

For the Salem High School volleyball team, there is no place like the road. In the 15-year history of the county volleyball tournament, all of which were hosted by Salem, the Lady Lions never won.

Saturday, with the tournament being held in Pekin for the first time, Salem found the Musketeer gym friendly as they beat West Washington and Eastern in convincing fashion on their way to the title.

"I think it's funny that we hadn't won it at home," said SHS Head Coach Straton Thomas. "I talked to the girls and it meant a lot to them. They worked really hard to get it. It is crazy though that we move it and then we win."

The championship match turned out to be the middle one of the round-robin tournament.

West Washington picked up an easy 26-24, 25-16 win over the host Lady Musketeers and looked to be trying to claim their second county title in a row against Salem.

The Lady Lions had different ideas and were really never threatened beating the Senators 25-10, 25-22 and EHS 25-22, 25-12.

Leading 7-4 in the first game of the match against the Lady Senators, Salem went on a 10-1 run, led by two aces from Jordan Eastridge.

Ashley Blankenbaker got a kill and Treasure Hurst hammered down a number of kills during that spurt.

The second game was closer, but Salem was too strong at the net. That play up-front combined with solid back row play kept both Salem and West Washington on their heels.

"We talked all week about how we had to start strong no matter what," Thomas said. "We got our butts kicked a couple of times this week, but playing high-caliber opponents really prepared us for the county tournament.

"We were focused and the girls know they are better hitters than we were last year and we know that we work better as a team this year. The whole ride down here today they were cheering and ready to go and that's the first time it has been this way in a long time."

As good as Salem seemed to be in all facets of the game, the obvious advantage over West Washington and Eastern was at the net.

Hurst was a dominant force in the middle, but Salem had several other hitters who kept the ball moving as well.

Thomas said that any success his team will have this year will start with Hurst and Eastridge, who is the team's libero.

“What I like about Jordan is that she pushes every girl no matter what,” Thomas said. “She is the first person to encourage players after a mistake, but she is also the first one to admit that she made a mistake. She is a great leader. She and Treasure have done a great job with that and I really couldn't ask for more from those two players.”

In the other match, West Washington has an easy time getting past Eastern, 26-24, 25-16.