

Houston, we now have hope!

Written by Scott White

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The Houston area's hopes of ending a 12-year drought of state championships look a lot brighter today after The Woodlands knocked off two-time defending champion and preseason #1 Coppell 25-16, 22-25, 25-11 to win the Pearland Texas Volleyball Invitational on Saturday.

A Houston area team has not won a 5A state championship since Cy Falls' title run in 2000. The Woodlands, however, served notice over the weekend that they have all the weapons in place to end the dry spell. In addition to beating the defending champion Cowgirls, the Highlanders also knocked off Region 1's other top team, #3 ranked Southlake Carroll, in the semifinals.

Why does that matter? A region 1 team has won every 5A state title since 2004.

It was an impressive weekend for the Highlanders, whose victims on the way to the Pearland title also included Allen, one of several teams expected to challenge them for the Region 2 crown. Not that the championship was a surprise.

The Woodlands entered the Pearland tournament as the state's preseason #2 team, right behind Coppell. And if anything, they proved that they may be even stronger than expected.

With seven seniors, including two -- **Courtney Eckenrode** and **Kelly Quinn** -- who played in the state tournament as freshman, The Woodlands has an experienced, deep and court savvy squad.

Everything revolves around Eckenrode, named tournament MVP. And the dominating, All-Texas setter has a wide array of weapons to play with.

There is the explosive 1-2 punch of **Madison McDaniel** and **Courtney Quinn** on the left, and steady **Maddie White** on the right.

Then you have the powerful duo of **Rachel Reed** and **Morgan Eason** in the middle throwing up a huge block and throwing down some serious heat on the attack.

Anything that manages to get past the big front line is usually picked up by libero **Kelly Quinn** or **Morgan Lanier**, who play a mean back row.

In fact, The Highlanders play a level of defense rarely seen among Houston teams over the past few years. Even for explosive offenses like Coppell and Southlake Carroll, points do not come easy against The Woodlands.

If they showed a flaw at Pearland, it was a bad habit of starting slow in their matches.

That was not the case in the finals, however.

The Woodlands opened the match with an early 7-1 run, then, after the teams spent the next few minutes trading points, they closed with an 8-3 run to take the first set 25-16.

Mary-Kate Marshall and **Cathryn Cheek** provided most of the offense that Coppell was able to manage, as the Cowgirls' high-powered attack struggled against The Woodlands defense.



The Cowgirls had plenty to cheer about in the second set. (Photo by Jerry Baker)

The battle-tested Cowgirls, however, play with the heart of a champion and had been in similar situations during their championship runs. So they weren't about to go away without a fight.

As a result, the second set was a complete reversal of the first. This time it was Coppell setting the tone as super setter **Kylie Pickrell** did a terrific job of keeping The Woodlands block off balance. Suddenly Marshall, Cheek and **Lauren Hogan** found openings that hadn't been there earlier. And those are three girls who don't need much of an opening to burn a defense.

The set featured some entertaining and exhausting rallies that at times looked like a duel between Kelly Quinn and Lanier vs. Coppell libero **Alex Silver** or **Natalie Gilbert** to see who could make the most spectacular save.

In the end, however, it was the multitalented Pickrell leading a closing run that featured a terrific dump in which The Woodlands defense never moved as Coppell tied the match 25-22.

On the sidelines, The Woodlands coach Leslie Madison gathered her players.

"I know you are tired," she told them, "but we are playing for a championship, so go out there and leave it all on the court.

They did.

Before Coppell knew what hit them, The Woodlands had a 6-2 lead that they expanded to 13-6. Then McDaniel, Eason and Reed took over as The Highlanders closed the match with an 11-4 run to bring home the championship and position themselves as the team to beat in 2013.

"I was confident this weekend," said Eckenrode. "I thought we had the team that could compete with anyone and we did. Even after we lost the second set we were confident because we had been down before."

"At first we were just hoping to be the Final Four," added McDaniel, who was named the tournament's Outstanding Hitter. "Once we made it to the finals we thought we could do it, even though they were the state champs."

A STAR-STUDED TOURNAMENT

The championship showdown between the state's top two ranked teams ended what may have been the strongest overall Pearland tournament ever and made for a terrific launch to the season.

The 13-team gold bracket featured LoneStarVolleyball's #1,2,3,4,5,6,9,11,19 and 20 teams.

In addition to the championship showdown, there were battles of #2 vs #3, #3 vs #4, #4 vs #5 and #3 vs #6 as well as #1vs #6 and #1 vs #11. And all live up to expectations.

Comcast Sportsnet broadcast the third place and championship matches live locally, marking the first time that high school matches had been broadcast live on TV in over a decade. And they couldn't have asked for a better showcase of the state's best talent.

"It was a great weekend," said tournament host John Turner, as he watched his top four seeds playing, as expected, in the semifinals.



The Reagan defense had its hands full against Coppell and Carroll. (Photo by Jerry Baker)



Coppell's Mary-Kate Marshall (15) repeatedly delivered the heat from the outside on Saturday. (Photo by Jerry Baker)

Coppell also needed three to take down #6 Reagan to earn its place in the finals, although anyone who left after the first set probably would be surprised to know it went three.

It was a rematch of last year's Pearland finals won by Reagan, but that would not be the case this year. With Marshall simply unstoppable early, Pickrell doing a masterful job of mixing up the attack and **Silver and Gilbert picking the back row clean**, Coppell jumped out quick and rolled 25-11 to take the opening set.

Reagan rediscovered its block in the second. As a result, the second set started out as a back-and-forth battle between Coppell's Cheek and Marshall vs. Reagan's Reasor, **Mackenna Wollet** and **Ashton Korona**.

At 15-15, however, the relentless Reasor took over with six kills in an 8-3 run to put Reagan in control.

Marshall and **Jaime Stivers** tried to spark a late rally for Coppell, but it was too late as Reagan held on 25-22 to force a third set.

Any hopes of a Reagan upset were eliminated early as Marshall, Stiver and Hogan took turns unloading from all over the court.

Coppell jumped to a 16-10 lead then fought off one final Reasor-led Reagan rally. It was Cheek, then Hogan, and then Marshall down the stretch as the two-time defending 5A champs earned their second straight trip to the Pearland finals.

Meanwhile one court over, Coppell and New Braunfels were squaring off in a rematch of the 2012 state finals. A 7-2 outburst led by Marshall blew open a close first set. At one point, **Jennifer Mendez, Katie Steel and Morgan Eason** tried to start a Unicorn rally, but it came up short as Coppell took the opener 25-18.

Just as they had in the state finals, however, New Braunfels battled back.

The teams traded points in the second set until at 19-19, Marshall went on a tear to lead a Coppell run that closed out the sweep and sent the Cowgirls into the championship match.

"They lost a lot (of players) and we lost a lot, but there we were again just like last year fighting back and them holding us off," said New Braunfels coach Robin Gerlich.

In the other quarterfinals, The Woodlands had little trouble putting away Highland Park while Reagan needed three to get past a big, strong Flower Mound team.

Churchill would go on to knock off Flower Mound for fifth place.

Texas Volleyball Invitational

Individual Awards

Outstanding Setter - Kylie Pickrell, Coppell

All-Tournament

Mary-Kate Marshall, Coppell

Cathryn Cheek, Coppell

Alex Silver, Coppell

Results

Championship: The Woodlands def. Coppell 25-16, 22-25, 25-11

Semifinals

Coppell def Reagan 25-11, 22-25, 25-14

Quarterfinals

Coppell def New Braunfels 25-18, 25-20