

SECTION CHAMPIONS

Crusaders return to state tournament with sweep of section foes

BY JAMES STITT

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The Mayer Lutheran volleyball team is returning to the Class A State Tournament after winning the Section 2A Championship Saturday night. The Crusaders swept all four postseason opponents, capping the section tourney with a 3-0 win over Cleveland (25-21, 25-16, 25-8).

"It's super special for me," said Lilly Wachholz. "My senior year now ending with a state tournament - it's super cool and almost surreal still."

The spot at the state tournament means more this year than past appearances, as the Crusaders did not get a chance last season with the postseason being cancelled.

"Knowing that we can't take anything for granted this year because last year we didn't get to have it," said Emma Lade. "We knew we had to work really hard to get where we are."

After all of the restrictions last year, only playing a conference schedule, the Crusaders have taken advantage of being able to have a normal year. Mayer Lutheran has taken on ranked teams often including wins over teams in classes above them, and battled in tournaments that have helped them grow as a team.

"We've come together so close this last season," said Stella Maass.

The Crusaders have tallied a 29-2 record thus far, winning multiple tournaments like the Class A Showcase and the Section 2A Tournament, while picking up a Minnesota River Conference Championship along the way.

"It's definitely an unforgettable season," said Lilly Wachholz. "The memories we've made this year are great. How we grew together not only as a team but even off the court is really important too. It definitely shows on the court because of



how close we are. We're just able to work through things. We've taken huge jumps, every player has this year."

The Crusaders have been a dominant force all year, winning 77 sets compared to just 10 sets lost. Only six of their matches have not been sweeps compared to 27 wins that were either 2-0 or 3-0. That continued in the section tourney as Mayer Lutheran won every match 3-0.

"We did really good, we didn't drop a set throughout the entire section tournament which I think shows how strong and consistent we played during the entire thing," said Lilly Wachholz. "You have your times where you're up and down, but we played really well."

And with the 3-0 win over Cleveland Nov. 6, the Crusaders earned a spot at the state tournament, a goal they have been working toward all season.

"We've been working hard this whole season and it finally showed up," said Maas. "We did it. Got it done."

The Crusaders earned the No. 1 seed for the state tourney, taking on South Ridge (16-6) Nov. 11 at the Xcel Energy Center with a 5 p.m. start time. The winner faces either No. 4 Bethlehem Academy or No. 5 Nov. 12 at 1 p.m. The other first

round matchups are No. 2 Minnesota vs. Badger/Greenbush-Middle River and No. 3 Legacy Christian Academy vs. Walker-Hackensack-Akeley.

With the Crusaders undefeated in Class A play and victories over numerous ranked teams, the Mayer Lutheran players know that means they will be getting everyone's best shot at the Xcel Energy Center.

"Anything can happen on any given night," said Lade. "Yes we're the one seed, yes that's amazing, we worked hard for it, but you can't take anything for granted. You have to show up 100 percent of the time."

"We can't go in thinking we were the No. 1 seed and we're going to roll over everyone," added Maass. "We have to work hard."

MAYER LUTHERAN 3 CLEVELAND 0

The Crusaders earned a trip to the state tournament with a 3-0 win over Cleveland Saturday night in Mankato (25-21, 25-16, 25-8).

"What a night for a section final," said coach Joelle Grimsley. "We knew that Cleveland would give us everything they had and they sure did that tonight. I felt like the girls were ready for the night and for the match ahead of them. No one wants their season to end and

that is a lot of pressure for teams.

In set one, the Crusaders came out on fire and really held Cleveland to only 4 to 5 points when Emily Kern was up front.

"We needed to try and get her through the front row quickly and make runs when she was in the back row," said Grimsley. "Well, we jumped out to an eight point lead while she was up front. When she went back, she served and caught right back up with the Crusaders. The battle began to go back and forth with a 3 to 5 point lead. Cleveland was constantly keeping the pressure on. It never felt like we were going to be able to run away with this game. The Clippers played incredible defense against us all night."

