

Once their championship drive kicked into full gear Saturday night, there was nothing that was going to be able to stop the Lyons volleyball team.

Not even the near-perfect, top-ranked Yuma squad staring them down from the other side of the net. Unlike the Indians, who were playing in their fourth-consecutive state title match, the Lions weren't as experienced with the electric atmosphere of bright lights and raucous crowds the Denver Coliseum presents for the last match of the season.

Perhaps that's what helped them thrive in the moment, making the most of it with a 3-1 (25-17, 21-25, 25-23, 25-17) victory to claim their first state championship since 1986, the fourth in program history, in winning Class 2A.

"The mental dynamic was definitely there; we saw glimpses of it early," coach Mason Johnson said. "We knew we wanted to take the driver's seat as early as possible. This experience meant a lot to us, and I think we took advantage of that psychology aspect of the game."

The title match was nothing short of exhilarating as the two evenly-matched teams took turns exchanging strikes that prevented the other from gaining too much of an advantage.

Lyons started off hot, kicking things off with an impressive first set which they took control of midway through. The Lions held a strong presence up front on the net and forced Yuma to take a pair of early timeouts which the Indians were unable to recover from.

Yuma, however, was quick to show why it was the top seed and had a 25-1 record on the season entering Saturday's finale. The Indians responded with a set victory of their own in the second by claiming six of eight late points.

"When we take timeouts after times like that, our coach just has us close our eyes and has us focus on the things we need to keep doing," said Lyons senior Sarah Stevelinck, who finished with a team-high 22 digs. "That really helps us because it keeps us calm and collected. Then we think about making smart moves instead of just trying to hit the ball hard."

The pivotal point in the match came in the crucial third set that would give either team a strong chance to bring it home. Lyons and Yuma both showed desire as the set saw 14 different tie scores and seven lead changes before the Lions ultimately edged it out by a mark of 25-23.

From there, the Lions sat in the driver's seat Johnson referred to and brought the title home with a convincing 25-17 win in the fourth frame.

"It's unbelievable, unlike anything I've ever felt before," Johnson said. "You wonder if you have what it takes when you talk about it, and when you talk about it, it's taboo. You kind of want to quiet people when they talk about it, too."

"The words 'state champion' have been tossed around a little bit, but I was always worried when it did because expectations are the crux of disappointment, and I didn't want anyone to feel disappointed about our season. It's surreal."

Sophomore Taylor Maguire led Lyons in kills with 22, while senior Ixchel Leeuwenburgh added 12 of her own. Junior Kylen Christiansen finished dishing out a team-high 50 assists.

The Lions finish their season with a 23-5 overall record, capped off with the 2017 Class 2A state title.