PHS Girls’ Volleyball

There’s No Place Like Home

By Jeff Stuart

The PHS girls’ volleyball season came to an end on November 18 in the state semifinal at Ritchie Coliseum on the campus of the University of Maryland, College Park. They were swept by Fallston. Prior to that, the team had won fourteen straight regular season matches, losing just three games, and recorded playoff wins at home over Liberty, North Hagerstown, and Century, losing only a single game. They won the 2A region title to earn the right to play at Ritchie.

“Having the home court advantage for us is huge,” said Head Coach Fran Duvall. “Our gym is so small, it is not always easy for other teams to adjust.” The PHS gym is a cozy place. Hand-painted posters with each Poolesville player’s name and number adorn the walls. It is home.

Poolesville frequently faced bigger, harder-hitting opponents. The Falcons' tallest player is Alayna Hendrix at 5' 10”. But their serving, passing, and knowledge of the game offset their lack of size. They were able to keep the ball in play and wear other teams down. If you like great rallies, this was the team to watch. This year's team was led by the two holdovers from the '08 title team, senior outside hitters Paige Sekerak, and Lauren Rocco. Freshman libero Sarah Kenneweg had an immediate impact covering the court and making many great digs and passes. Setter Karishma Patel played steady all year, getting her hitters the ball where they could do the most with it. Seniors Alayna Hendrix, Abbe Guertin, and Christine Antonsen all helped to make the season so successful. They knew their roles and executed superbly as a team.

In the 2A region final against Century, Sekerak and Rocco each had eleven kills. Century had a significant height advantage. The Falcons pulled away late to win the first game, 25-17, but they trailed, 21-13, in the second game before Coach Duvall called a time out. In addressing her team, Duvall was remarkably calm. The time out was remarkably effective. With Karishma Patel serving, Poolesville staged a nine-point rally to take the lead before Century got a side out to briefly tie the game. PHS got a side out and won the last two points to win, 25-21. Most of the points in the stirring comeback were won after long volleys featuring often spectacular digs. Century opened up with a brief 3-0 lead in the third game, but their frustration with the results of the second game showed. They fell, 25-11.

This year’s team was quietly confident. There was little swagger. Until the state semifinal, they had come back successfully every time they had been challenged. “The end of the season we played a tough Gaithersburg team, probably the best match of the season for us,” said Duvall. “They are big and powerful, and we executed well in the three games we won; we lost the first game. B-CC and Damascus were also good matches. We had to play smarter and keep ourselves on track.”

Forty-eight teams participated in the 2A state region tournaments. Only two went farther than Poolesville. If they have a single regret, it might be that they did not believe they played their best against Fallston (losing 25-8, 25-17, 25-18). It might have been nerves. Many of the girls were playing in the state tourney for the first time. The Cougars scored six of the first seven points of the contest. That might have unnerved them. The precise execution that had been their calling card all year was not there. "You can be prepared as you want, but in order to be successful, you have to have execution," said the coach. Fallston (2A-East), the eventual state champions, did not lose a game in the region or state tourneys. The Falcons, a very good volleyball team, finished the season 17-1, dropping just seven sets, and made their sixth appearance in the state tournament in nine years. They are a proud program and have a lot to be proud of. They have lost just four matches in four years—remarkable. Sekerak is going to Towson University to play volleyball next fall. Antonsen will attend Oberlin College in Ohio. Rocco plans to attend Vanderbilt but does not plan to play volleyball.