

LoneStar Finds A Way At LSC

Written by: [John Tawa](#) in [Club Features](#) April 17, 2017 0



Emma Clothier (4) was a tower of terror for LoneStar when it mattered most Sunday afternoon

LoneStar 16Red captured the third and final 16 Open bid by outlasting **Excel 16 National Red** in a three-set thriller in the fifth-place match at the Lone Star Classic Sunday afternoon in Dallas.

It was going to be a GREAT story no matter which team prevailed...

LoneStar, the pre-season national No. 1 team, had no idea who was going to set the most critical match of the tournament. One of its setters, **Madison Chew**, was knocked out of action by a concussion on Day 1 after a headlong collision with libero **Brooklyn Jackson**, who also was sidelined by a concussion. Its other setter, Florida Atlantic commit **Stephanie Young**, was feeling unsteady after twice being hit in the face while blocking. If she couldn't go...

Excel had no business being in position to play for a bid in the fifth-place match. On the one hand, Will Wiggins' team went 1-2 on Day 1 after losing middle blocker **Jayden Thompson** to an ankle sprain and had to win two sets to 25 to play back into the contending pools. On the other, this gritty group could as easily have been playing for the title after barely losing, 15-13 in the third each time, to both **TAV** and **Houston Skyline** in Gold pool play.

It didn't have to come to this.

LoneStar, which was routed by **TX Image** to start Gold pool play on Saturday night, fell behind immediately Sunday morning to **San Antonio Magic**. Nothing was going right for the tournament's top seed, which looked listless and trailed 16-11 in the first set. A **Raven Rolle** kill seemed to snap the squad out of its doldrums. **Noelle Piatas** served LoneStar into the lead and Jacob Hanan's team closed

on a 14-4 run, capped by Rolle's overpass kill, to steal the first. The second set, which was tight, followed on a Piatas kill.

LoneStar's win, coupled with Texas Image's romp over 1-1 **Houston Juniors**, gave Image the pool and an Open bid.

Excel, which lost a Saturday night heartbreaker to Houston Skyline – it led, 10-9, in Game 3 – rallied to take Game 1 of its Sunday morning match versus TAV. TAV prevailed handily in the second but the third was played point for point. **Emma White's** kill got Excel within 14-13 but **Morgan Christon** broke Wiggins' team's heart for the second time in less than 16 hours with a swing that dusted the baseline.

In the same pool concurrently, Houston Skyline was rallying from behind to top **Woodlands Revolution**, clinching a bid for TAV.

If 0-2 Excel wanted to play for a bid, it would need help.

LoneStar held all the cards. With Houston Skyline entrenched among the top four, it needed only to beat previously-qualified Houston Juniors to clinch a bid. A loss would be devastating but not fatal, however, as the team had already clinched no worse than third in its pool and would get another shot in the fifth-place match.

Excel and Woodlands Revolution, both 0-2 and waiting to play one another, would only have a chance to earn a bid if HJV found a way past LoneStar. That seemed unlikely when LoneStar rocketed to an 8-1 lead to start the match...

Houston Juniors found a way, winning a close second set and then rallying from 12-10 down in the third to topple LoneStar on late kills from **Skylar Fields** and **Kennedy Prince**. Not only did Young take a ball to the face, making her availability uncertain the rest of the way, but pin **Caroline Swan** suffered a high ankle sprain that took her out of action.

Excel had the crack it needed and took advantage by sweeping two close sets from Woodlands Revolution, the second 28-26 on a block from **Avery McCrillis**, who might not even have been in there but for the Thompson injury.

The stands on one side of Court 41 were practically full and spectators were lined up four and five deep on the baselines for the fifth-place match between the Dallas-area clubs. Excel had Thompson back, not as a middle but wearing a libero jersey and scoring points as a serving specialist. LoneStar got Jackson back to play DS and Young was in the lineup despite feeling shaky and having a headache. She'd refused to be checked for a concussion.

"I had to play for the team because we're suffering from a lot of injuries," she said.

"I asked her, 'What do you want to do?'" said Hanan. "She said she wanted to play. We want gamers like that."

