

By Ken Wunderley
Tri-State Sports & News Service

Kyleigh Brown, Rileigh Cummings and Jordan Lee Yarsevich began their volleyball career in fifth grade at St. Anne School in Bethlehem.

On Nov. 21, the trio concluded their high school career at Bethlehem Catholic with a PIAA title.

"I've coached Kyleigh, Rileigh, and Jordan since they were in fifth grade," said Bethlehem Catholic coach Kelly Brown, who coached at St. Anne when the trio were in grade school. "It's been great watching them develop during their careers and see them celebrate a state title as seniors."

Bethlehem Catholic concluded a perfect 18-0 season with its 3-0 sweep of Franklin Regional in the PIAA Class 3A final, which was the third of four title matches held at Cumberland Valley High School.

"I've been playing with Rileigh and Kyleigh since the fifth grade," said Yarsevich, a senior defensive specialist. "For us three, it's extremely special because I feel like we've been working for this since middle school. It was also special playing with the other girls. We were able to come through, work hard the entire season and get a reward like this."

Bethlehem Catholic earned its PIAA berth by winning its first District 11 title since 2014. The Golden Hawks earned their title berth with wins over District 12 champion Cardinal O'Hara, 3-0 in the first round; District 1 champ Pope John Paul II, 3-1 in the quarterfinals; and District 3 champion York Suburban, 3-1 in the semifinals.

"We've all been dreaming of something like this since middle school," said Cummings, a senior outside hitter. "Freshman, sophomore, junior year, we were always worried in the district playoffs if we were going to have another practice. For some reason this year, during districts, we knew it wasn't going to be our last practice. We knew that this was the team that had enough drive and enough talent to bring home the gold. We just knew it."

Bethlehem Catholic was making its fourth appearance in the finals and first since winning its only other state title in 2014.

"I experienced this six years ago with my other sister (Alyssa)," said coach Brown, referring to the 2014 title. "Being able to experience this with my youngest sister (Kyleigh) is an extremely proud moment for me."

Franklin Regional (18-3), the District 7 champion, was making its first appearance in the finals. The Panthers advanced to the title match with wins against District 6 champion Bellefonte, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and District 10 champ DuBois, 3-0 in the semifinals.

"At the end of last year, I kept telling people that we had the potential to win a state championship this year," coach Brown said. "Being able to get to this point and actually winning it, I'm at a loss for words."

The match featured three players who were voted to the PVCA Class 3A All-State Team last year. Bethlehem Catholic had Kyleigh Brown, a senior libero and Lehigh recruit, and MacKenzy Ruggerio, a junior opposite. Franklin Regional countered with senior middle hitter Aly Kindelberger, a DePaul recruit.

Ruggerio led the Golden Hawks with 17 kills, while sophomore outside hitter Jodi Hewitt added nine. Brown recorded 26 digs. Kindelberger led the Panthers with 24 kills and six blocks.

"Our offense did very well," coach Brown said. "MacKenzy has always been our offensive threat. She's our 'go-to' when we need to put the ball down. Today, she definitely did that for us. Jodi Hewitt gave us another offensive threat."

Ruggerio and Hewitt each recorded four kills in Bethlehem Catholic's 25-17 win in the first set.

Franklin Regional jumped out to a 9-6 lead in the second set, with Kindelberger registering four kills, but the Hawks scored 17 of the next 21 points en route to a 25-21 victory.

Bethlehem Catholic dominated the third set, leading by as many as 10 points. Ruggerio recorded the final two kills in a 25-17 win.

"I don't think we played poorly," Franklin Regional coach Mike Feorene said. "They played really well. We had trouble containing their hitters and couldn't get our offense going."

Franklin Regional's title match appearance comes three years after the program went winless in 2017.

"For four years we've dreamed of a season like this," Feorene said. "We had shirts made a couple years ago that said 'The journey begins now.' That journey has been taken. We got here and represented Franklin Regional and the WPIAL well, but came up short. The girls have a lot to be proud of."