By Ken Wunderley

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University Park, Pa. - Northeastern continues its move up the PIAA charts with its win in the Class AA title match, held June 10 at Penn State's Rec Hall.

Northeastern's 3-1 win over Beaver County Christian was the fifth in a row for the Bobcats and coach Matt Wilson. The only school in PIAA history with more consecutive titles is Haverford, who won six straight titles from 1966-1971.

The title also moves Northeastern into a tie for third place on the PIAA's list of schools with the most titles. Landisville Hempfield (10) ranks No. 1, followed by Haverford (9), Northeastern (8) and Peabody (8). The only other schools with five or more PIAA titles are: Central York (7) North Allegheny (5), and Westinghouse (5).

Northeastern also became the seventh school to make ten or more appearances in the PIAA finals. Here's the list: North Allegheny (15), Peabody (14), Central York (12), Landisville Hempfield (11), Homestead (11), Haverford (11), Northeastern (10).

"Remarkable," said Wilson, when asked how it felt to win a fifth consecutive title. "The day I first picked up the clipboard, I don't think any of us would have ever in our wildest dreams be able to take a program from where it once was to where it is today.

“When you think of five in a row, it's not just one player. It's the strong foundation we've been able to build. We as coaches have been extremely blessed. This team created its own legacy."

Northeastern's accomplishment is even more impressive when one considers the Bobcats had lost six key players to graduation from last year's squad and had only three seniors on this year's squad.

"This season started on the bus ride home from last year's championship match, one year ago today," Wilson said. "I'm blessed to have the best coaches surrounding me. We knew our pipeline was quite full. Those teams in the past had to practice against someone. You saw many of those faces today. We were extremely optimistic, but also knew we had a lot of hard work developing this squad."

Northeastern took charge in the first set, recording a 25-13 victory. Cole Brillhart, a junior outside hitter who is being recruited by Penn State, led the way with eight of his match-high 30 kills.

Beaver County Christian looked much better in the second set, building a 16-12 lead, but Northeastern rallied to pull out a 25-22 victory.

The Eagles finally recorded a victory in the third set. Daniel Townsend recorded eight kills to lead the Eagles to a 25-21 victory. However, Northeastern responded with a 25-20 victory to clinch the match victory.

"[Beaver County Christian] were as tough an opponent as we've faced up here," Northeastern coach Matt Wilson said. "Their relentless pursuit on defense in games two and three was inspiring. They didn't quit after falling behind 2-0."

Beaver County Christian was making its first appearance in a state title match, but facing the four-time defending champions was a little more than the Eagles could handle.

"We are so blessed to be here," said Beaver County Christian coach Christen Adels, trying to hold back the tears. "God definitely blessed our school.

"I can't believe I'm getting so choked up. Two years ago, we lost a tough five-set match in the WPIAL semifinals to Ambridge. Last year, we upset Ambridge, the defending champ, to win our first WPIAL title. This year, our goal was to get here. To play in the state championship match is just awesome."

Wilson had a premonition that Beaver County Christian would be the team to beat in the Western half of the state. That's why he scheduled a match with the Eagles on the opening night of the season.

"When we looked the West side of the state, and who each team had coming back, it was obvious that Beaver County Christian was the best team in the West," Wilson said. "We watched them for a couple years get to the state quarterfinals, and most of their starters were coming back. That's why we scheduled them."

Northeastern swept Beaver County Christian in that season-opening match, but Eagles coach Christen Adels felt it played a big part in their success.

"When Northeastern's AD sent an e-mail asking us to play, I said wow," Adels said. "The four-time defending champions want to play us. We're going for it. We knew going into the match that we were going to lose, since we had only two weeks of practice, but that's the way to kick off the season. After that match, we set a goal of making it to Penn State to them in the finals. We reached that goal."

Northeastern enters the 2018 season as a strong favorite to win its sixth consecutive title, as the Bobcats lose only three players to graduation: libero James Toomey, middle hitter Dakoda Hoffman, and defensive specialist Braxton Sowers. The top returnees are: Brillhart, setter Jacob Cheuvront (56 assists) and outside hitter Wyatt Hughes (12 kills).

Beaver County Christian will be hard pressed to make a return trip to the finals, as the Eagles lose 10 players to graduation, including most of their starting lineup.