

# CHANGING

THE

WOLVES

REDEFINING



The Wonewoc-Center volleyball team celebrates a score during Friday's WIAA state semifinal match against McDonell. The Wolves took a 20-match win streak into the state tournament before losing to the eventual state champs 3-0 at the Resch Center in Green Bay. HSE photos by Brandon Berg.

## Wonewoc-Center redefining volleyball with back-to-back state runs

By ZACH RASTALL  
HSE Sports Reporter

The Wonewoc-Center volleyball program reached its apex last fall thanks to a memorable October run that brought them to the state tournament for the first time ever.

One year later, they went ahead and did it all again.

The blueprint was strikingly similar: a slow start to the season was followed by a scorching hot stretch that netted the Wolves a share of a conference championship and a playoff run that brought them all the way to the Resch Center.

"We kind of have a certain pattern that we start off all our seasons slow and then

kind of find our groove as the season goes on," said Wonewoc-Center junior setter Jaelyn Stowe.

"I'm going to take that slow start every year if it means we end up here," Wonewoc-Center head coach Nikki Justman said following that second straight state trip.

But as incredible as that 2021 campaign was for Wonewoc-Center, the encore in 2022 was even more improbable.

The Wolves lost a pair of senior leaders and all-conference players with the graduation of Shelby Justman and Nicole Totzke this past spring, leaving them with important roles to fill. But 2021 Scenic Bluffs Player of the Year Kelsey



ABOVE Heidi Baker, Brooklyn Bolton, and Emma Milbrand cheer on their team from the sideline during the Division 4 state semifinals.



LEFT Jaelyn Stowe flips a set to her hitters during Friday's D4 state semifinal. Stowe led with 28 assists.

**STATE**  
cont. on pg. 6



D4 STATE SEMIFINAL WONEWOC-CENTER 0 MCDONELL 3

# Wonewoc-Center falls to McDonell Central Catholic at state

By ZACH RASTALL  
HSE Sports Reporter

**GREEN BAY —** For a second straight year, Wonewoc-Center squared off with McDonell Central Catholic in the semifinals of the state volleyball tournament. And, for a second straight year, the Wolves met the same fate.  
No. 1 seed McDonell Central Catholic (41-12) swept No. 4 seed Wonewoc-Center (26-5) 25-18, 25-13, 25-20 in their Division 4 semifinal meeting at the state tournament Friday, November 4 at the Resch Center in Green Bay.  
At the 2021 state tournament, the second-seeded Macks defeated the third-seeded Wolves 25-21, 25-19, 25-11 en route to the Division 4 state title.  
That memorable run last fall resulted in Wonewoc-Center's first-ever state appearance. The Wolves lost a couple of key seniors in Shelby Justman and Nicole Totzke from that squad, leaving big shoes to fill.  
A slow start out of the gates back in early September made a return

trip to state seem like a long shot, but the Wolves buckled down, made some key lineup changes — namely moving senior Taylor Novy to libero and junior Estanna Graewin to outside hitter — and found a groove that allowed them rip off a 21-match winning streak and book a return to the Resch Center.  
“This was supposed to be our building year. When we came here last year, we lost two seniors that were fantastic — good leaders on the court,” said Wonewoc-Center head coach Nikki Justman. “When we came back at the beginning of the season, we expected it to just be kind of a ‘build up, let’s get prepared for next year’ sort of thing, and these girls have surpassed every expectation. They have come and accepted and dominated every challenge that I have given to them for this year. I’m super proud of them for that.”  
Wonewoc-Center faced an uphill battle against the defending state champions and top remaining seed in Division 4. The Wolves were unable to avoid a sweep against the Macks, but they continued to fight to the end and even saved their best for the final



Wonewoc-Center fans travelled far and well to see their Wolves play at state for the second year in a row. HSE photo by Brandon Berg.

