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Acalanes Girls Volleyball Team Wins 'Instant Classic' to Claim First State Title

By Karl Buscheck

As Ernie Rodriguez stood on the sideline at Santiago Canyon College, the head coach of the Acalanes girls volleyball team was just trying to smile.

After building up a 2-0 lead over Crossroads of Santa Monica in the CIF State Division 3 championship, the Dons had just dropped back-to-back sets. A decisive fifth set awaited.

"It was one of the things my assistant coach, my wife (Shari), kept talking about in between timeouts," Rodriguez explained. "We kept talking during the match and one of the things she kept telling me is, 'Keep smiling. Make sure the girls see that.'"

While Rodriguez did his best to follow that advice, the coach was riding an emotional roller coaster.

"Oh no. Absolutely not," Rodriguez admitted when asked if his external demeanor reflected his internal feelings.

"Inside I'm actually talking to myself and (saying), 'Hey, watch yourself. Watch how you say things.' Things like that. As a coach, you're sort of talking to yourself and say things to yourself before you say them out loud. But there are a couple instances there where I try to rev them up a little, raise my voice a little and get them going."

The strategy worked, as the second-seeded Dons topped the No. 11 seed Crossroads 16-14 to claim the first state title in program history.

"I can only imagine the way that Acalanes and Acalanes students feel," Rodriguez said. "This is such a huge accomplishment. Not only for what they've done as a team, but as a school and against the schools that they compete against in our league - Campolindo and Miramonte are unbelievable programs."

The final set against Crossroads in Orange featured seven lead changes and four ties.

"It was an instant classic," Rodriguez said. "From the

beginning to the end, from us getting to the gym to us leaving the gym, it was a phenomenal day."

The title-winning match marked the second week in a row that the Dons had to rally to extend their postseason run.

"It was Sonora all over again," Rodriguez said, referring to the team's 3-2 comeback over Sonora in the NorCal State Championship on Nov. 26.

"The one thing that I told the girls is, 'Just keep battling. Just keep after it. We've been here before. We were just here a week ago,'" Rodriguez said. "I actually believe that was a really comfortable feeling for us that we had been there just a week before in the exact same setting."

Against Crossroads senior Parker Jones, who's heading to University of Pennsylvania next fall, led both teams with 18 kills.

"Obviously, she's our big-game hunter," Rodriguez said. "She shows up for every game - whether it's a league game or a big title match like the state championship - Parker Jones always shows up."

The coach also praised the performances of the team's two setters - (freshman) Lane Webster and (junior) Maddie Kalil - who combined for 57 assists, while singling out one of the team's unexpected stars.

"The one that I don't think anybody's talking about is (sophomore) Roxy Cummings," Rodriguez said. "She had, I would say, her season high kills in the biggest match of her life. She had 15 kills in this match and I don't think she's ever had over five the entire season."

In Rodriguez's first year in charge of the team, the state-winning Dons ended the season 31-9 (7-3 in league).

"They did a phenomenal job of keeping their mind, keeping mentally prepared and just going after it," Rodriguez said. "It was a lot of fun to just watch these girls really grow up in front of your eyes."



Parker Jones

Photos Craig Nelson



The proud Acalanes volleyball team and coach Ernie Rodriguez with the trophy. The Lady Dons defeated Crossroads of Santa Monica in an emotional 3-2 match.

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