

Schmidt comes up aces for Valencia girls' volleyball

By Erik Boal, Special to the Daily News
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Valencia players celebrate a point on their way to a victory over Villa Park. (John McCoy/Staff Photographer)

VALENCIA -- On a night when Valencia struggled with its passing, hurt itself with untimely missed serves and Katie Hank often had to take as many as five swings during a rally to put a ball away, veteran coach Ray Sanchez looked to an unlikely source to provide his team with some stability.

With Valencia tied with Villa Park midway through the fifth game of their Southern Section Div. I-A girls' volleyball playoff opener Tuesday, Sanchez called on reserve Alexa Schmidt, and the junior came up aces.

Schmidt responded with a four-point service run and Valencia scored nine of the match's final 11 points to outlast the visiting Spartans 25-20, 23-25, 21-25, 25-23, 15-9 to advance to Thursday's second round against El Toro of Lake Forest.

"That kid was amazing. If there was a game ball, it would go to Alexa Schmidt. She saved us for sure," Sanchez said. "That was the best team I've seen (us play) in the first round. They served well. They passed well. And I've never seen Katie Hank hit so many balls into the block in my life, which is a credit to them. But we pulled it out and I'm proud of the girls."

Valencia (20-11), which celebrated its eighth consecutive Foothill League title last week, almost didn't get to add a playoff victory to its resume as Villa Park (21-10) rebounded from squandering a six-point lead in the

first game to outlast the Vikings during several long rallies to grab a 2-1 lead entering the fourth.

But despite having four

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players on the court competing in their first postseason contest, including freshman setter Carly Carapella (46 assists, eight digs, three blocks), Valencia showed its resolve by building a big lead in the fourth and then relying on clutch kills down the stretch from the Delaware-bound Hank and Heidi Brown to force a deciding game.

"(Heidi and I) looked at each other and said 'We're not losing.' This wasn't going to be the last match we played together," said Hank, who finished with 26 kills and 10 digs. "They were definitely all over me. But I had to keep hitting around the block and see the open court and find a way to put the ball away."

With neither team leading by more than two points in the first half of the deciding game, Schmidt finally gave the Vikings some breathing room, forcing two bad passes on service receptions that resulted in Villa Park net violations, setting up a Hank kill following an overpass and delivering two aces that resulted in a Spartans' timeout. After Villa Park cut the deficit to 13-9, Hank delivered a shot down the line to set up match point, which Brianna Earley clinched with a left-handed tip in the middle of the court.

"(Alexa) definitely stepped up when we needed her," Hank said. "She took on her role and she helped us a lot."

Brown had 12 kills, Earley added seven kills and 14 digs, Brooke Dawson recorded 12 digs and Sydney Striff -- playing opposite hitter in place of injured junior Emily Elias -- contributed seven kills for Valencia.