set.  
Junior outside hitter Kelsey Justman — a UW-Green Bay commit playing in her future college city — was a particular bright spot, firing in a match-high 20 kills to go along with 17 digs and two aces. Justman’s 20 kills left her just two shy of reaching

the 1,000-kill mark for her career.  
“She was an insane hitter, and we knew that coming in,” McDonell Central Catholic head coach Kat Hanston said of Justman. “We faced her last year and now she’s a year older and a year better.”  
Additionally for the Wolves, junior

setter Jaelyn Stowe dished out 28 assists, Graewin recorded 10 digs and Emma Mildbrand added three kills. Heidi Baker, the lone freshman on the team, also notched two kills late in the match.  
While the result was ultimately still a loss in three sets, Kelsey Justman believed last year’s state experience allowed the team to play looser and finish the match strong even in the closing points.  
“Last year, I think it was really intimidating because we had never played in a court like that at all. We’re used to our intimate little gyms,” Justman said. “But this year we were all just a lot more relaxed, and I think it showed when we played.”  
Following Friday’s win, the Macks went on to beat No. 3 seed Monticello (31-2) 22-25, 25-22, 25-15, 25-16 on Saturday to secure their second consecutive Division 4 state championship.  
Monticello — coached by Wonewoc-Center alum Rebecca Gustafson — had beaten No. 2 seed Athens (37-7) 25-22, 13-25, 25-27, 25-21, 15-9 in a five-set semifinal thriller on Friday.

STATE  
continued from pg. 5

Justman, who garnered those same honors in 2022, only upped her level further and the pieces fell into place around her to create an updated winning formula.  
That first state run was a watershed moment. Following it up with another right after is helping elevate the volleyball program to a different level that holds the potential to help breed future success.  
There’s a palpable sense of excitement around Wonewoc-Center volleyball matches, and the team is cognizant of the fact that the enthusiasm they create now can inspire younger kids to fall in love with the sport too.  
It’s that sort of self-sustaining recruitment that can go a long way in establishing a higher, more stable level of success for a school that serves villages as small as Wonewoc and Union Center.  
“There are so many little girls that always are at our games, and they’re all really getting into volleyball, which is really exciting because we all love the game,” Kelsey Justman said. “I’m just really excited for what the future holds.”  
Perhaps the best news of all for the Wolves is that this boom period doesn’t appear likely to slow down in 2023.  
Wonewoc-Center does lose a trio of seniors — Taylor Novy, Kadence Hamburg and Stacie Kopenhafer — but otherwise returns most of their key players from this year’s squad. That presents them with another golden



The Wonewoc-Center volleyball team has been changing the culture of its program with its recent success. The last two iterations of the team have been a positive influence on younger members within the program - something that the current coaching staff hopes will pay dividends down the road. HSE photo by Brandon Berg.

opportunity at a deep postseason run — and all the increased community enthusiasm that comes with it — next fall.  
“I think, by having these state runs, we kind of built a winning culture compared to the years before. I think that’s really helped with the new girls’ confidence coming in,” Stowe said. “We have so many returners next year that I’m very, very hopeful for what we can do.”

*...by having these state runs,  
we kind of built a  
WINNING CULTURE*

— Jaelyn Stowe

SLOW TO START

Wonewoc-Center’s slow start put them under the radar for a second-straight season. The Wolves kicked off the Scenic Bluffs Conference season with a 3-0 loss at Royall and dropped a 3-2 decision just a week later to Cashton.  
The Wolves went 2-3 at the Sparta tournament and moved to a pedestrian mark of 5-4.  
Though there was plenty of season to be had, the idea that W-C could even repeat as a conference champion was in doubt.

FAST TO FINISH

After a loss to Menomonie at Sparta, W-C seemed to find its footing as a team.  
The Wolves mimicked their own formula from 2021 as the team rattled off 15-straight wins to end the regular season. Those wins included revenge wins against both Royall and Cashton as well as a season sweep of Hillsboro. W-C escaped victorious in a five-set thriller with Brookwood while Royall lost five-setter in their first meeting with Cashton.  
All of that added up to another Scenic Bluffs Conference co-championship as the Wolves tied Royall with a mark of 12-2.  
The momentum had swung in W-C’s favor, though and the team entered the postseason on a red hot streak, which they rode all the way back to Green Bay and the WIAA state volleyball tournament for a second-straight season.



W-C’s Jaelyn Stowe led the Wolves with 6 serving aces and 20 assists in this year’s regional opener against De Soto. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

D4 REGIONAL QUARTERFINAL  
WONEWOC-CENTER 3 DE SOTO 0

Hot off a 15-game win streak to end the regular season, the Wolves opened the WIAA tournament portion of their season with a very quick win over De Soto.  
The visiting Pirates totaled just 25 points across three sets, scoring 7, 6 and 7 points in each respective game.  
Wonewoc-Center’s 16th win in a row came on the strength of a 15-kill effort by Kelsey Justman and 20 assists by Jaelyn Stowe.  
Serving was also an area that benefited W-C as the team scored 18 points on aces. Stowe led with 6 aces while Justman added 5 and Taylor Novy 5. W-C awaited the winner of La Farge and Brookwood for their second round matchup.