LoneStar led the first, 13-10, on a kill by OH **CiCi Hecht** before Excel scored four straight, sparked by the serving of Thompson, to take the lead. Excel did not trail the remainder of the set, took the lead for good on a tip from **Cailey Ousley** and won, 25-22, on a kill from McCrillis.

LoneStar also led 13-10 in the second set but, this time, stretched its advantage to 19-14 thanks to terrific play from Young, Hecht and Piatas. Excel rallied within 19-16 on an ace from White, but LoneStar,

getting great defense from **Maddie Parmelly**, closed on a 6-0 run to win going away and force a third game for everything.

A sensational pass from Excel libero **Kayla Martin** started the third set in which the defensive effort was evident on both sides of the net. Excel won the first point, on a net call, but physical and ultra-efficient middle **Emma Clothier** quickly tied things up for LoneStar.

Excel scored the next two. White took a **Sydney Holcomb** set and wiped the ball off the block. Thompson followed with an ace. She wasn't able to move well enough to play front row but was making a contribution to the cause!

"It was a big piece of the chemistry on the team," Wiggins noted. "Knowing that she had a piece of our success really fired the girls up."

Down 3-1, Clothier's cross-body crush cut the lead to one. Excel responded with two in a row, a tool shot from White and a LoneStar hitting error that was the result of a bad pass. 5-2 Excel for a team filled with fight and grit and hustle.

Hanan was not panicking. His team was 11-3 in three-set matches on the season. He was confident they'd find a way.

Annie Swan scored on the right for LoneStar. Piatas added a kill of her own. Excel's lead was back to one again at 5-4.

The team's exchanged errors before two **Rylie Auchenbach** kills sandwiched a serving error to give Excel an 8-6 lead. The team that started the tournament 0-2 was leading in a bid match as the team's changed sides!

Clothier sought to again pull LoneStar closer with a tremendous blast. But Martin, who was sensational all tournament long, stood in, got her hands up and sent the ball back over the net. LoneStar eventually hit wide, giving Excel a 9-6 lead and ALL the momentum.

"That was an amazing dig," said LoneStar coach Hanan, who admitted to doubts about whether his team would be able to come back. "Momentum started to shift the other way. I called time out and talked about resilience and making positive touches on things to maybe give ourselves a chance."

Young southpawed the second contact deep into the court on the next point to give LoneStar a side out, then went back to serve. She set Clothier for another kill and LoneStar was right back in it, once again down by just one. Clothier followed with a big block to tie the set and then Hecht tooled the block to give LoneStar four straight and the lead! All with Young serving.

"I've been missing a lot of serves lately," she said. "I had to do it for the team to get a bid and get us back in the game."

LoneStar added three more points, including two from Clothier, who hit .843 for the match.

"The will to win...she has it every time," said Hanan.

The 7-0 run, which turned around a 9-6 deficit, was devastating to Excel emotionally.

"I think that's what you try to train all season," said Excel coach Wiggins. "Fundamentals and tactics are relatively common at this level and in this region. These girls know what they're doing. We're trying to train their minds to mitigate the swings and stay focused. But there's a lot on the line and that team was ranked No. 1 by PrepVolleyball.com at one point. You try to drown out that noise with the team by training that mental side. I hope this was a learning point."

Ousley stopped the run with a kill for Excel, which looked like it might draw one point closer still when its serve was poorly passed. But Piatas hit a roll shot from the back row that looked innocent enough but was effective, top spinning to the floor to give LoneStar four match points. Ousley saved one with a right side kill but Parmelly passed serve perfectly on the second match point, Young fed Piatas and the outside smacker found the floor. LoneStar, which won 15 Open here last year while fully healthy, was leaving the LSC with a bid. Fifth place never felt so good!



LoneStar gets it done

Excel, which made it to the Gold pools for the second straight qualifier – it finished T-9 at Big South after going 0-2 on the last day – will have one more crack at Northern Lights in two weeks.

After the loss, Wiggins gathered his team about them and told them that they would earn their bid in Minnesota, just as his 16s team did last year.

"I told them I was proud of them for giving that kind of fight," he added. "There's no reason to hang their head. I love watching that style of play."

"To quote Prep, this team may not have 'star power,' but they really do believe. These girls chop it up out there. They're surgeons. They fight. They lay out and they defend."

"Watch out Minnesota. Here we come!"