

SPORTS

Gator Volleyball advances to section title, defeats Fosston

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The Gator Volleyball team had won the first two sets of its section semifinal match versus the Fosston Greyhounds before back-to-back Greyhound kills sent the Gators to 24-26 set loss, forcing a fourth set. The team responded to this tight loss in a big way.

Leading 12-10 in the fourth set, the Gators went on an 11-0 run to take a 23-10 edge, led by

River Falls on November 1 to advance to the Section 8A title match.

"I feel like we're really gelling at the right time," Coach Dahl said when asked about that 11-0 run. "I'm really proud that... they're together. They have their roles."

She added how she did feel a little more doubt and trust issues, including looking at one another more than usual.

kill and ace serve, to tie the set at 9-9. Both teams went back and forth for a little while, locked in a 16-16, but then the Gators moved its move.

Behind a 4-0 run, the Gators took a 20-16 lead, led by two blocks and a kill from Riley Gust and a Cassie Dahl ace serve. Later, Reese ended the set with a kill to give the Gators a 25-19 set win.

20-12 lead, the Gators ended the set on a 5-2 run, led by four Kenzie Dahl kills, to win 25-14.

In set three, neither team built a lead larger than two. A Gust kill would tie the set at 22-22 before a Greyhounds block and kill forced a Gator timeout, with the team trailing 22-24.

Hanson and Dahl each recorded kills to tie the set at 24-24, but those back-to-back Greyhound kills led to the 24-26 set loss and forced a fourth set. Following this set loss, Coach Dahl's message to her team was it has one shot at this and has to own that shot.

"You need to own your success and you need to be hungry for the win. And you have to do whatever it takes to make it happen," Coach Dahl said. "Every team is good from this stage out, so you just can't ever take your foot off the gas."

The Gators responded with that 11-0 run that turned a 12-10 lead into a 23-10 lead. Besides Hanson's three kills during this run, Jacey Wojchowski earned a block and Gust a kill to help the Gators. Before the Gators' match



Photo courtesy of Val Truscinski
Riley Gust rises up for the kill attempt during the Gators' 3-1 victory over the Fosston Greyhounds in the semifinals of the Section 8A Volleyball Tournament from Lincoln High School in Thief River Falls on November 1. Gust finished with six kills in the win.

point, a sea of black and green-wearing Gator fans rose to their feet on one side of the Lincoln High School stands. Coach Dahl called this support from Gator Nation as impressive.

"I don't think people realize how important that is and it's just so much fun. It's a great environment. It's tournament time," Coach Dahl said. "These kids have worked hard and they deserve every bit of standing ovation that they get... For our Gator Nation to recognize that and support them, that's just phenomenal."

Offensively, Hanson led the

Gators with 18 kills, followed by Reese with 15, Kenzie Dahl with 12, and Gust and Wojchowski each with 6. Cassie Dahl led the team in assists with 40. At the service line, Reese and Cassie Dahl led the team with three aces each.

Defensively, Gust led the team in blocks with three, followed by Cassie Dahl with two.

With this win, the Gators advanced to its first section title match since 2009—one win away from the program's first section title and state tournament berth. The message from Coach Dahl now? "Get it. Go get it."



Photo courtesy of Ryan Bergeron
The Gator Volleyball team celebrates together, as Gator fans stand and cheer, following the team's 3-1 victory over the Fosston Greyhounds in the semifinals of the Section 8A Volleyball Tournament from Lincoln High School in Thief River Falls on November 1.

three kills from Kinsley Hanson. Not long after, Kenzie Dahl ended the match for the Gators with a kill, influencing the Gator student section to storm the court with the team in a celebratory huddle.

The Gators won 3-1 (25-19, 25-14, 24-26, 25-12) from Lincoln High School in Thief

"But as far as cohesively playing as a team," Coach Dahl said, "they've really done well in this postseason getting rid of some of those errors that we've been seeing all season long."

In set one, trailing 4-8, the Gator rallied back with a 5-1 run, including a Jade Reese

In set two, the Gators again got off to a slow start, falling into a 1-4 hole. The Gators used a 6-1 run to take a 7-5 edge, getting two kills each from Kenzie Dahl and Reese.