D4 REGIONAL SEMIFINAL  
WONEWOC-CENTER 3 LA FARGE 1

The La Farge volleyball team flustered W-C through the first two sets of the regional semifinal match on Thursday, October 20. Eventually, the Wolves were able to wrangle the Wildcats and notch a win, however.  
La Farge, which finished tied for third in the Ridge and Valley Conference, pushed W-C to extra points in the opening set with the home team winning 27-25. The visitors found a way to take a game from Wonewoc-Center in the second set 25-18. W-C hopped back in the contest and won the last two sets by holding LFHS to 19 and 16 points, respectively.

Wonewoc-Center’s Stacie Kopenhafer was an all-around key player in the four set win against the Wildcats. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

Bryn Ertel led the defense with 4 blocks while Kelsey Justman added 2 and Jaelyn Stowe 1.  
The law firm of Justman and Stowe penalized La Farge with 35 kills by the former and 43 assists by the latter.

D4 REGIONAL FINAL  
WONEWOC-CENTER 3 ROYALL 0

The two Scenic Bluffs Conference co-champions faced off in a rubber match with a shot at sectionals on the line in front of a generous crowd on Saturday, October 22.  
A barrage of early attacks by Kelsey Justman put W-C on track for its second-straight sectional berth and kept dreams of a return to state alive.  
After an opening set win, W-C fell behind early against Royall in the second set. That deficit was short lived as the Wolves battled back. When the dust settled, W-C had earned a three-set sweep after holding Royall to totals of 20, 20 and 17 points.  
Kelsey Justman put away 24 kills while Bryn Ertel added 8 as the team headed back to the sectional round of the WIAA tournament.

Estanna Graewin and Jaelyn Stowe embrace each other while Taylor Novy rushes in to join them after the Wolves finished a 3-0 sweep of Royall in the regional final. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.



# SPARK PLUG

## Stacie Kopenhafer's energy provides support on the court

By ZACH RASTALL  
HSE Sports Reporter

One of the highest compliments a coach can pay a player is praising them for their consistent energy and work ethic.

When it comes to Wonewoc-Center senior right-side/outside hitter Stacie Kopenhafer, head coach Nikki Justman is quick to heap her with exactly that kind of praise.

"She gives it her all at all times. I never have to doubt that she's giving 100 percent of her effort," Justman said of Kopenhafer. "Even in practice, she's the one diving and sliding all the way across the floor and giving it every ounce of everything no matter where she is — if she's at practice or in a game."

Kopenhafer carved herself out a pivotal role the past two seasons on Wonewoc-Center squads that



made back-to-back trips to state. Despite her being a bit undersized, her tenacity and unflappable effort made Kopenhafer the type of player that the Wolves needed on the court to provide a spark.

"I found that when I took her out, it just didn't go as well," Justman said. "I found that with her hustle and her determination, I really just couldn't take her off the court. And that's the kind of player you should aspire to be, is the girl the coach doesn't want to take off the court because things go downhill."

For her part, Kopenhafer doled out plenty of praise to a host of role models for the wisdom they imparted on her over the years: Abby Field ("who gave me the love for the sport"), Lindsay Peters and Tessa Gehri ("who pushed me to be the one who hustles after all the balls") and the duo of Nicole Totzke and Kailey Ertel ("who showed me how to be a smart front-row player without killing the ball every time").

Kopenhafer admitted that she's not necessarily the strongest hitter or the greatest setter, but grew to understand that there were areas where she could focus on and thrive.

"Sometimes it's just more important to be the consistent passer or the front-row player that places the ball in spots the other team isn't," she said.

When looking at the whole of her high school volleyball



career, there are many fond memories for Kopenhafer to reflect on and cherish: her first solo block and the reaction it garnered against Hillsboro as a junior, serving 25 straight points against New Lisbon in a set where the Wolves nearly blanked the Rockets, and her pregame dance to "Cotton Eye Joe" with Bryn Ertel.