In the second set Cleveland jumped out to an 8-4 lead on some of Mayer Lutheran's errors and their strategic offense. Brooke Sauter went back and got Mayer Lutheran back into the set to tie it up at 12-12. Lilly Wachholz led with six kills while Madeline Guetzkow and Stella Maass each had three digs. Emma Lade distributed the ball to many players and had 12 assists in the second set. The Crusaders got in great rhythm as this set continued and ran away with the match in set three.

"In set three we contin-

ued in an uptempo pace and stayed in rhythm," said Grimsley. "It was fun to see the team play at a high level and finish strong. The Crusaders did not make many errors and did not let Cleveland get going at all."

Stella Maass led with six kills and Lilly Wachholz had five. Defensively, Madeline Guetzkow had six strong digs. The team finished the match strong and is excited to begin the next phase of the season.

"I am so proud of this team," said Grimsley. "We are looking forward to representing Section 2A at the State Tournament. We are going to the Xcel to play one match at a time and to keep focused on our overall goal. The journey has been great with these girls and now we are going to show up and have a great time."

Emma Lade dished out 28 assists, with Lilly Wachholz earning 15 kills, Maass earning nine, Julia Carns tallying eight, Gabby Wachholz recording seven and Guetzkow pitching in three. Guetzkow had 11 digs, Gabby Wachholz had nine, Sauter and Maass each had eight.

MAYER LUTHERAN 3 BOLD 0

The Crusaders earned a spot in the section championship with a Thursday night win over BOLD, winning 25-14, 25-15 and 25-5.

"We moved the ball so well," said Gabby Wachholz. "We were consistent and played at our level. If the other team got a point, we just got a side-out right away. We stayed fast, consistent and we used everybody on the court."

Mayer Lutheran was in control all game, not letting BOLD get a rally to gain any momentum.

"We stayed strong and consistent and we didn't drop," said Madeline Guetzkow. "I think we were all high energy and we kept our level of play."

With a spot in the section championship close at hand following a 2-0 lead, the Crusaders were nearly perfect in set three with a 25-5 set to earn the victory.

"We had a positive mindset, a confident mindset going into that last set," said Gabby Wachholz. "We all trusted each other."

With the win, the Crusaders are happy to continue the journey.

"[This season has been] a blast - we all get along so well," said Guetzkow. "We all just click."

Lade dished out 35 assists and Guetzkow finished with 10, with Lilly Wachholz and Gabby Wachholz earning 15 and 14 kills. Guetzkow pitched in nine kills, Maass and Carns each had four.

Maass had 16 digs and was followed by Lilly Wachholz (9), Brooke Sauter (8), Lade (5), Gabby Wachholz (5) and Guetzkow (4).

"Several people stepped up tonight," said coach Joelle Grimsley. "Gabby had 14 kills and no hitting errors tonight while Lilly had 15 and Madeline nine. Emma was able to get the ball around to many hitters and had 35 assists. Stella had 16 digs and kept the ball alive in so many ways. The girls are trusting each other more and more and starting to peak at the right time."

SECTION CHAMPIONS

Crusaders return to state tournament with 42-point rally from early deficit

BY JAMES STITT

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After last season ended early for the undefeated Mayer Lutheran football team that had eyes on the State Tournament, they worked hard all year to not let another chance slip away. The Crusaders fell behind early to a team that had previously defeated them, but Mayer Lutheran rallied to the tune of 42 consecutive points to run away with the Section 2A Championship.

"Last year we were a really good team, we didn't get to play in this game last year, so for us to come out as seniors get the win is super special," said Elijah Jopp. "Our senior year, to come out here, -these guys are brothers, so it's special to get a huge win. Now we've got next Friday."

Mayer Lutheran's 10 game win streak and two postseason wins earned them a spot in the section championship game Nov. 5 and a chance at redemption. Their opponent, Gibbon-Fairfax-Winthrop, won the season opener when scoring 32 points to give Mayer Lutheran their only loss of the season. The Thunderbirds got on top early Friday night in New Prague with a 69 yard touchdown run in the opening minute before the Crusaders settled in.

"We were just telling the guys, keep your heads up, one touchdown isn't going to change the game," said Cole Neitzel. "It was still early in the game."

