

Tenafly's Jeff Koehler is the NJ.com Girls Volleyball Coach of the Year, 2020-21

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Tenafly coach Jeff Koehler motivates his team from the sideline against Northern Highlands in the North 1, Group 3 final in Allendale. 4/19/21 Brian Bobal | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

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Tenafly got an important taste of what it's like to make a playoff run and come up short.

In 2019, a team that was capable of challenging for a state championship fell in the quarterfinals to Wayne Valley, who went all the way to William Paterson.

The team had to wait a long time to get back on the court together and was finally able to do so in February but with a change.

The girls weren't practicing with the freshmen or JV teams. It was just one net and the 11 girls perfecting their craft together. That helped create a team bond that was immensely important to this team.

"Every day, every game the girls got better," said Tenafly coach Jeff Koehler. "That was our motto. I think the captains really did a great job of keeping them as a family. You like to have your team close and have them bond but because of COVID they really did."

That started with Koehler and assistant coaches Megan Williams and Cortney Weissenborn and trickled down to the girls.

Under his guidance, Tenafly made history and did so in style. The team went all the way to the sectional championship and topped top-seeded and then-No. 1 Northern Highlands 25-19, 25-20 to win the school's first-ever official sectional title.

As a result, Koehler has been named **NJ.com's 2020-21 Coach of the Year**. Koehler had several close calls in the past but finally got that elusive trophy.

He took over the program in 1998 and made a state championship in 2009 - they didn't have sectional finals prior to the state championship that year. His squad lost to Caldwell and it took a few years to get back to that high point.

Tenafly reached the sectional final three years in a row between 2014 and 2016, but came up short against Ramapo and River Dell twice.

This year's squad needed an extra dose of maturity and intensity considering one positive COVID test would shut the team down for two weeks.

Koehler made sure his girls knew that and the team got the message. The closeness of the team made that a complete non-issue.

"If you want a season, you really have to do this," he said. "When they want to do it themselves, it's a lot easier. That's why they did the family thing with the dinners and hanging out with each other."

Seniors Danielle Korenkov, Zuzanna Buchnajzer and Noa Ben-Ari did a good job in that regard.

They helped bring the best out of a very young group of players that played on JV in 2019. Sophomores Sofia Bell, Meghan Koehler, Anna Taufield and Rylie Theuerkauf were key pieces to the puzzle and grew as the season progressed.

"Rylie's a power hitter but also a finesse and smart hitter. She's really special. Sophia Bell was great in the middle and she'll probably go to the outside next year. Anna Taufield I think is one of the best liberos. She does her job, is very quiet and is a great athlete," Koehler said.

"My daughter Meghan, I feel the setting position is the hardest. You're basically the quarterback of the offense and I was really nervous for her coming in. In the beginning, she started out slow but she really did a phenomenal job of just getting the ball to her hitters."

The group closed the season with a record of 13-3 and more impressively went 16-0 in the opening set of each game.

The closeness of the team didn't even end when the season did. They're still just as close as ever and don't plan on that changing soon.

“It was just a fun season with these girls and it was awesome to do it with my daughter on the team,” Koehler said. “That’s even more special. We’re having another get-together next week because we don’t want it to end.”

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