But perhaps nothing topped the chance this year for her to share the court with her cousin: sophomore middle hitter Emma Mildbrand.

"Playing with Emma will forever be something I'm thankful for. Emma always knew how to keep me going," Kopenhafer said. "I loved every minute I got on the court with her and will never forget the memories I made with her this season."

This past weekend brought an end to Kopenhafer's high school volleyball career, but all these memories — and the chance to finish her time with the Wolves at the state tournament — will continue to endure.

"Being a part of the back-to-back state teams were the biggest moments of my life — knowing I was a part of the team that put Wonewoc on the map is a huge deal," Kopenhafer said. "So many girls dream of having that chance and I'm blessed to say I got to do it twice."

**Wonewoc-Center's Stacie Kopenhafer's** all-around skillset, energy, and love for the game has made her an essential piece of the Wonewoc-Center puzzle. **HSE photos by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

### WONEWOC-CENTER SENIORS

#### FROM HEAD COACH NIKKI JUSTMAN

**Kadence.** The most fun going and relaxed. The first day of practice this year she busted open her chin going for a ball in warm ups, and had no idea until the blood started dripping off her chin. She worked so hard every day in every part of practice, even though she was a serving specialist.

**Taylor.** Team mom. Making sure everyone knew everything, and that the girls Without their licenses were still included in everything. She is the responsible team mom and diva (and I mean this in the best and nicest way possible)

**Stacie.** I never have to doubt that Stacie is giving her 100% on the court. She doesn't have it in her not to. She is always throwing her body around on the court trying to get that ball over the net. She adds fun to our practices.

# In their own words

#### KADENCE HAMBURG

My position on the volleyball team is a serving specialist. Having this position means that you don't see me on the court a lot. However, no matter how small or big your role seems, they are all equally important. This is something I would like to remind the younger players. No matter what role you are given, you accept it and perform to the best of your ability.

I have had the privilege of playing on our varsity volleyball team for the last two years. During these two years, we have had the opportunity of going to state. We would not have been able to do this without the enormous amount of hard work and dedication us girls put into the game or the amount of support our little community has given us.

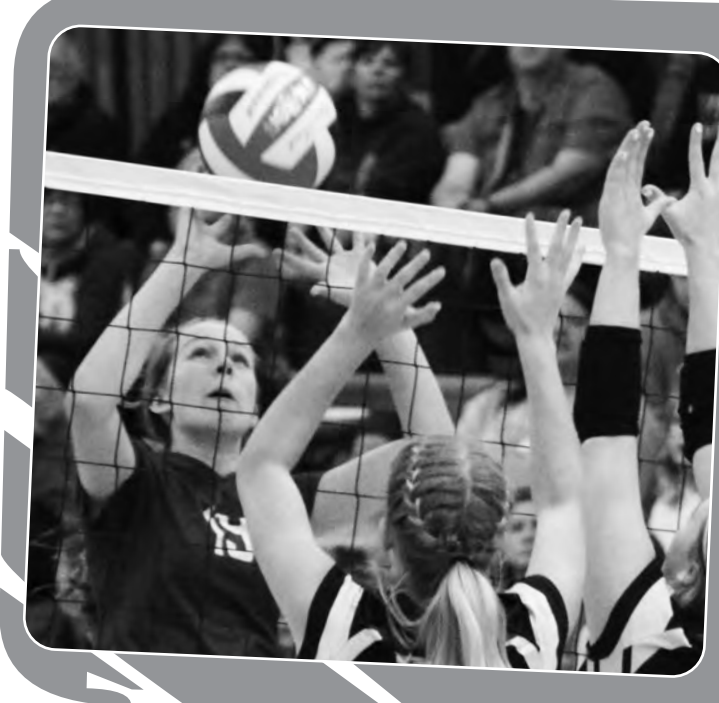
#### TAYLOR NOVY

Being on the volleyball team for the past four years has been more than I'd ever imagine. It's like being a part of a family. Volleyball has shown me that you can accomplish anything you want with the right mindset and passion. I will always treasure my memories no matter where they were either at practice, team dinner, or going to state the past two years. I am going to miss the feeling and adrenaline rushing through my body while playing on the court with my family. These are the memories I am never going to forget.

