Victories offer gift in time of grief

The community of Brady rarely has to search for a reason to rally.

If there ever was a time, though, it would have been last week when residents were reeling from grief following a tragic traffic accident that killed three of their own and left a fourth fighting for his life.

In that time of sorrow, Brady's volleyball team brought folks together in joyful celebration as the Eagles won the D2-9 sub-district and captured the D2-5 district as well to make a return trip to state.

"It's amazing," said coach Lynne Johnson. "Winning those games seemed to have very little to do with volleyball."

And yet it had everything to do with the game.

With emotions raw from the memorial service for Brady students Connor and Colten Gentry earlier in the day on Oct. 30, Johnson said she wasn't sure how her Eagles might respond during the first round of the sub-district playing Eustis-Farnam in Gothenburg.

"We didn't play all that great but the girls did what they had to do," Johnson said. "We've gotten to the point where they know they're not going to get the perfect pass every time or a great set so they figure out how to make something work anyway."

Brady defeated the Knights in straight sets 25-18, 25-23, 25-18 to advance to the sub-district final against Bertrand.

It was an outstanding match against higher-ranked Bertrand last season that propelled the Eagles to a sub-district win and eventually to state.

The previously state-rated Vikings came into the sub-district as the favorite again this year but left without a chance to play at state in 2012 as the Eagles defeated Bertrand in five sets 16-25, 25-23, 14-25, 25-21, 15-13.

"After we lost that third set, the girls were exhausted," the coach said. "But they had made a decision that they weren't going to let fatigue determine the outcome."

Johnson said senior Dakota Terry made an obvious turn-around in attitude and determination to start the fourth set. It was contagious for the rest of the Eagles.

"There was no giving up at that point," she said.

It took everything the Eagles had to match Bertrand point for point in the fifth set, the coach said, noting that 11 of the team's 15 points came from kills in the final frame.

That persistence carried through the D2-5 district final where the Eagles met Wallace at North Platte St. Pat's.

It didn’t start well for Brady as the girls fell behind 9-1 in the opening set of the match.

But Johnson calmed her troops with a timeout and the girls pulled themselves together.

“They know they have to play one point at a time,” Johnson said. “The worst thing they can do is dwell on the last mistake and the last point and the point before that. ”

Unity is what pulled the Eagles out of an eight-point deficit to a 25-22 victory and kept the girls rolling through to win 25-10, 23-25, 25-15 and earn a spot in this week’s state tournament.

“It’s what we hope for and what we work for all season,” Johnson said of the state tourney. “Now we just have to pull together, play our best and see what happens.”

The Eagles (23-7) take the No. 8 seed in Class D-2 and will face No. 1 Mead (26-4) in the first round of the state tournament at 2 p.m. Thursday at Grand Island Central Catholic.

“We tend to play up to the caliber of our opponent,” Johnson said. “I would guess that means it should be a pretty good game.”

The coach said state experience should help the girls bring their best ball to the court.