

For the 9<sup>th</sup> encounter of these preseason games, Birkirkara will face the newly joined in team Zabbar St. Patrick's. Birkirkara have 3 points in their pockets after 2 games while Zabbar St. Patrick's have no points after one game. The coaches and captains for the game are Stefan Decelis and Juliette Vella for Birkirkara and Christ Gatt and Caroline Bugeja for Zabbar St. Patrick's.

Game started a bit uphill for Birkirkara as Zabbar took a 3 point lead in the initial part of the set. Birkirkara managed to equalize the score at 4-4. The players from both sides still were adapting themselves to the rhythm of the game. Both teams were winning points mostly because their opponents were committing mistakes. Birkirkara had a 2 point lead at 10-8 and at this point it was obvious that both teams were suffering from lack of covering. Stanislava Vukicevic from Birkirkara spiked a very strong ball which ended slightly out. Zabbar players were not able to capitalize on this mistake and gave a point back in favour of Birkirkara. A shifting of winning points started for both teams as there was continuation of mistakes were being done. With 3 point lead for Birkirkara, Coach Gatt called for the first time out at 11-14. After the time out Jolanda Paolini served a safe service but when Zabbar players placed the ball over and it was easy for them to earn a point due to bad reception. A good rally was played at 13-14 between both teams and a block by M. Lazarevic allowed Decelis' players to regain control and take the lead to 4 points. Zabbar St. Patrick's clinched one point with a tip and Birkirkara quickly regained the right to serve thanks to Miljana Lazarevic. The pressure on the players in black continued to build up and some more mistakes were committed putting Birkirkara in the lead of 6 points. At this point Coach Gatt requested the second time out for the set to refuel his players. Zabbar St. Patrick's managed to reduce the distance by 2 points but this was not enough as the Zabbarians gave 3 consecutive points back to Birkirkara. Birkirkara players looked more organized in court and managed to win the set 25-16 with a spike from their central player Stanislava Vukicevic.

Player Karolina Maik of Zabbar placed a positioned ball in the centre of Birkirkara court in order to allow her team to take the initial lead but a back court spike from Jolanda Paolini of Birkirkara was the reply to equalize the score. In the initial part of the set both teams were winning points each in order to take the lead in turns. The game got balanced at this time though Birkirkara looked more organized but after a long rally, which Zabbar won using a tip, forced Coach Decelis to request the first time out of the set at 5-6. Another tip by Stephanie Grech allowed Zabbar to take the lead to 2 points. An ace service by Jessica Rodriguez took Zabbar at 4 points lead. The momentum has clearly shifted from Birkirkara to Zabbar St. Patrick. After a winning soft spike by Stephanie Grech, Coach Decelis at 5-11 was again forced to call the second time out of the set. Birkirkara become static while Zabbar started increase their confidence in court. Gaining the right to serve Birkirkara clinched two points but this was not enough. The Zabbarians continued to increase their lead until they were well 14-7 up. Temporarily Birkirkara won another point but Zabbar regained immediately control of the game. With the captain Caroline Bugeja serving another point was won but but a spike by Stanislava Lazarevic gave her teammates temporarily an opportunity to get closer to their opponents. Zabbar players at this point in time were looking confident especially winning points with the tips by Kimberly Grech. After regaining the right to serve, Birkirkara captain Juliette Vella tried to lead back her team into the game. The pressure on the Birkirkara players was being felt and as result of that, more mistakes were done due to lack of concentration. At 22-12 in favour Zabbar, the ladies in black look confident to win the set, when a rotational fault by them was committed. A reaction from the players of Birkirkara was started to be visible. In fact Birkirkara won 3 points in a row, forcing coach Gatt to request a time out at 17-23. A tip in position 2 by Captain Vella gave more hope to her teammates. At this point Zabbar started to feel the

pressure on them but with a tip from Captain Caroline Bugeja was able to point her teammates closer to win the set. A service by Daphne Ciantar managed to close the set at 25-19.