Later leading 10-9, the Gators went on a 7-0 run, led by three Kinsley Hanson kills, to take a 17-9 edge. Holding a



Photo courtesy of Ryan Bergeron
The Gator Volleyball program poses with its Section 8A Championship trophy. Pictured are (L-R): Meagan Otto, Keyasha Housker, Kinsley Hanson, Jade Reese, Greta Lee, Aulona Jasiqui, Assistant Coach Jessica Stender (in back), Jacey Wojchowski, Riley Gust, Honna Westlund, Kenzie Dahl, Cassie Dahl (in back), Hannah Bergsnev, Head Coach Stacy Dahl (in back), Macy Majer, and Assistant Coach Ashley Lambert (in back).

On the brink, Gator Volleyball captures first ever section title

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Still looking for that elusive first section championship, the Gator Volleyball team fell into a 1-2 set deficit and a 22-24 deficit in the fourth set of its Section 8A Championship match versus the Kittson County Central Bearcats—one point away from falling short of that section title again. After a Gator

lift violation gave the Bearcats that 24-22 lead, Gator Head Coach Stacy Dahl called a timeout.

"Sometimes you just have to decide how do you want this thing to end and I think we hung on and hung on and hung on," Coach Dahl said when asked about the message to her team in this timeout. "And no team is going to hand you anything. You have to go get it."

The Gators would go and get it. It fought off two match points as part of a 4-0 run to end the fourth set to win it 26-24 and force a fifth set. It then jumped out to an early 5-1 lead in the fifth set before putting the match away on a Riley Gust kill, setting off pandemonium—cheers, hugs, jumps, and tears—amongst the Gator players, coaches, and fans.

Battling back from the brink, the Gators defeated the Bearcats 3-2 (27-25, 19-25, 24-26, 26-24, 15-9) to capture the program's first ever section title and state tournament berth following action at the University of Minnesota Crookston on November 5.

"I felt like they wanted it," Coach Dahl said about her team's late match response. "They clearly did what it took to push that fifth set and then they dictated the game. And that was truly awesome."

Trailing 22-24, the players said the message from Coach Dahl to them in that fourth set timeout was that they weren't done yet, but needed to go now.

"Still in it. Go get it. Take it," Cassie Dahl said about the message.

Coming out of that timeout, the Gators earned one point on a Bearcats' four-hit violation and another point when a Gator serve was not returned to tie the match at 24-24. Gust then earned a kill and Jade Reese an ace serve to force a fifth set. The Gator players and fans broke out into cheers, as the players on the court went to the bench. The Gators still had work to do in that fifth set.

In this fifth set, the Gators jumped out to a 5-1 lead behind two Gust kills and one Kinsley Hanson kill. The Gators kept at least a three-point margin the rest of the way. Then, leading 11-7, the Gators scored three unanswered points, including a kill each by Kenzie Dahl and Gust, to pull within one point of victory. After a Gator service error and a Bearcats ace made it 14-9, Gust sealed the history-making win with her team-leading nineteenth kill.

Besides Gust, Reese earned 17 kills, and Hanson and Kenzie Dahl each 12 kills to pace the Gator attack. Cassie Dahl led the team in assists with 53. At the service line, Hanson paced the Gators with three aces, followed by Aulona Jasiqui and Cassie Dahl each with two.

Defensively, Reese led the team in blocks with five, followed by three from Gust and two from Kenzie Dahl. Hanson led the team in digs with 23, followed by Hannah Bergsnev with 12, and Gust and Cassie Dahl each with 11.

The Gator Volleyball program has had some close calls

at section titles and state appearances over the years. It advanced to the section title match in 2009, but fell in this match to finish as section runner-up. It also earned a pair of section semifinal appearances—in 2017 and 2019—but fell in each of these matches.

After watching so many close calls and being on the brink of experiencing yet another, Coach Dahl hugged her players and watched them hoist that section championship plaque above their heads. She called this moment tonight incredible.

"These kids have earned every bit of success that they've had this year. They've worked incredibly hard and they've been pushed to a whole different level," Coach Dahl said. "And so I'm really proud that they came out and just played that hard, with that intensity."

Coach Dahl said this first state tournament berth could have happened for the Gator program sooner, having many great teams over the years. Asked what made this team so special—to be the first to make that mark—Coach Dahl pointed to chemistry. They started playing summer JO volleyball together when they were nine and ten years old and had gone to numerous tournaments and camps together.

