

Lady Cats hope experience puts them over the top at state tourney



Louisburg senior Erin Lemke (left) and junior Carleigh Pritchard go up for a block during last Saturday's sub-state tournament. The Lady Cats begin state tournament play at 4:30 p.m. today in Hutchinson.

For the last two years, the Louisburg volleyball team has found itself in the last match of the season.

It is a pretty good place to be, and for some programs, it would be monumental to reach the state championship game in back-to-back years. The Lady Cats were proud of what they accomplished, but finishing second both times has left them wanting more.

"We all are tired of talking about taking second because this and that happens," Louisburg senior Reilly Ratliff-Becher said. "I've been saying third time is the charm and I think this is our year."

Louisburg will soon find out as it begins its journey toward a state title today at the Class 4A state tournament in Hutchinson. The Lady Cats will open with pool play at 4:30 p.m. this afternoon and will face off against No. 1 Andale,

No. 4 Holton and No. 5 Nickerson.

The top two teams in each pool will advance to the semifinals at 1 p.m. on Saturday at Hutchinson Sports Arena, on the campus of Hutchinson Community College.

The Lady Cats, who are the No. 8 seed with a 21-15 record, will open against Andale, which has been ranked the No. 1 team in Class 4A for most of the season. Louisburg defeated Andale in the state semifinals a year ago, so the Lady Cats are somewhat familiar with their first opponent.

"I am excited to see them again," Louisburg senior Erin Lemke said of Andale. "Every team is different this year, and I think it is exciting for us to see them again after playing them last year. Them being No. 1 most of the year is not a fear of ours, and I think we are more excited than anything. When we play together, and for each other, is when we play our best."

Louisburg will also see a pair of unfamiliar foes in Holton and Nickerson, but the Lady Cats aren't as worried about their opponents as much as they are about themselves.

"We will play whoever we get paired up against," Louisburg coach Jessica Compliment said. "It was the same thing we told the girls getting ready for sub-state, that regardless who is on the other side, no one else can control what we do on our side of the court. If we take care of our business, and keep our energy level high, then no one can stop us. If we leave it all out on the court, it doesn't matter who is on the other side."

The Lady Cats took care of business this past week as they knocked out perennial state tournament participant, Bishop Miege, in the first round of sub-state.

Louisburg brought its energy level

up and it translated into one of its better matches of the season. The Lady Cats hope to use that same recipe this weekend in Hutchinson as they try to earn the school's first state volleyball championship.

"This week, coach said this is the most energy a team has played with during practice since she has been here,"

Ratliff-Becher said. "Since I've been here, I think we are the most prepared than we have ever been and every single player is ready to do their job."

"I think if we come out with the same energy that we did last week, we are going to win every single game. I told my teammates that we are winning every single game, no matter how sloppy or awful it looks."

Experience will certainly be on Louisburg's side as the Lady Cats have six seniors on their roster, and many of them will participate in their third state tournament. They have several players back who saw state action last season, including seniors Haley Cain, Lemke, Ratliff-Becher and Kallevig.

Junior middle blocker Carleigh Pritchard, along with sophomore setters Rinny McMullen and Davis Guetterman, also played big roles on last season's state tournament team. All of the players realize what they are going to have to do to reach their goal.

"We all know what it takes to win to get to state, and once we get there, we know what it is like playing with those teams,"

senior Riley Kallevig said. "Hopefully we can all play our game, everyone will do their part and we can have a good weekend.

"Being able to get second is a good accomplishment, but twice in a row is kind of tough. I think we are ready to bring home that first state title. It would be amazing."

If anything, the Lady Cats will try to use those back-to-back state runner-up finishes as a reminder of what they have missed out on heading into this weekend.

"For a few of them, they have their two second place medals and I think that is added motivation for them to go down there and win a state title," Compliment said. "A lot of people would be happy in getting second at state last year, but I think after it was over, there was a lot unfinished business left there with some of these seniors. They know this is their last chance to get that title for those seniors. We have to take care of business first on Friday, but they definitely have a little motivation after the last couple of years."

After their match with Andale, the Lady Cats will face off with Holton (30-11) at 5:30 p.m. and Nickerson (27-13) at 7:30 p.m.

No. 2 Independence (35-3), No. 3 Towanda-Circle (33-6), No. 6 Eudora (26-13) and No. 7 Topeka-Hayden (25-14) will compete in the other pool.