



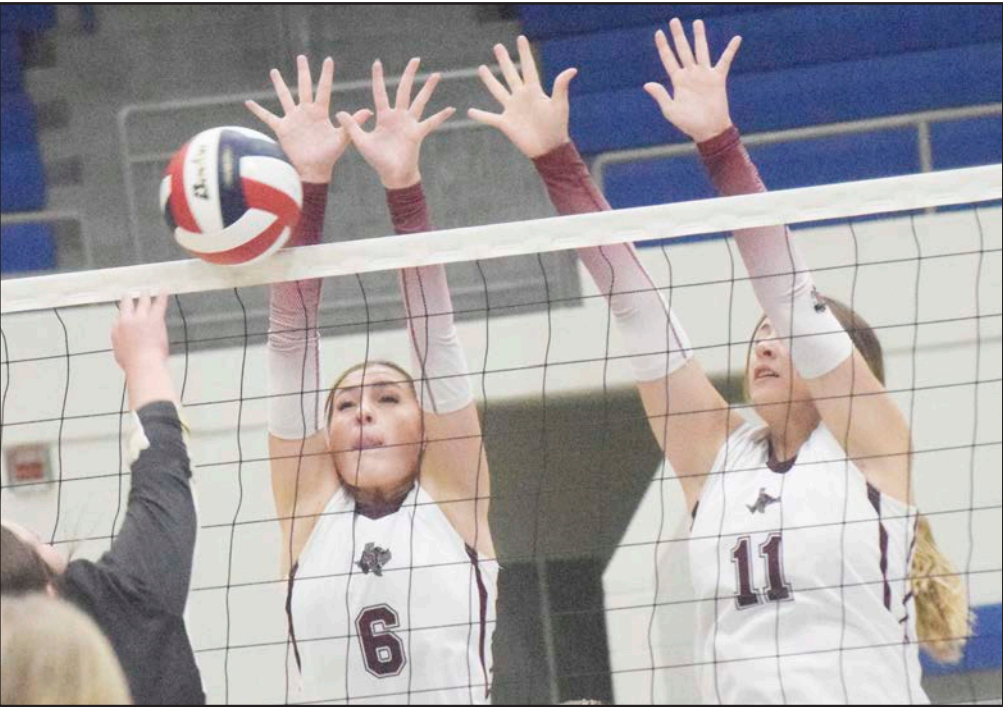
The Saint Jo Lady Panthers were regional finalist runners-up for the third consecutive season as six seniors fought through tears after they played their final match for Saint Jo.



It was not all a bad trip as Saint Jo celebrated after winning against Evant on Friday.



Aubrey Morman looks to tip the ball over the net into open space.



Kamron Skidmore (#6) and Cara Vogel look to get a hand on a hit at the net.



Libero Taylor Patrick looks to pass an easy hit ball to her setter.

Lady Panthers fall in the regional final

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The Saint Jo Lady Panthers came up short at the regional final for the third straight season, one game away from state, on Saturday at the regional tournament in Midlothian.

The Lady Panthers beat Evant in straight sets 3-0 on Friday to reach the final game against Harrold which they lost 3-0.

Saint Jo knew before the season even started it would likely come to this big challenge, but it still had to go through all the steps to get there.

The Panthers reached the regional finals the previous two seasons, losing both times to eventual state champion Blum.

With district realignment meant a new region so a rematch with a Blum program that had graduated several key players from those teams would have to wait until state possibly.

Instead, a showdown against last year's state runner-up Harrold was forecast in the regional final.

With the team having six seniors, with five of them having been on varsity since they were freshman, it was this year or bust for Saint Jo.

First, the Lady Panthers had to beat Evant. The Lady Elks leaned heavily on a big front court player. When she rotated to the back row, Evant showed almost no net resistance which meant Saint Jo hitters had free reign during that time.

The Lady Panthers won each set pretty easily, with the scores being 25-17, 25-17 and 25-19.

