

Grand Island wins boys state volleyball championship



Grand Island poses after winning the boys state volleyball championships (Peter Holeran)

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By Peter Holehan, Special to the News

ALBANY — Billy Weiberg couldn't contain his excitement any longer. The junior outside hitter hopped up and down with glee to match all the jumping and spiking he did in the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Division II boys volleyball championship at the Capital Center on Saturday.

Making its first appearance in the state tournament in program history under coach Bill Schultz, Grand Island looked the part of a seasoned championship team in dispatching Section III champion Jamesville-DeWitt, 3-0. Game scores were 25-12, 25-16, 25-11.

It marks the first state championship for any sport for the Vikings, who became the second team in three years to win the state title from Section VI (Eden in 2017).

"It's blown my mind," said Wieberg, who was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player. "I can't get over the fact that we won state. It's so big that it's crazy."

From the onset of the final, Grand Island carried comfortable leads in all three sets, spurting out to a 14-8 lead in the first set, winning the opening six points of the second set and then raced out to a 7-1 advantage in set three.

The Zach Cramer to Wieberg connection turned into an unsolvable duo for the Red Rams (16-5), who had difficulty defending the hard spikes from Wieberg and quick sets from Cramer.

Toward the end of the second set, fans in the blue Grand Island section began chanting "Feed the Beast" in support of Wieberg, as they have often. Wieberg rolled to 18 kills, six digs and two aces. Cramer led with a game-high 33 assists and six digs, and senior Tom Shemik chipped in six kills and nine digs.

"I've had a lot of heartbreak and frustration in 19 years of coaching," Schultz said. "Losing and losing bad. A couple years ago, I had a team that I thought could go really far. And it hurt because we lost as a No. 1 seed to the No. 8 seed. It almost made me retire because it was so gut-wrenching. But, it means 19 years of coming in every day and keeping these guys focused. It was worth it."

The Vikings pushed through adversity all season, most notably in a 3-2 come-from-behind victory against West Seneca West after dropping the opening two sets. It also went through perennial power Eden, a team that had been a thorn in their side.

"In the beginning of the season, we beat some good Division I teams in the Clarence tournament and I thought this team was special," Wieberg said. "I love this so much. It's my favorite sport. My favorite school. I just can't explain how excited I am."

In morning pool play, Grand Island rallied back from a 5-1 deficit against Section XI champion Westhampton to take the first set 25-21 and then stormed out to a 13-2 start in the second set before holding off a late push to win 25-20.

Grand Island lost both matches to J-D in pool play 25-18 and 25-17, but Schultz elected to rest his usual starters because the results had no bearing on reaching the final. Westhampton had already been eliminated from losing to each team two sets to none.

When it was all on the line, the Vikings delivered.

"I think it was a culture aspect and there was a lot of experience on this team," Cramer said. "If somebody was off, we picked them up and we continued to win games. We played a lot of beach (volleyball) over the summer together to get the chemistry up. I think it was a lot of hard work and on of the first day of practice, we were ready to go."

"It's going to be an awesome bus ride back to Buffalo."