

Husker volleyball team makes Final Four after huge comeback

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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From Huskers.com

Seattle, Wash. – Behind a career-high 24 kills from Regional Most Outstanding Player Tara Mueller, fourth-ranked Nebraska kept its magical season alive with a 3-2 victory over No. 5 Washington. The Huskers dropped the first two sets, 25-14, 25-23 before rallying to win the final three sets by scores of 25-17, 26-24 and 15-13.

The Huskers (31-2) will now advance to meet top-seeded and undefeated Penn State, a 3-0 winner over California, in Thursday's second national semifinal, set for 8 p.m. Stanford and Texas will meet in Thursday's first national semifinal, set for 6 p.m. (central).

Mueller turned in an amazing performance, shattering her previous career high of 20 set against Kansas State on Nov. 8, and added 16 digs, as the Huskers advanced to their 11th national semifinal in program history. Mueller was one of two Huskers to eclipse the 20-kill mark, as Jordan Larson added 21 kills, 18 digs and four blocks for NU, which won a regional on an opponent's home court for the first time in program history.

The Huskers trailed 9-3 in the finale before using a nine-point run, keyed by the serving of libero Kayla Banwarth. The sophomore ran off eight straight points from the service line, as NU took a 12-9 lead on a block from Amanda Gates and Lindsey Licht. The Huskies (27-5) pulled even at 13-all, but an

attack error put the Huskers at match point before Larson ripped her second ace of the match, sending the Huskers into bedlam and culminating one of the greatest rallies in school history.

Airial Salvo led Washington with 15 kills to place three Huskies in double figures, as Washington fell one win shy of making its fourth national semifinal appearance in five seasons.

Nebraska struggled to find a rhythm offensively in the opener, committing 13 hitting errors in suffering a 25-14 setback. Larson and Mueller had four kills apiece, but Washington held both attackers to .000 hitting in the set. Nebraska was within 5-4, but two straight blocks by Salvo sparked a 4-1 Husky spurt, as Washington pushed the lead to 9-5 after a Husker hitting error and forced NU to take its first timeout.

Washington continued to roll, pushing the lead to 13-6 after a Kindra Carlson kill. Nebraska chipped away at the lead, pulling to within 15-10 on a Banwarth service ace, but the Huskies won three of the next four points,

pushing the lead to 18-11 after a Jane Collymore service ace, which forced NU to take its second timeout.

Washington pulled away down the stretch, holding the Huskers to their lowest set total of the year.

In the second set, the Huskers had chances to even the match, but could not capitalize on its opportunities in a 25-23 setback. Mueller led the Husker attack with nine kills and six digs, while Licht added four kills, but the Huskers were out-hit .214-.157. Nebraska trailed 10-8 before Mueller and Larson combined to run off four straight points for the Big Red. Larson had two kills, while Mueller added a kill and a service ace to spot NU a 12-10 lead and force a Washington timeout.

The Huskers continued to manage the lead, building a 16-13 advantage after a Mueller kill. The lead would be short-lived, as two Becky Perry kills and a hitting error tied the score at 16 and forced the Huskers to take a timeout. The Huskies' run would continue after the timeout, running three straight points before a Mueller kill ended the run of six straight points. Washington continued to add on, completing an 8-1 spurt to take a 21-17 lead and force NU to use its second timeout.

Mueller continued to bring the Huskers back, coming up with a pair of kills to make it 21-19, but a Husker hitting error stalled the rally momentarily. Trailing 23-20, a Larson kill and a block from Licht and Gates pulled the Huskers within a point, but a service error gave Washington set point. Licht helped NU stave off one set point, but a block by Kindra Carlson and Bianca Rowland sent the Huskies to the locker room up 2-0.

The Huskers showed some spunk, coming back with a 25-17 victory in the third set to pull within 2-1. NU hit .324 as a team as Mueller drilled home eight kills and Larson added five kills for the Huskers, who never trailed. Nebraska got off to a quick start in the third set, jumping out to a quick 3-1 lead and led 6-5 before a Larson kill and ace helped the Huskers win four of the next five rallies to take a 10-6 lead after a Mueller kill.

Gates pushed the lead to 11-6 after her first ace of the match. Washington chipped away, pulling to within 13-10, before a Larson kill and a Washington hitting error pushed the margin back to five points, at 15-10. Washington fought to within 16-13, but an Anderson kill and a solo stuff by Gates quickly pushed the lead back to

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five points and forced UW to take a timeout. NU led 19-13 after a Mueller kill, but Washington made one last run, getting to within 20-16 before a kill from Larson and Husky hitting miscue made it a six-point advantage. Mueller put the set out of reach with a pair of kills before a UW service miscue wrapped up the set.

The teams battled through the early part of the set, and Washington led 9-8 before a Gates kill sparked a 4-0 spurt for the Huskers. NU ran off four straight points with Gates doing the damage at the service line, taking a 12-9 lead after an Anderson kill and forcing Washington into a timeout. Washington was within 13-10, but Nebraska won four of the next five rallies, taking a 17-11 lead after Licht came through with consecutive kills to force UW to use its second timeout.

NU eventually made it 18-11 after a net violation and was ahead 22-15 before a Swarbrick kill and two kills from Salvo pulled Washington within 22-18 and forced NU to take a timeout. Salvo continued the comeback, coming up with two big kills before a Husker hitting error pulled Washington within a point. Mueller stopped the 5-0 run with a kill, but Salvo tied the match at 23 with

back-to-back kills. A Washington service error gave NU a 24-23 lead, but UW fought back to tie the score. Larson then came up with one of the biggest shots of her career, going off the block to make it 25-24, before Banwarth sliced an ace to even the match at two sets apiece.

The Huskers fell behind quickly in the finale, as three strong serves from Collymore helped UW build a 3-0 lead after a Salvo kill and forced the Huskers to take a quick timeout. Washington built a 6-1 lead before a Jordan Wilberger kill and a net violation chipped the lead in half. Unfortunately for the Huskers a pair of attack errors put NU in an 8-3 hole at the change. The Huskers trailed 9-3 before making a charge. A Larson kill and a bad set pulled NU within 9-5 and forced a Washington timeout. Gates and Licht combined on a block before Larson found the floor with two kills to pull NU within 9-8 and UW took its second timeout.

Larson tied the score at nine, before Gates and Larson combined on a block of Salvo to put the Huskers ahead for the first time in the set. NU continued the 9-0 run and led 12-9 before Washington made its final charge.

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