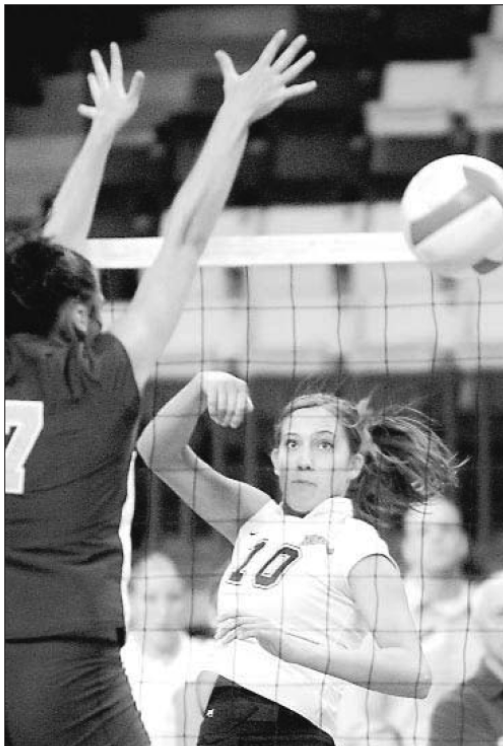


MSU 3, SOUTHWEST MINN. STATE 1



Pat Christman

Minnesota State's Ally Kwikkel hits the ball past the block of Southwest Minnesota State's Leah Ashburn during their first game Tuesday at Bresnan Arena.

Comfort zone

By Chad Courrier
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — An explosive hitter for all of her volleyball life, Cassie Wolpern opened this season playing one match at libero and the next at outside hitter. It was an adjustment for the Minnesota State senior, but she said it was right for the team.

However, when she had the opportunity at the net, she wanted to make the most of it.

"I did my best in that role (as libero), but I'm an outside hitter at heart, that's who I am," she said.

Wolpern had a team-high 16 kills, with six in the deciding game, as the Mavericks defeated 24th-ranked Southwest Minnesota State 3-1 Tuesday at Bresnan Arena. Game scores were 30-26, 27-30, 30-22, 30-27.

It was the second straight victory over a ranked opponent; Minnesota State defeated 12th-rated Nebraska-Omaha in five games Saturday.

"The kids are working on becoming better volleyball players and becoming a better volleyball team," coach Dennis Amundson said. "It's the culmination of what we've been working on the last year-and-a-half."

In the first game, the Mavericks stymied Southwest Minnesota State at the net, taking the lead at 23-13 on the strength of five blocks. Allison Kunath had two of the blocks as Minnesota State appeared ready to cruise to the victory.

However, Erin Contons,

the Mustangs' leading hitter, led an 11-2 rally with six kills. Ashley Nachreiner and Kunath nailed consecutive spikes as the Mavericks regained momentum, and Stef Sandstrom's ace serve finished the game at 30-26.

"It's the nature of volleyball, it's really hard to sustain anything," Amundson said. "The momentum swings are incredible, and as a coach, you try to keep the mood even."

Minnesota State built another early lead in the second game, going up 11-5. But the Mustangs answered with six straight points and took their first lead of the night at 13-12. Ally Kwikkel's block put the Mavericks on top at 18-17, starting a three-point run, but Southwest Minnesota State responded with four straight.

The Mustangs scored nine of the final 13 points, four of which came on hitting or serving errors, to prevail 30-27.

The third game started much the same way, with the Mavericks jumping ahead 7-1 and forcing an early timeout.

This time, the run continued through that break as the lead grew to 11-2, with Minnesota State taking advantage of several hitting errors.

A second timeout didn't kill the rally as Lisa Rohret's serving streak reached seven points for a 15-2 lead. The Mavericks got a little sloppy with an 18-4 lead as the Mustangs pulled within 19-11. Mandy Reuter's spike put the Mavericks back on track, and Dana Ostertag's kill ended the game at 30-22.

"Last week, we were working on finishing the game after 25 (points)," Wolpern said. "We call it a tsunami if they score three straight points, and (ending that) starts with a good pass. It doesn't have to be perfect, we just want to give ourselves a chance."

Southwest Minnesota State took the early lead in Game 4, forcing Minnesota State into a timeout down 10-5. The Mustangs maintained the lead until Reuter connected on three straight kills to pull within 21-20. Wolpern's loud spike and another kill by Kunath made it 23-all, and the game was tied again at 25, 26 and 27.

Wolpern's final kill started the match-ending push, and a couple of hitting errors gave Minnesota State the victory.

Wolpern also had 17 digs, her fifth double-double of the season. She had only three attack errors, showing better decision-making at the net.

"Her arm is quicker than last year, and she's playing smarter," Amundson said. "She knows when she's in rhythm and when to take a rip. She's become a really smart player."

Reuter finished with 12 kills and 24 digs, also her fifth double-double. Sandstrom made 47 assists, and Rohret had 21 digs, her ninth match of 10 or more. The Mavericks had one block solo and 22 block assists, led by Kunath's six.

Contons led the Mustangs with 23 kills.

The Mavericks (11-4, 1-4 in NCC) return to North Central Conference play this weekend with matches Friday at St. Cloud State and Saturday at No. 5 Minnesota Duluth.



Cassie Wolpern is happy to be back at outside hitter.