This set up the match with Harrold the team had been anticipating. The Lady Hornets had been at or near the top of the state standings since the beginning of the season.

Harrold had so much respect it had even played bigger local schools this season, beating Bowie in straight sets and Nocona in five sets during its pre-district schedule.

The two teams had met earlier in the season when the Lady Hornets attended Saint Jo's hosted tournament. The two teams met in the tournament championship where Harrold won 2-1.

Still, with the tournament format being a best of three instead of five and the match after playing an exhausting schedule of five matches the previous two days, that result was not gospel, especially two months later.

The challenge is Harrold had multiple big hitters at the net, which is a big deal since most 1A teams are lucky to have one or two, which meant constant pressure on Saint Jo's defense.

This also meant the Lady Panthers constantly had to find ways to attack the Lady Hornet defense as well or it would face strong hit after strong hit which was unsustainable for any team.

The first set saw the Lady Hornets get out to a good start before the Lady Panthers rallied back and took a little lead 8-7. Unfortunately, it started turn from there.

Harrold had some good runs from the service line that Saint Jo struggled to make much offense out of and led to the Lady Hornets pulling away. Harrold won 4-1 to get the lead to 11-9 and then extended it to 14-11, 17-13. Another 4-1 run and the Lady Hornets could smell the end of the first set coming.

The Lady Hornets won 25-17 to take the lead 1-0.

Saint Jo needed to bounce back, but unfortunately never got anything going in set two.

Harrold led 4-1 and then 8-2. The Lady Panthers would have needed

a huge run at some point from the service line to get back into the set, but it never came as the Lady Hornets lead grew more and more.

Harrold took set two 25-13 to go up 2-0 and had all of the momentum.

Saint Jo had its back against the wall, knowing the only option was to hope for a comeback that would lead to a fifth set, but to get there it needed to win set three.

The Lady Panthers initially started on the right foot. After falling being 4-1 to start the previous two sets, it was Saint Jo that started well up 4-1. Unfortunately, the Lady Hornets came roaring back, going on an 8-2 run as it led 9-6, then 12-8 and 15-10.

It looked like it was heading towards a similar place as set one with Harrold slowly running away with the set before the Lady Panthers made one last gasp.

Saint Jo eventually cut the lead down to one point, trailing 20-19 as the set entered the final stretch and the Lady Panthers had their best momentum of the match.

Unfortunately, it was Harrold that was able to close the set out with momentum, earning the final five points to win

25-19 and the match 3-0.

It was a disappointing end not just to this season, but a run for Saint Jo volleyball that will be hard to match. Before this group, only two Lady Panther teams had made it to the regional tournament, which came right before them in 2018 and 2020.

This group took those accomplishments and made it the standard after a rough freshman year.

It is hard for a team to come into a season with such high expectations and reach them not just once, but twice after a surprise run two years ago to the regional final.

With Harrold looking like the favorite to win state this week, you can chalk it up to a bad draw as this group just happened to get the eventual state champs in its region three straight years.

For Coach Kelly Skidmore, this senior group is the first she shepherded through the program, taking over as head coach their freshman year in what was then a rebuilding season before they took off.

Even past successful teams that went to the regional tournament, including the 2018 team that also made it to the

regional final, would struggle playing its slate of tough 2A teams back when the district schedule was chalk full of them.

This group the past three seasons, even when the district schedule removed the mandatory 2A teams, has made beating bigger schools not a huge deal anymore.

This group raised the bar for Saint Jo volleyball. After past teams showed it was possible, these teams have made it expected.

"I hope they instilled the desire to never quit," Skidmore said. "That was one thing this group of seniors really did, no matter what the score was or how many sets we were down. We could have given up in that third set and it was the most competitive of the match."

While there is some thought the program will dip down a bit with this core graduating, there is enough returning talent at all positions for the team to expect good things again next year.

While a regional final appearance probably won't be expected by anyone outside of the program, inside the program the standard has been set and it is up to returning and future Saint Jo players to raise it once again.