

Hard Earned Respect

Shy and happy, Lucca dances across the Northpoint school court, smiling and gesturing at those fortunate enough to know her. She loves her new school as much as she loves to play volleyball. Today's game against Hernando will provide an opportunity to play against people she knows from her travel team.

Last year, she earned her way onto the varsity team at her former school in Memphis. Today, both teams playing varsity games are more talented and better coached than her last year's high school team. Until Lucca shows she deserves to play on the varsity at Northpoint, she will have to play on the junior varsity team.

Both school's supporters arrive, greet each other, and sit among one another without hesitation on one side of the gymnasium across from the team's benches and scorers. Behind the scorer's table are folded bleachers. Northpoint students occupy one entire section of seating.

The noisy crowd rises to a much higher level of excitement while anticipating the start of the junior varsity game when a small contingent of sweaty football players joins the crowd one by one. Others watch from an upstairs weightlifting room as both school's junior varsity volleyball team's pre-match warm-up concludes.

Seconds tick from score clocks high above both ends of the court, and the chosen starters, six on each side of the net, line up to begin the match's first game. Visitors from Hernando High School are dressed in black and gold uniforms, while Northpoint players wear blue and white uniforms.

The critical opening phase of a volleyball game is the serve. Lucca has a monstrous serve. However, in this game, Lucca and her friend Parker sit on the bench beside one another with crossed legs, unsure if they will play.

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The first game progressed until Hernando's team won the match's first game by a wide margin. Northpoint's junior varsity was embarrassed by the lopsided score. The Northpoint supporters seemed disheartened, not wanting to lose, while Hernando players and supporters expected they would easily win the formality of a second game and the junior varsity match.

Parker and Lucca enter together for Northpoint as the second game of the junior varsity match begins. Lucca will serve before rotating positions. I hold my breath as she gathers the ball from the floor and steps away from the back line, her back to her opponents, moving the white and black striped volleyball from one hand to another before turning sharply and staring across the net at the Hernando players.

The crowd erupts as her first powerful serve is untouched. Defenders avoid being struck by the fast-moving projectile while shielding themselves with tender arms and hands. The second serve is more powerful than the first, striking an opponent in the back of her head as she turned away from the blur before it hit her. As tears flow, a substitution is made, and the game continues.

The third serve is sent directly to a player on the back line for Hernando, volleyed, and returned. The visitors score. Lucca's serve is lost. Despite this, the crowd of students dressed in blue and white is rejoicing, knowing it is the first time Northpoint has led today's scoring.

The joyous Northpoint team gathered in a huddle, encouraging one another and celebrating their lead before returning to their positions. Something feels different to them.

As the match progressed, Lucca and Parker's teammates showed renewed confidence in dominating their areas of the court during lengthy volleys. Everyone was faster and more confident than in the first game. Hesitation brought corrections.

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Numerous volleys and sets from both teams precede a mixture of the ball softly clearing the net from robust serves and returns. Coordinated blocks are only a foot away from the net as friendly opponents score points in succession.

An overflowing crowd of Northpoint students spilled onto the polished floor. The boisterous students began a choreographed hum, sounding like a lengthy line of motorcycles was approaching. The hum was loud enough to cause team supporters to discontinue conversations or watch in wonder at the hundreds of students, some waving towels over their heads before joining them with hums amplifying the already high sound level.

Lucca regained her serve and scored six consecutive points before a powerful return by a Hernando front-line player ended the streak.

Mistakes are crucial, causing polite moans from the crowd. Players rotate positions. Lucca moves forward and is now positioned on the net's front row, left side. Parker is in the center.

Tied at twenty-two points each, three more points will mean the second game is won.

One of Hernando's many star players serves a missile worthy of recognition. It zooms past the front row and is ideally placed to give the Hernando team a one-point lead, with only two more needed to win the game for the visitors.

The next powerful serve from Hernando is diverted by a brush with the top of the net into a diving save by a Northpoint player volleying to Parker and an accurate set for Lucca. The crowd hum becomes deafening as Lucca springs from the floor to accept the set.

Her leap is higher than I have seen. Her arm is above the net when she strikes the ball so strongly that it sounds like a cannon shot. The noisy, humming crowd watches the strike and

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emulates the sound with a loud, coordinated “BOOM!” as the ball slams off the floor untouched, followed by gasps, clapping, and foot stomping. Even the opponents are in awe as they look at each other, smiling.

The score is tied at twenty-three.

The ball is returned to a Northpoint teammate's hands before taking two steps forward. She rises off the floor and fires the ball across the net. It is volleyed, set, and returned with authority by a Hernando player. The ball was barely kept alive, volleyed to Parker, and set for Lucca. Another impressive leap is followed by the sound of her right hand battering the ball. Those not already standing rise from their seats before one word is said. “BOOM!” The lead is now one.

Only one more point is needed to win.

A nervous Northpoint server prepares and delivers the ball across the net to the visitors. It is volleyed, set, and returned. The crowd hum is so loud that it is impossible to hear anything else. Even the opponent's fans, friends, and neighbors to us all are humming while watching the ball cross the net over and over again.

Each player's hands unite to form a single weapon, as every opportunity to fail is managed and returned. This continues until a volleyed ball is sent to Parker, and time slows down.

Lucca turns away from the net, not with her body, only her head. She quickly retreats from the net to a designated distance, preparing her attack. Crouching and waiting like a lioness spotting its prey, she measures Parker's actions.

Shifting her weight to the left side without compromising her balance, she counts her steps without concern. Timing is everything.

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There's hesitation as Parker determines the logical placement of the ball. Unattainable perfection shows in Parker's face as the set is made. This one is the real deal. The ball rises toward the heavens, alive and spinning until it is called downward. Witnessing a thing of beauty, the crowd hums louder than before as everyone waits to say that one word.

Lucca's face shows the plan. She steps closer to the net, staring at the ball, wanting to annihilate it. The large humming crowd makes her approach surreal. Winged feet leave the floor. The ball meets the power of her blow, her face snarls, and she exhales as her arm comes down, not touching the net. The boom of her hand is perfectly timed with the "BOOM!" from the crowd. The sound is deafening.

The ball is invisible as it screams past defenders and explodes onto the gymnasium floor, causing everyone to look at one another as Lucca and Parker triumphantly gather with screaming teammates and enjoy a new hard-earned respect from everyone in attendance.

Winning one game in a junior varsity volleyball match may seem trivial.

For young athletes sacrificing their time to play a sport... it's everything.