

Roxana's volleyball girls win thriller over MELHS on Senior Night

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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ROXANA – Senior Night for Roxana's girls volleyball team turned into a pretty exciting one.

The Shells honored **Niah Bevolo, Abby Palen and Taylor Westfall** in a pre-match ceremony, then wound up falling behind in the final game of the match after splitting the first two games of the evening. The Shells found themselves trailing 12-3 before making an adjustment that proved to be a decisive one.

“I give credit to the girls and to (assistant coach Derek) Dempsey; I'm like 'they keep tipping around us' and he says 'go to a single-block'. We switched to a single-block when it was 12-3,” said **Shell coach Mike McKinney**.

The decision to change their strategy proved decisive as the Shells chipped away and came from behind to record a 25-20, 23-25, 25-22 win over **Metro East Lutheran** at Larry Milazzo Gym Wednesday night.

“We started making a run and the girls started getting some momentum and believing in themselves,” McKinney said. “We became more aggressive and the became more tentative on the other side and we took advantage of it; we played until we got 25 (points). It doesn't matter what the score is; if their team doesn't have 25, we still have a chance to win it. Our girls believed they could do it, and they did it.

“Now they'll have confidence going into tomorrow night's match (the Shells' regular-season and South Central Conference finale at Gillespie).”

Of Bevolo, Palen and Westfall, McKinney said “I've got three really good kids; they're not just good out on the court, but they're good role models and leaders off the court. They've all got their own different personalities and we need each one of them and we feed off each of them.

“One of them is quiet, one's vocal and the other one just does it and shows you on the court without having to do any of the vocal stuff. I'm excited.”

“That's volleyball; anyone who knows volleyball knows that things can change very quickly,” said **Knight coach Jon Giordano**. “Momentum's a funny thing, and when we don't make plays and they do, that was just a very runny match. I honestly thought both sides were somewhat sloppy during the first two games. At times, it was kind of who was going to make the fewest errors rather than the great plays; I thought we had a nice lead in the third game and Roxana just went on a run and they couldn't do anything wrong.

“When you have an explosive team and explosive hitters like they have, that's what happens. Mike works so well with them always; we knew we had our work cut out for us.”

MEL jumped out to a 5-2 lead in the opener before Roxana went on an six-point run behind Bevolo's serving to grab an 8-6 lead; the Knights managed to get back to 8-7 before another Shell run made it 11-7 and then 14-9. The Roxana lead eventually got to 18-10 before a Knight run cut it to 18-15. Things seesawed back and forth before it became 21-20 in Roxana's favor before the Shells closed out the game.

Roxana scored the first three points of Game 2 before the Knights seemingly took command at 7-4; the Shells bounced back and forged ties at 7-7 and 8-8 before taking an 10-8 lead. Back came the Knights, who regained the lead at 14-11 but couldn't shake off Roxana.

At one point, the MEL lead grew to 19-14 before the Shells got to 19-18; the Knights had the answers and got the lead to 22-19 before Roxana came back to get the game to 23-23, but the Knights scored the final two points of the game for force a decisive game.

MEL scored seven of Game 3's first nine points to get out to a 7-2 lead on the Shells, extending the lead to 12-3 before the change in strategy, cutting the MEL lead to 12-6 and 14-7 before the Knights managed to get to 16-9 before Roxana scored nine of the next 12 points to draw level at 19-19 before taking their first lead at 20-19. The Knights

battled and forged ties at 20-20 and 21-21 before scoring four of the final five points of the game to take the match.

Braeden Lackey had 17 kills for the Shells on the night, with Westfall adding nine and Taylor Jackson eight. Palen had 17 digs for the Shells, with Lackey and Westfall each recording 12 and Brittany Alexander 11; Bevolo had 33 assists, Hannah Kelley two blocks and Palen 13 points and Bevolo 11 points on the night.

Courtney Fenelon had 10 kills and four aces for the Knights, with Ellen Schulte recording seven kills and Danielle Timmerman six kills; Lydia Flaherty had 30 assists and Emily Schwarz 16 digs.

MEL will be hosting an IHSA Class 1A Regional tournament next week; play begins Monday evening, with the Knights taking on Monday evening's McGivney Catholic-O'Fallon First Baptist winner in a semifinal match at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday evening. The final, with the winner getting a spot in the Lebanon Sectional against the Clay City Regional winner, is set for 6 p.m. Oct. 27.

Following Thursday's match at Gillespie, the Shells head to the Class 3A Jersey Regional, where they take on Monday's Civic Memorial-East Alton-Wood River winner in a 6:30 p.m Tuesday semifinal match; the final, with a berth in the Mount Zion Sectional against the Mahomet-Seymour Regional winner at stake, is set for 6 p.m. Oct. 27.