The defense dug in and the offense eventually got going, with Cole Neitzel and Sam Dennis breaking off touchdowns of 40 and 30 yards. Then Ty Hoes connected with Elijah Jopp for a toe-tapper in the corner of



the endzone to give the Crusaders a 21-6 lead at the break. The TD pass was the first three from Hoes, who connected with Elijah Jopp twice and Teigan Martin once for scoring plays despite a very windy night.

"We were very concerned [with the wind]," said coach Dean Aurich. "We're a good throwing team, we're balanced, it was to their advantage we felt. We changed things up, went with the shorter stuff, then we had a great catch down there that opened the game up."

While the Crusader passing game seemed to overcome the wind, it hammered the special teams of the Thunderbirds, which avenged a postseason loss from the past.

"In the 80s, the state quarterfinals in Breckridge, we had a really good team and it was really close at halftime, we might have even been ahead by one," said Aurich. "Our first punt, snow coming into our face, went up, came back and we lost 15 yards. They scored on

that drive just like we did [tonight]."

G-F-W had to punt into the wind several times, with the ball hitting a wall after a few yards and going backwards to set up the Mayer Lutheran offense with great field position, including a start inside the opposing 10 yard line.

"We had a lot of help with it on punting and kicking, because we were with the wind almost the whole time," said Tyler Neitzel.

While Mayer Lutheran got lucky with the wind, they did not need it as their defense shut-down the Thunderbird rushing game that put up 32 points on them in the season opener.

"The big thing is that coach Zupke does a great job," Aurich said. "We told them that you cannot penetrate past the line of scrimmage. Take the dive away and defensive ends take away the line of scrimmage, read your keys. Marcus [Johnson] and Chad [Heinlein] did a really good job on that dive inside. They had a

lot of tackles."

The G-F-W offense featured a multitude of ball carriers that could fake out the defense at anytime, which could hurt an aggressive squad rolled out by the Crusaders.

"It was just hard to see it," said Elijah Jopp. "They are a really good team they perform their fakes well."

Yet Mayer Lutheran made the adjustments. The Crusader defense that is often aggressive at the line, stepped back a few yards and let the game come to them.

"It's a lot of trust in a lot of the other guys on the team," Tyler Neitzel said. "One linebacker has got to look to the other two guys and trust that they're going to make the play. If you don't see it, they will."

The Crusaders finished with 80 tackles, with 18 different players recording stops in the 48-12 win - Elijah Jopp (12), Isaac Hahn (10 and 1 sack), Marcus Johnson (9), Cole Neitzel (7), Tyler

Neitzel (5), Chris Corrigan (5), Michael Corey (5), Chad Heinlein (5), Connor Olsen (4), Dylan Nelson (4), Caleb Olsen (3), Ty Hoes (2), Levi Hahn (2), Abram Jopp (2), Gavin Lofgren (2), Brayden Bury (1), Teigan Martin (1) and Sam Dennis (1).

The Crusader offense was not hitting on all cylinders Friday night but still managed 360 yards of offense and seven touchdowns thanks to big plays. Cole Neitzel had seven carries for 133 yards (19 per carry) and three scores, while Sam Dennis had 80 yards on seven carries (11.4) to go with one touchdown. Dylan Nelson also had a huge average of 9 yards per carry, taking five rushes for 45 yards.

"We're on and off," said Aurich. "We have big potential plays - that's where we're still good. So teams have to prepare for us. Offensively, when we're hitting on all cylinders, we're solid. I feel like we're not quite where we need to be."

While the game was a bit unusual with the wind and five fumbles by G-F-W (two forced by Cole Neitzel, one by Tyler Neitzel, Chad Heinlein and Isaac Hahn), the Crusaders got the job done after the football season ended earlier than they had hoped last year.

"The seniors - this is what they've been dreaming about all summer," said Aurich. "They're all excited, it came true. Now we're back at it with the next one."

