jumping out to a 9-1 lead in the next set. They extended that lead to 14-4 on the strength of key plays by "the Megans"—Meyer and Zulli. Mt. Carmel made one last run but there was simply no gas left in that tank. Fontainebleau ended the match on a 10-3 run, winning the last set, 25-12, giving the Bulldogs its first ever state volleyball crown.

In the joyous interview room after the match, Coach Tullis spelled out the unique advantages he had in this year's team. He said most coaches would love to have just one girl on a team that's tall, can jump and play defense. "We got two," he said, referring almost apologetically of Ulm and Bonneval.

The "twin towers," along with fellow senior Morgan Todd clearly enjoyed their very special day. Todd, somewhat quiet during the interview, reflected on what was likely her last volleyball match. Ulm, who Tullis says "could play on the collegiate level if she wanted to," hugged the state championship trophy throughout her interview.

And Bonneval, who was given the Most Outstanding Player award, had 28 kills, 19 digs and four blocks in the final alone. She definitely has more volleyball ahead of her and plenty of celebrating to do. She was overjoyed when the fans sang "Happy Birthday" to her at the awards ceremony. The just-turned 18-year-old said she didn't know exactly how she was going to celebrate. "But it doesn't get any better than this...It's the best birthday ever!"

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