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Elk County Catholic and West Branch high schools compete in different districts, but were quite familiar with each other when they faced off in the PIAA Class 1A girls volleyball title match on Nov. 18.

The two teams played in a five-team league every Monday during the summer. They also played twice in tournament play during the regular season.

"We beat them twice in tournament play during the season, but they won the match that really mattered," said West Branch coach Terry Trude, after his squad lost in the finals for the second straight year. "I guess they knew us too well."

Elk County Catholic claimed its first PIAA volleyball title with a 3-0 sweep of West Branch in the first of four championship games played at Cumberland Valley High School.

"It still hasn't sunk in yet," said Elk County Catholic coach Tricia Bauer, the day after watching her squad play an almost perfect match. "The girls were amazing. It's so hard to put it into words. We played a near perfect match. We played such a flawless match that we would have had to keep playing for me to find anything to fix."

Elk County Catholic was making its third appearance in a PIAA title match and first since the school was re-named. In 1985 and 1986, Elk County Christian made two appearances in the Class 2A title match, but had to settle for a runner-up trophy twice.

"It's a great honor for the girls and our coaching staff to bring home the first PIAA girls volleyball championship trophy," Bauer said. "And to have my daughter (Reagan) on the team, makes it even more enjoyable."

Reagan Bauer, a senior outside hitter, had similar feelings.

"I can't even explain. It feels so good..I am so excited and happy right now!" said Reagan Bauer, who had 13 kills, 3 serving aces, and 14 digs.

In the first set, the two teams traded points until the match was tied at 17-17. Elk County Catholic scored the next three points and never looked back, as the Crusaders allowed only three points the rest of the set and posted a 25-20 victory.

"Their serving game was the difference," said Trude, referring to Elk County's five serving aces in the first set. "They increased the serve speed and we had trouble adjusting. It didn't help that our normal libero (senior Shianna Hoover) was out with an injury."

Elk County opened the second set with two more aces, but West Branch stayed with the Crusaders until the match was tied at 13-13. Three kills by senior outside hitter Tori Newton allowed the Crusaders to build an 18-14 lead. Three consecutive kills by Warriors senior middle hitter Katrina Cowder cut the deficit to 18-17.

Elk County scored seven of the next 10 points to pull out a 25-20 victory. Newton led the way with a total of seven kills.

The third set was not close, as Elk County recorded a 25-12 victory to close out their sweep. Bauer led the way with seven kills.

"I never thought we would win in three," coach Bauer said. "I was expecting a five-set match."

Senior setter Kiri Emmert directed the Crusaders offense by recording 33 assists and also led the team with 15 digs.

"This feels amazing," Emmert said. "I think as we progressed in the playoffs we had better defense and got more confidence."

Elk County Catholic, the District 9 champion, earned its title berth with wins against Homer Center, 3-0 in the first round; Serra Catholic, 3-0 in the quarterfinals; and defending PIAA champion Maplewood, 3-0 in the semifinals.

Bauer and Newton tied for the team lead with 13 kills each. Newton also had four aces and the team had a total of 10. Klawuhn had eight kills, 2 aces, and 13 digs.

"It feels awesome to finally be able to win this big!" said Klawuhn, a senior outside hitter.

West Branch, the District 6 champion, advanced to the finals with wins against Clarion Limestone, 3-0 in the first round; Covenant Christian, 3-1 in the quarterfinals; and Mt. Calvary Christian, 3-1 in the semifinals.

"We may have come up short, but this was our second straight appearance in the finals," Trude said. "You have to give the girls a lot of credit for that."

Marley Croyle, a senior outside hitter, led West Branch with 8 kills, while Crowder had 6 kills and 3 blocks. Briella Baney had 14 digs for the Warriors.

Elk County Catholic loses six players to graduation, including four starters. West Branch loses five players to graduation, all of whom were starters.