Mayer Lutheran moves on to face the No. 1 ranked team Murray County Central Nov. 12 at Jordan (7 p.m.). The winner moves on to U.S. Bank Stadium Nov. 20 (11:30 a.m.) to face either Deer River or New York Mills. The Class A State Championship is Nov. 26 at U.S. Bank Stadium and the other half of the bracket features Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa vs. Rushford-Peterson and Mahnomon/Wauben vs. Minneota.

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Pictured, from left, Mallory Czinano attacks the net. • Alaina Burns rises up to attack the ball to record a kill. • Ashley Olsen beats a defender to the ball to earn a kill. (James Stitt/The Patriot)

Watertown-Mayer reaches section championship

Royals make playoff run to earn spot in section title game Saturday

BY JAMES STITT
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After missing out on the postseason last season, the Watertown-Mayer volleyball team was excited to be back in playoff mode Tuesday night when hosting Kimball Area.

“It’s awesome, the atmosphere is amazing,” said Kate Thibault. “I love that we’re playing to win, playing for our section. I love it.”

Also unlike last year, a large crowd was on hand to cheer on the No. 1 seeded Royals when they hosted No. 8 seeded Kimball Area in the Section 5AA semifinals.

“I love the fans, that really helps us bring the

hype,” Alaina Burns said.

The Royals were glad to have the extra energy from the fans after 2 weeks off, with their high seed earning them a bye for the first two rounds of the postseason.

“A 2 week break is a lot, not having matches in between gets to be a lot, but I think that we played really consistent for having those 2 weeks off,” Thibault said. “It was really nice letting our bodies rest, getting ourselves back in the groove of things and staying focused on our next goal.”

The Royals won the first set 25-13 before Kimball Area gave them a fight in a 25-20 set two. Watertown-Mayer then

closed the door with a 25-15 win in set three for the 3-0 sweep.

“We played very controlled,” said Alaina Burns. “We had a few moments where we were down, but we picked ourselves up.”

Watertown-Mayer had another big night serving the ball with 11 aces – Natalie Ernhart had four, Libby Burns and Alaina Burns had three each and Jada Kosmatka added one.

“Our serves are really aggressive,” said Alaina Burns. “We might be a little inconsistent right now, but they’re really aggressive.”

Ernhart dished out 20 assists while Thibault had

two, Alaina Burns and Mallory Czinano each had one.

Ashley Olson led the team in kills with eight and was followed by Alaina Burns (6), Libby Burns (4), Czinano (4), Thibault (3), Ernhart (2) and Haley Baker (1).

Thibault led the team with 10 digs and was followed by Libby Burns (8), Ernhart (6), Alaina Burns (6), Emily Burns (4), Czinano (3) and Kosmatka (1).

Arisa Intlekofer, Libby Burns, Olson and Czinano each had a solo block. Olson had three block assists, Intlekofer had two and Ernhart added one.

With the win, the Royals moved on to face No. 4 seeded Maple Lake.

“We played steady,” said Thibault. “We played well, although we had a few errors in between, I think really picked ourselves up and played really nice.”

WATERTOWN-MAYER 3 MAPLE LAKE 2

The No. 5 ranked Royals and the No. 10 ranked Irish dueled in a five-set battle that saw Watertown-Mayer’s middle hitters prove to be the difference in the match.

Ashley Olson led the team with 14 kills while Mallory Czinano added 12 more. Czinano added six solo blocks and a

block assist, while Olson had one solo block and two block assists.

“Tough battle, our middles really showed up on offense tonight,” said coach Andrea Raser.

The back-and-forth battle had the Royals up 2-0 with wins of 27-25 and 25-21 before the Irish fought back with wins of 25-20 and 25-23. The Royals then came up with the 15-9 deciding fifth-set victory to send them on to the Section 5AA Championship.

In addition to the 26 kills from their middle hitters, Watertown-Mayer got 12 from Libby Burns and nine from Alaina Burns. Arisa Intlekofer, Kate Thibault and Haley Baker each had one.

Natalie Ernhart led the team with 39 assists, while Thibault added three and Alaina Burns had one. Ernhart and Libby Burns each had three aces, while Alaina Burns had two. Thibault led the back row with 26 digs and was followed by Libby Burns (12), Alaina Burns (11), Baker (3), Ernhart (2), Czinano (1) and Emily Burns (1).

