By Ken Wunderley

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STATE COLLEGE - Landisville Hempfield became the most successful boys volleyball program in PIAA history with its 3-2 come-from-behind win against Penn Manor in the Class AAA title match, held June 11 at Penn State's Rec Hall.

Hempfield claimed its 10th championship trophy, thus setting a PIAA record. The Black Knights were tied with Haverford, who won nine titles, the last 1981.

"You don’t think if you are ever going to get back there again. We got close. We made it to the semifinals the last three years," said Hempfield coach Mike Vogel, referring to the fact that Hempfield's last title came in 2007. "These are the guys who worked their tails off to get this old coach back here again."

Vogel thanked his players and his assistant coaches - Gary Dimm, Steve Griffiths, Gary Vogel and Michael Bouril - for the many hours of training and practice.

"This is the first title for them, but it really means a lot to me." Vogel said.

The title match was actually a rematch of the District 3 final, but the results were reversed. Penn Manor claimed the District 3 title with a 3-1 win against Hempfield.

It was the first time Penn Manor beat Hempfield this season. The Black Knights swept the Comets 3-0 in a pair of District 3 regular season matches. Hempfield also beat the Comets three times in tournament play.

"We played them so often," Vogel said. "We changed our practice slightly to stop [Penn Manor outside hitter Sam] Greenslade with our triple block, and I think we got him a couple times with timely blocks. One or two blocks a game can really change momentum."

Hempfield had trouble shutting down Greenslade early in the match, especially in the second set. Greenslade, a George Mason recruit, had 10 of his match-high 33 kills in the second set.

Penn Manor took an 18-12 lead with a 7-1 spurt midway through the first set, then held off Hempfield's late rally to pull out a 25-23 victory. Greenslade provided the winning point with a kill.

Penn Manor fell behind in the second set 23-20, but Greenslade single-handedly led them to a 27-25 victory with five kills and one ace to score six of the Comets final seven points.

"We had a coach on the court by the name of Nick Oleksa," said Vogel, referring to his libero, a PVCA All-Star last season. "We made some positioning adjustments in our serve-receive. Penn Manor's serves were very good, very aggressive. They were putting the ball in the right spot all the time, serving short, serving into a spot. But the change we made on the fly was the difference."

Knights’ setter Ethan Williams credited Vogel for the change.

"We had a very inspirational speech from Mr. Vogel himself," said Williams, who recorded 47 assists. "He told us this is our season on the line. We are going to go home either way. It was up to us to decide our fate."

Hempfield began its comeback with a narrow 26-24 win in the third set, then evened the match at 2-2 with a 25-22 win in the fourth set. The Black Knights capped the title with a 15-10 win in the final set.

"Today they got the best of me a couple of times. That’s what they do," Greenslade said. "[Senior libero Nick] Oleksa is an incredible libero. He's someone who I always have to keep my eye out for and game plan away from him. It's not unexpected that he plays like that. There was one ball I cut pretty hard and he brought it up. He's phenomenal."

Defense was the key to Hempfield's comeback, as Oleska recorded 34 of the Black Knights' 96 digs. Hempfield also recorded 19 blocks, led by seven from Gavin Hanzelman.

"Hempfield is known for its defense. We kept balls up all match long. Our block picked up in games four and five," Vogel said.

Middle hitter Tyler Buterbaugh recorded the final point with a kill.

“It’s incredible. I am speechless,” Buterbaugh said of game-winning kill. “[Williams] put the ball where it needed to be.”

Penn Manor coach Chris Telesco agreed with Vogel's assessment of the comeback.

"Hempfield started passing better," Telesco said. "Their passing wasn't strong in the first two games and we took advantage of that. In the third set, they turned their passing on and started running their middles more. We had trouble stopping their middles, especially (Gavin) Hanzelman. He did an awesome job of keeping us off-balance."