

Tigers Hold Off Final Set Rally By O'Fallon, Win SWC Girls Volleyball Title With 8-0 Record

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
April 9 2021 6:32 AM



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EDWARDSVILLE - It was, as Edwardsville head coach Heather Ohlau described it, "the perfect ending to a not so perfect year."

The Tigers held off a big third set rally by O'Fallon, where the Panthers came back from 24-16 down to within 24-23 before freshman Sydney Davis delivered the match-winning kill to give Edwardsville a 25-30, 21-25, 25-23 win over O'Fallon to claim the Southwestern Conference tournament championship Thursday evening at Lucco-Jackson Gym and finish the season a perfect 8-0.

"Yeah, I think our seniors just didn't really want this season to end," Ohlau said during her post-match interview. "A 25-23 third set to finish the season out, going out in style."

All kidding aside, both teams played very well, leaving everything out on the floor in a tremendous match for the conference title.

"Yeah, I mean, O'Fallon is always a tough opponent," Ohlau said. "One of our biggest conference foes, so I think both teams get pretty hyped and energetic whenever it comes down to the two of us, and I'm just glad that we were on the positive side of that outcome tonight."

During the Panthers' rally, Ohlau used both of her time outs in the set to settle her team down and remind them as the task at hand.

"Just knowing that we had one ball," Ohlau said. "We just needed one ball to finish it out, and just reminding them that it's now or never. You have one ball to finish it, and I think that was just the final statement."

Davis delivered the final blow to give the Tigers the championship, and it demonstrated how she stepped up late in the season when the team was racked by injuries to two key players.

"It's kind of nice whenever an underclassman puts that exclamation point on the win," Ohlau said. "We couldn't have done it without all players on that court, even on the bench getting hyped up in between points, but it was a nice ending."

The conference championship means more, given the shortened season that was moved from its traditional fall spot to the spring by the Illinois High School Association because of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

"I can say we had the perfect season," Ohlau said. "We went 8-0 with a conference championship, so I think being able to finish that way is the perfect ending to a not so perfect year."

The two sides started the opening set splitting the first four points before Valeria Finck had a kill that started a three-point rally for O'Fallon, with Annalie McWhorter serving

up the next two points to make it 5-2. After the Panthers scored two of the next three points to make it 7-3, and an exchange put the score to 11-7, Lexie Griffin served up four points in a row, getting an ace and a Davis kill to tie the set at 11-11 before the Panthers scored twice to take a 13-11 lead. Davis then got a kill to make it 13-12, but O'Fallon, behind an Ally Denton kill, scored the next three points to make it 16-12. Edwardsville followed suit with three straight points to make it 16-15. and after an other exchange that brought the score to 18-17, a pair of service points by Alexa Harris gave Edwardsville a 19-18 lead, and after another exchange that put the score to 20-19, Storm Suhre served up three points in a row, with backing from a Davis kill, to make it 23-19. After another exchange, Griffin served up the set-winning point to make the final 25-20 and give the Tigers a one-set lead.

The second set started in similar fashion, with the teams splitting the first four points before the Panthers, behind Finck's service, scored the next three points to go up 5-2, with Denton and Lauren Dawson driving home kills in the sequence. Another exchange brought the score to 9-6, and Denton served up the next three points to give the Panthers a 12-6 lead, forcing an Edwardsville time out. Another exchange brought the score to 14-10 before a Dawson kill and a Claire Hackney service point made it 16-10 for O'Fallon. The Tigers fought back behind a pair of kills from Gabby Saye and another Harris kill to make it 16-13, with another exchange bringing the score to 19-16. Faith Mayfield had a kill to make it 20-16, but the Tigers rallied to make it 21-19 behind the play of Griffin and Davis, but the Panthers scored four of the set's last six points, clinching the set with a tip from Erionna Coleman to give O'Fallon a 25-21 win to square the match at 1-1.

The third and deciding set started out with Griffin, behind a combined block from Rihanna Huebner and Saye, jumped to a 3-0 lead before the Panthers fought back to tie it up at 3-3. An exchange made the score 5-5 before a Davis kill gave the lead back to the Tigers at 6-5, and Huebner then served up four straight points, behind a pair of combined blocks from Suhre and Davis to make it 10-5, forcing an O'Fallon time out. The Panthers scored the next two points to bring it to 10-7, but Edwardsville, with Davis leading the way, scored three in a row to make it 13-7. An exchange brought the score to 15-10, but with Suhre serving, a pair of Davis kills helped the Tigers score four in a row to make it 19-10. Another exchange made the score 22-13 before O'Fallon cut the lead to 22-15, but the Tigers scored two of the next three points to bring the score to 24-17 and match point. O'Fallon then got the ball back at 24-18, and behind Kyla Ellis' service, a McWhorter kill, a combined block from Mayfield and Finck and a pair of violations brought the Panthers back to 24-23, but Davis' kill after a Edwardsville time out gave the Tigers the 25-23 win and the conference title 2-1.

Saye led the Tigers with 17 kills, while Harris had 10 and Davis eight, Morgan Tulacro served up 11 points, with Huebner adding eight points, Kaitlyn Conway had 24 digs, with Harris adding 17, Griffin had 24 assists, while Tulacro had 15 and Saye had six blocks, Suhre five and Huebner four.

The IHSA cancelled the volleyball state tournament series because of the ongoing pandemic, which made it a very bittersweet ending to the season.

"It is bittersweet," Ohlau, "but I think what we are capable of doing, and what these girls have in their future is, I think, the driving force what we've been dealt with."

It was also the final match for the seniors, who have worked very hard for the last four years to help establish the Tigers as one of the best teams in the St. Louis area. Their contributions will not be forgotten, and they will be greatly missed.

"Absolutely," Ohlau said. "Anytime you graduate a group of starters that have impacted this program for not just this year, but two, three, four years even, I think that leaves some openings to try to fill. And I think some of the underclassmen will have some big shoes to fill in the coming years."

Still, it was a very unforgettable season in many ways for the Tigers, and Ohlau knows that she and her players will have very precious memories of their time with the team.

"Yeah, I think they were able to make some memories in the short time they had together this year," Ohlau said. "Like I said, a perfect ending to a not so perfect year."





[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)