Czinano and Olson each had a solo block, while Olson had a block assist, as did Ernhart.

Thibault tallied three aces, Alaina Burns had two, Emily Burns and Gabby Dulas each had one. Ernhart had 33 assists and Thibault had one. The Royals finished the season with a 24-6 record and a Wright County Conference Championship.

Royals, their season came to an end Saturday night in another battle between top-10 teams, with the Cardinals winning 25-22, 25-19 and 25-19. Watertown-Mayer was close throughout the match, trailing by just two points for much of the three sets, but Annandale refused to let the ball hit the ground with a number of lunging saves that kept the Royals from going on any runs. While Watertown-Mayer did not get the win, they made the Cardinals work for the section title, hanging in every set.

Libby Burns led the team with 13 kills and was followed by Olson (10), Czinano (5), Baker (5) and Alaina Burns (2).

Thibault led the back row with 17 digs and was followed by Libby Burns (12), Alaina Burns (11), Baker (3), Ernhart (2), Czinano (1) and Emily Burns (1).

Czinano and Olson each had a solo block, while Olson had a block assist, as did Ernhart.

Thibault tallied three aces, Alaina Burns had two, Emily Burns and Gabby Dulas each had one.

Ernhart had 33 assists and Thibault had one.

The Royals finished the season with a 24-6 record and a Wright County Conference Championship.

WATERTOWN-MAYER SPORTS SCHEDULE

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Go Royals!

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Day/Date	Cross Country	Boys Soccer	Girls Soccer	Girls Swimming	Volleyball	Football
Thurs., Nov. 11				Sections @ Willmar, 5 pm	State Tournament @ Xcel Energy Center, TBD	
Fri., Nov. 12					State Tournament @ Xcel Energy Center, TBD	
Sat., Nov. 13				Section finals @ Willmar, 10 am	State Tournament @ Xcel Energy Center, TBD	
Mon., Nov. 15						
Tues., Nov. 16						
Wed., Nov. 17						

WATERTOWN-MAYER 2 ANNANDALE 3

Unfortunately for the

Raiders run at Cross Country Class A State Meet

Brinkman and Druley both excel at their first state meet for Central

BY JAMES STITT
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With less qualifying spots at the Class A State Meet, there could have been added pressure on the runners looking to qualify for the year-end meet, but Central cross country runner Amanda Brinkman felt at ease when on the course Oct. 29.

“I didn’t really feel any pressure,” said Brinkman. “Throughout the season, running at state gradually became a more realistic goal, but even then I tried to keep an attitude of ‘Whatever happens, happens.’ I figured that it would be senseless to burn myself out or beat myself up if I didn’t qualify, considering that I’ve only been running for a little over a year.”

Relatively new to the sport, Brinkman has steadily become more and more accomplished on the course, hauling in medals at numerous races before earning All-Conference Honors this year. The Central junior got to add another achievement this year when she earned a spot at the State Meet, finishing in the top 10 at the section meet.

“Qualifying was a pretty meaningful accom-

plishment, and I’ve been feeling pretty grateful for the season that I was blessed with,” Brinkman said. “I worked really hard this summer and put in a lot of miles, but I never expected to make it as far as I did. Whenever the question was posed about state, I would just kind of laugh and brush it off.”

At the Section 2A Meet in Blue Earth, Brinkman crossed the line in eighth place with a time of 20 minutes, 59.97 seconds to earn one more meet on the season, picking up one of just 48 individual qualifying spots.

“When I learned that I qualified, I felt pretty proud of myself,” said Brinkman. “I have put in a lot of hard work to stay healthy mentally and physically since the start of the season, so seeing how much I’ve grown and that it was all worth it kind of made me a little bit emotional. I didn’t show that, of course, but if I had, it would have been quite the waterworks. When my mom hugged me, I remember thinking, ‘Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.’”

On Saturday, Brinkman traveled down to St. Olaf to compete in the year-end meet, running

alongside of 160 runners.