At the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> set Birkirkara, immediately took the lead of 5 points with the services by Stanislava Lazarevic. After gaining one point by the Zabbar, the Birkirkara players replied immediately back and therefore forcing Coach Gatt to take a time out at 1-6. The ladies of Decelis now looked to be a completely different team and with the spikes of Carol Debattista and Stanislava Vukicevic, the lead was now of 7 points. Zabbar players were finding it difficult to catch up with such rhythm from their opponents but a short distraction from Birkirkara players, allowed Zabbar players to clinch 3 points consecutively. Quickly, the players of Decelis regrouped and with the services of Jolanda Poalini, the team took the lead now to 8 points. A miscommunication between Birkirkara players gave the chance to Zabbar to start gaining points but it was only momentarily as Stanislava Lazarevic placed a tip behind the block in position two. Coach Gatt used his 2<sup>nd</sup> substitution for the set and this helped to stop the momentum of their opponents. A tip by Caroline Bugeja caught by surprise the players of Birkirkara to gain one point and with a good service by the latter, Coach Decelis find it appropriate to call for a time out t 18-11 in Birkirkara's favour. The time out served well as Birkirkara regained control and continued to increase their lead. A series of services by Captain Vella and also rotational faults by the players in black allowed Birkirkara to get closer to the 25<sup>th</sup> point. At very long rally at 11-21 saw Zabbar player Kimberley Grech giving another point to their opponents. Zabbar players regain control and started to dictate their own pace by gaining 3 points in a row. A very good and strong spike by Kimberly Grech from Zabbar which was received by Stanislava Lazarevic followed by a tip by Jolanda Paolini allowed the Birkirkara to win point. A tip again by Kimberley Grech gave Zabbar the right to serve but it was Birkirkara to win the point and therefore win the set at 25-15.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Set was crucial for both because Birkirkara had to win the set and therefore win the game and Zabbar had to win the set to equalize the set scores. 2 points by Stephanie Grech gave Zabbar the lead. At 3-0 under Player Stanislava Lazarevic placed a hard spike in the opponent's court to gain their first point but Zabbar afterwards quickly, regained possession of the ball. Zabbar continued to build their confidence point after point and the distance between the two teams was increasing. A service out by Stephanie Grech gave the opportunity to Birkirkara players to bridge the said distance. Serving Captain Juliette Vella aced a point on Stephanie Zerafa, who in return after a solid rally the latter placed the ball in the Birkirkara court to regain control. Long rallies started to be played but as a result this the players were more subject to commit mistakes. The mistakes were getting more in favour to Zabbar St. Patrick's and at 5-10 under Coach Decelis had to call for the first time out of the set. The time out was effective for one point only as Zabbar managed regain control. A shift of points from one side to another started but Daphne Ciantar aced a point on Jolanda Paolini. The second attempt in service by Ciantar failed widely. At 8-13 under player Carol Debattista started serving and therefore putting Zabbar players under pressure. Zabbar St. Patrick managed to stop Debattista's services and also to gain some points but at 15-10, Birkirkara started to reduce the distance between both teams. With 2 points of advantage Coach Gatt called for the first time of the set. An intelligent tip by Kimberly Grech gave again a 3 point lead to her teammates after the time out. A long rally started with both teams trying to put pressure mainly with tips but in the end Birkirkara managed to take the point. The pressure in the court was getting intensified after every point because Birkirkara players were closing the gap by one point and Zabbar were re-widening the gap by one point. Finally at 19-18 in favour of Zabbar, Birkirkara players equalized the score to 19-19 and at this time Coach Gatt for the second time out. Both teams were showing signs

of tension and exhaustion but were trying to avoid to commit mistakes. Birkirkara managed to take the lead by a spike of Carol Debattista. With a 2 point lead for Birkirkara, Stephanie Grech managed to clinch a point to allow the chase by Zabbar to begin again. Although Zabbar managed to equalize the score at 21-21 Birkirkara took the lead again and then the score was equalize at 22-22. Both team were becoming resilient and with Birkirkara taken the lead at 24-22 the pressure was all on the ladies in black. A miscommunication between the Gatt players resulted in the victory of Birkirkara players at 25-22

The final score was Birkirkara vs Zabbar St. Patrick's :- 3-1 (25 – 16 ; 19 – 25 ; 25 – 15 ; 25 – 22). The referee of the match was Dalton Caruana.

