

Published November 25th, 2013

Cougars Lose Heartbreaker in NCS finals

Campo advances to Nor Cals

By Brad Kvedaris



Photo Gint Federas

It was an ending almost too cruel for words: Campolindo celebrated a come-from-behind win, only to realize they had more volleyball to play.

Campolindo had fallen behind Bishop O'Dowd in Saturday's NCS girls' volleyball title match, trailing by two games. But the Cougars managed to force two elimination sets into overtime and survive match point three times. With Campo up 18-17 in overtime of the fifth set, they watched a spike attempt by O'Dowd sail out long— and seemingly, the Cougars were champions.

Only it didn't quite work out that way.

As the Campo girls celebrated in a dog-pile and their opponents walked off the floor in disbelief, the officials conferred at midcourt. They eventually ruled that a Campolindo player had tipped the ball at the net. The teams were ordered back on the court tied 18-18. O'Dowd won the next two points, and the Dragons rushed the floor as NCS champions.

Campo coach John Vuong said it was one of the toughest breaks he'd experienced. "Definitely, that has to be up there — in that moment, that time," he said. "That's what the line judges are there for; they've got the best angle, the best shot. But if the up ref sees something, that's his call."

After the reversal, the Cougars thought they had another chance at match point, as Kirsten Sibley and Emma Johnson blocked another spike attempt by O'Dowd. However, after the point was initially awarded to Campolindo, that call too was overturned, giving the Dragons a 19-18 lead. O'Dowd star Brianna Karsseboom then slammed the ball home on match point to seal the victory, 25-17, 25-18, 19-25, 26-28, 20-18.

Of the sideline block by Johnson and Sibley, Vuong said, "It looked like it was in, but I can't see from there. It's the up ref's call, and he saw something the line judge didn't see. He overruled it, so what can you do?"

Bishop O'Dowd dominated the early action, opening up a big lead in the first set. Campo challenged in the second game, maintaining a narrow lead, until O'Dowd held serve for nine straight points to put the set out of reach.

A flat and dejected Campolindo team took the floor for the third set, but came alive after grinding out a tough first few points. Team MVP Kelley Wirth (22 kills, 6 blocks) led a furious rally in which the Cougars seized control, taking 10 of 11 points.

"The attitude changed because they said 'hey, we have nothing to lose now.' There's less pressure than being up 2-0 and being the team that has to finish the game out," Vuong said. "That's the hardest thing in volleyball, trying to finish the game out."

Sibley (13 kills, 3 blocks) and Kaylyn Murray (6 kills, 6 blocks) helped Campolindo overcome a 5-point deficit to win a thrilling fourth set that saw a tie or lead change on almost every point.

Despite the up-and-down ending, Cougars team captain Natalie Meniktas called the loss, "Probably the best second-place feeling I've ever gotten in my life; I was so proud of everyone on my team."

The Cougars travel to Sacramento to face Christian Brothers Nov. 26 as the No. 6 seed in the first round of the CIF Northern Regional playoffs.

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