“Competing at the meet was a really cool experience,” said Brinkman. “At the start, it felt like the ground was shaking because of how many girls were running.”

Brinkman finished in the top half of all runners in her first ever state appearance, taking 74th with a time of 21:08.3.

“I think that I did a good job of being patient and running my own race,” she said. “Going into it, I knew that most of the girls would go out really fast and that the final mile would include several challenging hills. I had the strongest finish that I’ve had this entire season and passed a girl who was ahead of me for most of the race, so that was a pretty cool feeling. My thought process was, ‘There’s the finish. I’m almost done. Wait... I’m almost done... I want to beat her.’ After that I just let it go, and I could hear Mr. Lagergren screaming by the finish chute. I think that the adrenaline was on overdrive at that point.”

Brinkman was not the only Central runner at the state meet, as Jake Druley qualified as well. The first place finisher at the Minnesota River Conference



Championships, Druley placed third at the section meet (17:08.68) to earn a spot at state as well. The junior also had an excellent race, finishing 48th out of 160 runners with a time of 17:29.54. Druley had a standout year as well, leading the boys to a fourth place finish at the section meet (17 teams), while Brinkman led the girls to a sixth place finish (also 17 teams).

“I fully credit our success this season to the environment that we

created as a team,” said Brinkman. “Overall, attitudes were incredible, and everyone was willing to listen and put in the work. We didn’t have any seniors this year, so for the juniors to step into a role of leadership and have the underclassmen follow was a pretty cool thing to see. Knowing that we’ll be able to carry that leadership into next season makes me hopeful that we’ll have another amazing year.”

With such a young

team, the future is bright for Central cross country.

“Seeing what I’m capable of and knowing that I can continue to grow makes me feel hopeful for next season,” said Brinkman. “I’m going to continue to take it one run, practice, and meet at a time, but having a state meet under my belt will definitely influence my goals moving forward.”

Check back next week for a recap of Jake Druley’s season

Raiders earn All-District Honors



Six Raiders earned All-District or All-District Honorable Mention for their play on the football field. Pictured, from left, Honorable mention Tanner Neubarth and Ben Hoernemann, All District Bennet Molva, Hunter Neubarth, Jake Kalkes and Noah Strickfaden.

Raiders battle Stars

Central takes on No. 1 ranked volleyball team in postseason play

BY JAMES STITT
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After defeating Sibley East in the first round of the Section 2AA Championship, the Central volleyball team had the tough task of taking on the No. 1 seed and No. 1 ranked Stars of Southwest Christian Nov. 1, falling 3-0 (25-14, 25-9, 25-17). The Stars ended the season for the Raiders before earning the No. 1 seed for the Class AA State Tournament.

Lauren Schmidt led the team at the net with eight kills and was followed by Emma Dose (5), Laya

Hallquist (3), Mikayla Tellers (1), Paige Lueck (1), Meghan Barr (1) and Grace Dose (1).

Hallquist led the back row with five digs and was followed by Lueck (4), Emma Dose (3), Adeline Willems (3), Morgan Johnson (3), Barr (2), Schmidt (1), Emma Conser (1) and Grace Dose (1).

Hallquist led the team with 14 assists, Johnson had two and Cadee Vinkenmeier added one.

Tellers had a solo block and block assist, while Hallquist had a solo block and Lueck had a block assist.

CHAMPIONSHIP WEEK



It was a big week for area athletes, many of whom competed in championships last week. Pictured, clockwise from top left, the Crusader defense swarms the G-F-W ball carrier. • Libby Burns makes a diving save to keep the ball alive. • Elijah Jopp keeps his toes in bounds for the touchdown catch. • Julia Carns celebrates a Crusader point. • Jake Druley and Amanda Brinkman competed at the state meet.

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Central Public Schools Weekly Sports Schedule

Day/Date	
Thursday, Nov. 11	No Events
Friday, Nov. 12	No Events
Monday, Nov. 15	Girls Basketball Practice 3:30-6 pm
Tuesday, Nov. 16	Girls Basketball Practice 3:30-6 pm
Wednesday, Nov. 17	Girls Basketball Practice 3:30-6 pm