



St. Francis fans cheer as their top-ranked team beat No. 5 Christian Brothers on Tuesday.

PHILIP RO

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HIGH SCHOOL VOLLEYBALL

For these rivals, 'Holy Court' match is frenzied and friendly

Francis in the annual "Holy Court" volleyball match in which can also be described as a "Holy Cow" environment. It was loud, proud and nonstop energy, and it was as unique as it was spirited.

"There's nothing like this for high school girls sports anywhere in this area," said Steve Shaff, St. Francis' assistant athletic director and tireless sports information director.

He said this in a virtual yell as the student rooting sections filled the place with shrieks and sing-song cheer.

That top-ranked St. Francis prevailed over the No. 5 Falcons in three sets was secondary to the atmosphere and meaning, one players and coaches are sure to remember. Volleyball matches otherwise often attract a few parents and loyal fans, particularly on a school night.

Christian Brothers students filled one bleacher section. Most were decked in school-color blue shirts, waving pom-poms. Some even had blue wigs. Football players raced up and down

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Parking was sparse Tuesday night, except on nearby streets.

Seating was limited, unless you were OK standing or wedging in amid the masses. Everybody had to yell to be heard — fans, administrators, coaches and student-athletes.

And all of this was a good thing.

The setting was in Oak Park in Sacramento, inside the Ron Limeberger gym on the campus of Christian Brothers High School.

The Falcons hosted rival St.



PHILIP ROINA

St. Francis fans storm the court after their team's victory.

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VOLLEYBALL

the sideline, only to be instructed to slow it down.

Across the gym, St. Francis students made for a sea of black to go with their pom-poms and face paint. There were animal costumes in that mix - a cow, a giraffe, a bird - all tribute to the actual St. Francis, who is the patron saint of animals.

Fittingly, this rooting section goes by "The Zoo."

Before the match, sportsmanship took center court. Both teams held hands by the net for a group prayer. The game action was intense, amplified by the near-constant crowd noise.

"This rivalry has grown because the game of volleyball has grown," St. Francis coach Allyn Wright said. "More kids are playing and both teams are improving.

"It's fun for these girls to play in this kind of an atmosphere because they don't get to do it very often.

Most college matches you don't have the noise like you do here."

Christian Brothers opened in 1876 and became co-ed in 1990. The gym walls are covered with girls championship banners, including 10 Sac-Joaquin Section titles and CIF Northern California Regional seasons from 2006, 2008 and 2009.

St. Francis opened in 1940, but it wasn't until Title IX - the law that mandates gender equity - came into play in the 1970s that the Troubadours started to emerge on the athletic front. St. Francis has won championships in every sport, some at the CIF State level.

The friendly "Holy Court" rivalry between the private schools started in 2009. Before, the Troubadours regularly played Christian Brothers, their chief rival was Loretto, an all-girls school located in Sacramento.

Declining enrollment

led to that school's closure, and droves of Loretto students enrolled into St. Francis and Christian Brothers.

ST. FRANCIS IS A SCHOOL OF VETERANS

St. Francis students are long known for their ability to mix their studies, community service and athletics into a hectic week. The "Holy Court" match allows for extra fun.

"It's such a unique situation here, an all-girls school where the girls can be themselves," said MaryAnn Kelly, the St. Francis director of advancement and an admitted Holy Court fanatic.

"There's no anxiety. No one is up an hour early in the morning to get their hair done."

Wright encourages her players to be themselves. She has been a St. Francis and regional volleyball fixture for decades. In her 31st season as the Troubadours coach, Wright has no time table to step away.

Asked why she keeps coaching, she said emphatically, "It's fun!" Wright was a multi-sport

start at Justin-Siena High in Napa and played three sports at BYU and later competed at Santa Clara.

A personal thrill was coaching daughter Taryn during the Troubadours' 2005 CIF State championship season. Taryn is now the St. Francis junior varsity coach. She is expecting a baby next month.

"Let's just hope she doesn't have the baby during a match," Wright said with a laugh.

Wright has won 12 section championships with seven second-place finishes. She has been named a league Coach of the Year 18 times and is a member of the section's Hall of Fame. Wright is as spirited as her players during warms and after matches.

Her husband Phil can appreciate coaching and athletic opportunities for women. He founded the women's soccer programs at Stanford in 1975 and at Santa Clara in 1980, coaching both programs.

"I'm just the third-best coach in this family," said Phil, who attends matches with a shirt and tie and is the public address voice

for St. Francis home volleyball matches.

CHRISTIAN BROTHERS COACH IS SELF-TAUGHT

While Wright has been a coaching lifer, James Todd is relatively new to all of this.

The Christian Brothers coach is self-taught on this sport. He never played volleyball growing up in Vallejo, but he loved the strategy and athleticism of the sport and started coaching it in the Bay Area.

In Sacramento, Todd transformed Encha Prep from an O-20 team into a playoff contender. Todd later coached at Whitley and is in his fourth season at Christian Brothers, seeking his second section title with the program.

How deep is he in this sport now? His girlfriend Lisa Fowkes is the Co-sumers Oaks coach. She has bragging rights at the dinner table since her program defeated his in five exhausting sets earlier this season.

"Those are crazy battles because we both know each other inside out,"

Todd said. "We both know our coaching styles and adjustment we make. Whenever I coach against her, it's always a close game."

As for his own personal coaching growth, Todd said, "I studied the heck out of the game because I love it. I went to lots of coaching clinics to learn how to be a good coach. It gives me a leg up. It makes me work a little bit harder than coaches who played the game. I'm always studying and trying to be better coach to help my team."

Todd said the energy of Tuesday night even left it coaches feeling fortunate "I never want to leave this place," he said.

Wright doesn't want to leave, either. She marvels at how far the game has come - the teams, the athletes, the rivalry matches.

She recalled that during her prep playing days, would be lucky to get 5 people in the stands. "There were that many people in the concession line 30 minutes before Tuesday's match."