

## **Patriots storm back to capture title**

### **Patriots collect 11th title**

**By RICH ZALUSKY**

#### **Assistant Sports Editor**

EAST HAVEN — The feeling for Coventry High senior Colleen McAvoy was downright surreal.

“Hard work pays off,” McAvoy said about 20 minutes after the conclusion of the CIAC Class S girls volleyball final at East Haven High School early Saturday afternoon. “All of us ... we grinded all season long to get to this point.

“The excitement of all of this just is amazing.”

The end result? Another banner will be hanging on the wall inside Matthew J. Hurlock Gymnasium on Ripley Hill Road.

The latest chapter in the legacy was probably the most unexpected.

McAvoy finished with 22 kills and provided a key momentum swing at the end of the opening game that proved to be one of the catalysts for top-seeded Coventry ( 25- 1) in a 20- 25, 25- 11, 25- 19, 25- 20 victory over defending Class S champion and No. 2 seed Lyman Memorial (23-3).

It marked the 11th Class S title in 12 appearances for the Patriots since 2003.

“Sometimes you win with the teams you don’t think you’re going to win with,” Coventry coach Ryan Giberson said.

“Everyone got a lot better — as the season progressed — and stepped up. Adding Colleen to the mix was a huge addition.

“I think that for the seniors that were returning — after losing last year in the semis — this is the way they wanted to go out. It was a terrific ending.”

Coventry was in a whole bunch of trouble early.

That was due to the fact that Lyman Memorial was not letting anything come easy.

The Bulldogs were in their rhythm — digging up ball after ball — while senior setter Meg Verizzi was moving the ball with precision on offense — with perfect passes to set up senior hitters Leah Vichas and Emerson Bailey.

Verizzi — in fact — was on the receiving end of a pass from sophomore Indigo Hevner — the second setter in Lyman Memorial’s 62 offensive system — that made it 24-10.

However, Verizzi landed funny on her left ankle and after a few moments headed to bench with a slight limp.

“She walked off the court and I thought, ‘tape her and we’d throw her back in’,” Lyman Memorial coach Amanda Nappi said.

Coventry held off the first game point — forcing its first side-out of the match — on a kill from McAvoy, who then stepped to the service line.

It was the start of a 9-point run — including three aces along with Hannah Levasseur setting up Julia Rutkowski (7 (Patriots, Page 10))

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*Members of the Coventry High girls volleyball team strike a proud pose moments after the Patriots wrapped up the program’s 11th state championship with a 3-1 victory over Lyman Memorial in Saturday’s CIAC Class S final in East Haven.*

*Rich Zalusky | Staff*

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kills, 15 digs) on three kills — that made it 24-20 and forced the second time-out in three points from Nappi.

Vichas came up with a huge dig that resulted in the Bulldogs winning the opening game on the next point.

Clearly though, things had turned.

“The serving run — probably wasn’t going to win it being down 24-10 but, what it did was build momentum and give us confidence,” Giberson said. “We were a little bit tentative early feeling things out.”

“I knew that if we could get in some good swings and play aggressive that they [Lyman] would struggle with our offense,” added Giberson.

Levasseur (37 assists) kept the momentum going with a block and with a pair of miniruns on serve from Rutkowski and Maggie Ziko – who had two aces — Coventry raced out to a 6-1 Game 2 lead.

And another story began to develop.

line to win seven consecutive points and build a 9-1 lead.

The Bulldogs got as close as four points on two occasions — the latter at 17-13 — before Coventry picked up a side-out and ended up winning the third game on a serve that went into the net.

And in Game 4, Coventry was threatening to pull away once again up 15-10.

Lyman Memorial made one last push — showing what champions usually do ... come back and fight.

And the Bulldogs fought their way back — tying things up at 16, 17 and 19-all.

Hevner was a big part in that fight. The sophomore showed that champions mentality.

“I’m glad that we’ve been playing the 62 so she had the opportunity to be on the court as much as she was and to adjust to the game,” Nappi said.

“I’m very proud of her. Her teammates trusted her to be there and supported her the entire way.”

It was a missed serve — that put Coventry ahead to stay — at 20-19.

Coventry was winning the ugly points. Those extended rallies.

“I thought if we could step up defensively and win those ugly points, we’d have a good shot at being successful,” Giberson said. “Lyman Memorial is a very good team going on runs. They string together points and all of a sudden it becomes a 5-, 6- or 7-point run.

“Serve/receive I thought was going to be a factor in the match.”

Verizzi ran some sprints and was back on the floor for the start of the second game.

However, her time on the court only lasted a few points as she asked Nappi to take her out.

“Meg is just such an integral part of our team,” Nappi said.

“She has a lot of experience and has developed into one of our best hitters and is a leader on the court. In terms of taking us out of system it was incredibly hard for the team to bounce back in terms of her first, second and third touch.”

Once Coventry tied things up with a convincing Game 2 victory, that trend continued in Game 3 — when Ziko (20 service points, 9 digs) stepped to the

Rutkowski won the next four points on serve to put things at match point.

The Bulldogs saved one.

“I know for them and for our program getting to the championship wasn’t the goal,” Nappi said.

“The goal was to walk away from here with a title. Sometimes it’s not in the cards and today was one of those days.”

Vichas had 21 kills and 15 digs while Bailey added 11 kills and Katee Meese finished with 16 digs for the defending champions from Lyman Memorial.

For Ziko, who watched from the bench as a sophomore when Coventry defeated Lyman Memorial in five games at Berlin High School for title No. 10 in 2015 before moving into a starting libero position as a senior, it was the perfect ending.

“No one expected us to be here,” Ziko said. “We all came together. Our chemistry was off the charts.

“For us to get to the finals, win it and win it in four ... it just feels amazing.”