

Coyotes Survive and Advance to Regional Semifinals:

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In college volleyball circles November's final Thursday is known for one thing: the start of regional play. Cal State San Bernardino is making their 18th consecutive regional appearance and on this night survived a gutsy comeback attempt from Azusa Pacific to prevail 25-10, 25-23, 14-25, 21-25, 15-13 at Van Dyne Gymnasium in Riverside. The Coyotes will face regional and overall #1 seed California Baptist in a true road match tomorrow night with a regional final berth at stake. The Lancers also had to go 5 sets before dispatching of Sonoma State.

Set 1 belonged entirely to the Coyotes. Azusa Pacific coach Chris Keife saw his side fall behind immediately with a 5-0 spurt by the Coyotes prompting his first timeout. Cal State San Bernardino would stretch the lead to 10-3 when the Cougars used their final timeout and never seriously threatened in set 1. APU posted a .061% hitting percentage in the opening stanza of Thursday's match. For sets 2-5 they posted a .187% attacking percentage.

Being the newcomers to this dance & trailing 5-0 out of the gate had to be Azusa Pacific's worst case scenario. Coach Keife said of the start that Cal State's service game was instrumental in getting his team out of rhythm. In his post match presser he also said "I could see it in our first two sets that we did struggle out there with the pressure in moments." when asked about this stage and the new experience for his ladies. You could also tell in the media room that there was excitement from a very young group of Cougars that do not graduate a senior: Sophomore defensive specialist Bailey Henington said "Honestly I'm ready for spring. I'm ready to get back at it again."

In set 2 Azusa Pacific responded about as well as a team could respond after dropping the first set like they did. They ran out to leads of 10-7 and 16-11 forcing Coyote timeouts at each point. Coach Keife emphasized ball control between sets 1 & 2 and got the improvements he wanted despite dropping the set. An 8-2 run gave Cal State the lead at 19-18 and they would go onto finish the job 25-23.

Azusa Pacific took the 3rd set taking control with a lead of 12-9. At 16-14 Coyote coach Kim Cherniss took her first timeout trying to stem the tide but to no avail. The Cougars from that point added another 3-0 spurt and stretched out that lead to 19-14 prevailing 25-14. Attacking efficiency really swung in the Cougars favor as they posted a .270% hitting percentage to the Coyotes .024%.

In the 4th Cal State San Bernardino led 10-6 forcing an early APU timeout. The Cougars responded with a 7-1 spurt to take the lead at 13-11 prompting a Kim Cherniss timeout. One of the more impressive things about APU's comeback was their ability to continue runs out of timeouts. That trend continued here as 3 more points by the Cougars forced the final timeout at 19-11. That sparked a Coyote rally which would ultimately fall short 25-21.

Set 5 saw really neither team able to grab momentum until the Coyotes took control 8-7 at change of sides. After another point APU called timeout at 9-7 and the Cougars responded tying things at 9-9 forcing a Coyote timeout. From that point it would be a race to 6 which Cal State San Bernardino took control of at 13-12 behind a solo block from Lauren Nicholson. Although she had a tough night offensively (10 kills, 11 errors, 53 attempts -.019%) senior maturity led her to stay involved in other ways: Coach Kim Cherniss praised her 14 digs as well as being money in serve receive during the post match presser.

Last year the regional round was hosted by Alaska-Anchorage and so I asked Coach Cherniss, Lauren Nicholson, and Hailey Jackson about getting to prepare and play in essentially your own backyard this time around. Jackson said that being at Van Dyne gave them the opportunity to basically follow the routine they'd use for home matches albeit with a short bus ride to Riverside instead of staying on campus. She also mentioned how nice it would be to go home and prepare for a final she had Friday. "It's indescribable having a home crowd. There's nothing like it." were her remarks about the strong contingent of Coyotes fans making the trip from San Bernardino. Coach Kim Cherniss explained that the university president got a bus and said any student or staff member who wants to go to this game can ride and we'll take care of it. Lauren Nicholson said that strong contingent made it feel like they were playing at home in Coussoulis Arena.

This match featured 30 ties and 16 lead changes over 5 sets. In the victory Cal State San Bernardino was led by Hailey Jackson (17 kills, 3 errors, 40 attempts .350% hitting percentage). Alexis Cardoza had a double double of 15 kills & 19 digs. Lauren Nicholson also posted the kills-digs double-double with 10 kills and 14 digs. Hannah Barrett tied Cardoza for the squad lead in digs with 19. Setter Jayann DeHoog posted 51 assists.

Azusa Pacific was led by Madison Ogas with 15 kills & 5 digs. Natalie Klapp added 10 kills & 18 digs while Bailey Hennington led the Cougars with 25 digs. Kaylen Higa recorded 26 assists and Shaylah Kagehiro 19 assists in defeat. The Cougars do not graduate anyone from this roster.