#### STACIE KOPENHAFER

- Family
- Adversity
- Dedication
- Grit
- Fun
- Agile
- Energetic
- Competitive
- Persevering
- Energetic
- Honorable
- Resilient
- Dependable
- Motivating
- Optimistic
- Cheerful
- Committed
- Encouraging
- Harmonious
- Optimistic
- Outgoing

Art by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

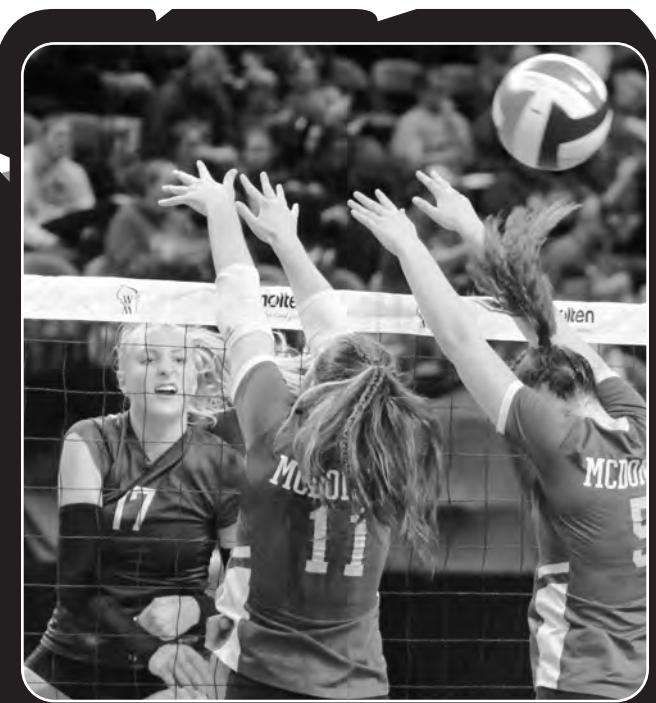


### D4 SECTIONAL SEMIFINAL WONEWOC-CENTER 3 ELMWOOD/PLUM CITY 0

The first round of sectional play was over quickly for the W-C volleyball team as they topped Elmwood/Plum City 3-0.

The Wonewoc-Center Wolves blasted the Dunn-St. Croix Conference champs from the onset at Black River Falls and didn't look back. The EPC Wolves' fans were left stunned after the sectional match as their team was held to point totals of 13, 11 and 15.

W-C would move on to its second-ever sectional final volleyball match where the team would face a familiar foe in Highland. **HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**



**Wonewoc-Center's Kelsey Justman** squeezes an attack past the double block by McDonell's Gracie Goettl and Marley Hughes during the D4 state semifinal match. **HSE photo by Brandon Berg.**

### D4 STATE SEMIFINAL WONEWOC-CENTER 0 MCDONELL 3

Rematches seemed to be in vogue for Wonewoc-Center as they met with Chippewa Falls McDonell at the WIAA state meet for a second-straight year in a Division 4 semifinal.

This year McDonell entered as the top-seeded team in D4 and carried the weight of being the defending state champs after winning last year's state title. Wonewoc-Center, which was seeded fourth looked forward to a second meeting with the Macks, though the end result was quite similar as in 2021 with McDonell winning 3-0 (25-18, 25-13, 25-20).

Kelsey Justman added 20 kills to her season total while Jaelyn Stowe had 28 assists. Bryn Ertel added 3 blocks and 2 kills.

The Macks went on to claim a second-straight state title after defeating Monticello, which was coached by Wonewoc-Center grad Becky Gustafson, 3-1.

### D4 SECTIONAL FINAL WONEWOC-CENTER 3 HIGHLAND 1

In a rematch of 2021's D4 sectional final, Wonewoc-Center and Highland squared off at Richland Center for a chance at state.

Both teams entered with significantly different looking teams than the year prior as both squads graduated a bevy of major contributors.

W-C took the first set 25-20 and held a 12-3 advantage in the second before Highland chipped away to take the second 25-22. The loss was a minor detour, however, as the Wolves outlasted the Cardinals 25-19 and 25-18 to finish with the same result as the year prior as W-C claimed a 3-1 victory and second-straight trip to state.

Kelsey Justman powered the offensive attack by tallying a match-high 35 kills. Bryn Ertel added 7 and also finished with 7 blocks. Jaelyn Stowe finished with 42 assists to help the Wolves get back to state.

**The W-C volleyball team** calls to their student section to join them in celebrating the team's second-straight state berth. **HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