"They mesh well. They are together. That is our word," Coach Dahl said. "And so I feel like they have their roles, they know what to do, they perform, and tonight... when it came down to it, they executed and that's exactly what they needed to do."

Gust highlighted this chemistry and work when asked about that final fourth set timeout by Coach Dahl.

"You got to trust your training," Gust said. "We've been working for a very long time."

This work and training is now taking them to Minnesota high school volleyball's highest stage, the Class A State Volleyball Tournament at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. As players confirmed, reaching this stage has been a dream since they were young.

The dream is now a reality and the Gators look to make it count.

"(Let's) show them what the Gators can do," Gust said.

The Section 8A Champion Gators (29-3) will open against the second-seeded and Section 3A Champion Minneota Vikings (29-4) on Thursday, November 11 at 7 pm. The Gators fell to the Vikings 2-0 at the Class A Showcase in Burnsville back on September 25.

Coach Dahl's message to her team moving forward is to not let up ever.

"They came in clutch tonight and that was fantastic," Coach Dahl said. "But there are going to be a ton more other teams that are going to be gunning for them."

She views her team's potential as high down at the state tournament.

"They're a pretty well-oiled machine and this maybe was a little bit of a scare tonight," Coach Dahl said. "And I hope that they can just refuel and be ready because the road doesn't get any easier and they have to bring it."

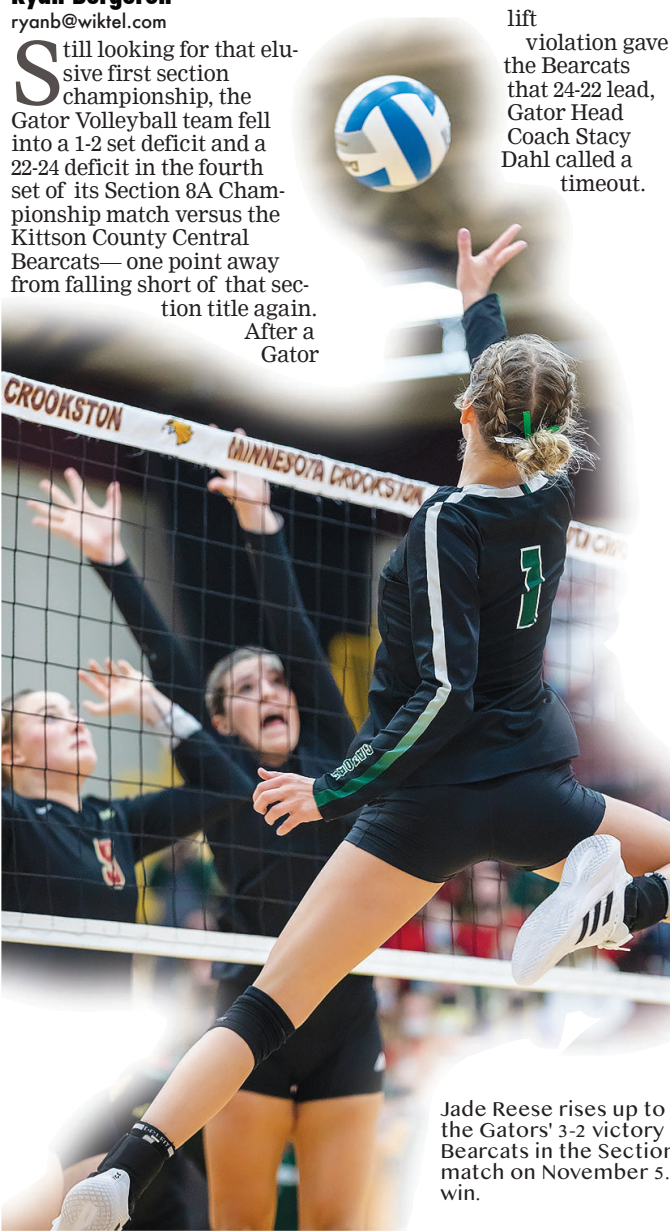


Photo courtesy of Val Truscinski
Jade Reese rises up to tip the ball over the net during the Gators' 3-2 victory over the Kittson County Central Bearcats in the Section 8A Volleyball Championship match on November 5. Reese finished with 17 kills in the win.