

Rocks battle back, lose on late goal

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It may indeed be the most-used sports cliché of our time — "a game of inches" — but it also qualifies as the best way to describe Thursday's Division I district soccer semifinal between Plymouth Salem and Northville.

After overcoming a two-goal deficit in the first half, the Rocks missed taking the lead in the second half by the narrowest of margins: the width of the crossbar above the Mustang's goal.

Four minutes later, Maggie Ossola slipped between a pair of Salem defenders, dribbled around Salem keeper Heather Jones and deposited the ball into the net to score what would prove to be the game-winning goal in a 3-2 Northville win at Northville.

The Mustangs, who improved to 17-1, moved into the district final opposite the Ann Arbor Huron-Novii winner. Salem bows out at 7-6.

"I was happy with our whole game," said Salem coach Joe Norn. "A month ago, we wouldn't have been able to come back from two goals down.

"We made a couple of mistakes, we missed a couple of chances, but that's going to happen to any team in a game. We stuck to our game plan."

And it nearly pulled the Rocks through.

A match that could have turned what had been an injury-plagued season around for Salem got off to a miserable start. First came the thunderstorms that swept through the area. Then, once the match got underway, lightning struck disguised as the Mustangs' Larissa Fill, who two nights earlier had ended Plymouth Canton's season by scoring the game-winning goal with 2-1 left in the match.

Against Salem, Fill put two in the net beyond Jones before the match was 12 minutes old. Giving a team like Northville — ranked second in the state — a two-goal lead is suicidal.

Ossola assisted on Fill's first score. Giving up an early goal is bad enough; giving up another on a mistake — Fill's second came off a shot that slipped through Jones' hands, with Nicole Cazzullo assisting — can ruin a team.

But the Rocks did not collapse. "In what Nora called 'our most complete game all year,' they battled back to knot it at 2-2 by halftime.

"They're making me turn gray," said Mustangs' coach Ron Meteyer, only half in jest. "But you know, you got two quick goals like that and the kids, but to play back a bit. And (Salem) pushed a player up — why

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wouldn't they, being down two goals? — and our players had trouble adjusting to it."

Getting superior play in the midfield, the Rocks sliced the deficit in half when Nikki Anderson fielded a pass from Mariessa Sarkesian and sent a looping shot from 20 yards out over Northville keeper Katie Kneisel, making it 2-1 with 22:05 still left in the half.

Less than 10 minutes later, Salem got the equalizer, and again it was Sarkesian in the midfield that put the scoring play in motion. Taking possession near the center of the field, the sophomore carried the ball toward the left wing, then slipped a pass through to Jordan Paleusan. Paleusan's shot was similar to Anderson's; it looped over Kneisel and dropped into the net, making it 2-2 with 12:29 left in the half.

The Rocks continued to apply pressure, pushing their defenders forward whenever possible. With 7:45 left before halftime, Meteyer pulled Kneisel — a sophomore — and put Stacey Taylor, a junior, into goal.

"Tonight just wasn't her night," said Meteyer of Kneisel. "The high balls were giving her trouble and she wasn't getting to her line."

The Rocks' Northville coach thought it was more determination than tactics that got Salem back into the game. "You have to give them credit," he said. "It was the caliber of players they had out there."

"We had to tighten up on defense," — as it had been against Canton two days earlier — was the main topic of conversation at halftime. "We tried to emphasize to them that they weren't playing too flat, they weren't getting a jump on the ball," Meteyer said of their half-time chat.

Just like against the Chiefs, the Mustangs responded with a much improved defensive effort over the last 40 minutes. Still, Salem got some chances, the best coming with 31:30 left in the match. A Paleusan shot from the left wing, 22 yards out, got over the outstretched arm of Taylor, only to bang off the crossbar.

With less than 28 minutes left, the Salem defense got caught pushing forward as Ossola fielded a pass from Kelly Anderson and split between the Rocks' defenders. Jones tried to confront her, but Ossola evaded her and slipped the ball into the goal with 27:12 left.

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to play and perform. Every single one of them really gave it their all.

"It was great seeing the team come together, especially after a tough season. We hadn't been winning a lot of games. Our heads were down a bit."

"I was very proud of them. They played well against a good team. Churchill is a very good soccer player. I think they wanted to win it for the seniors who left. They were fired up."

Mercy (5-12-1) played with the lead for much of the game after freshman Christine Herzog scored in the first 10 minutes with an assist from Trudeau.

Trudeau won the ball in the middle, got past a couple of defenders and crossed to Herzog for a one-time shot from 20 yards.

"That was definitely a confidence-builder for the girls," Macioce said. "Once they scored, they knew they could do it. It made a big difference in how they played."

"They went into the game really wanting it. You could tell when they were warming up. They kept a positive attitude the whole time."

Following a Mercy shot, Churchill (6-6-6) went the other way to get the tying goal from Meghan Trainor, who fired a hard shot to the far upper corner.

But the Marlins answered on their next possession, moving the

ball up field to Trudeau, who had time to control the ball in the middle and get set for a shot from 10 yards in front.

It was a short time later the Chargers tied it again with a high, arcing shot from near the left sideline by Kyle LaPorte.

Following a 25-minute delay due to the lightning, the teams returned to play 26 minutes of overtime before settling the issue. The game started at 3:30 p.m. and took nearly three hours to complete.

"It was a really good soccer game; both teams played well," Macioce said. "Churchill had some fast players on the outside and players who could shoot."

"That's what was great. We kept answering back. It was something I knew was in them. We struggled a bit this season. If we got scored on, it was hard to come back. Even though they scored, we kept coming at them, which was really good."

Freshman Cathy Smith was the Mercy goalkeeper and kept the Marlins in the game, according to Macioce.

"She had an amazing game," Macioce said. "She stopped a lot of chances and cleared a bunch of corner kicks. For a freshman pulled up from JV, she really stepped up."

Mercy was scheduled to play Livonia Stevenson for the district championship Saturday.



Gaining control: Livonia Churchill's Meghan Parnell works the ball past Mercy's Bridgette Hunt in Thursday's Division I district semifinal match. Mercy won in double overtime, 3-2.

STAFF PHOTO BY BILL ENGLISH

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"We're used to playing teams straight up. Harrison was set up to play mostly defense. (The Hawks) did a good job; it was a smart play. It just took some adjustment for us."

Russell added the Hawks had their best player, Alex Cicieri, back at the sweeper position, and Harrison goalkeeper Jakki Waldecker made a lot of key saves and had a great game.

The Raiders dominated in the area of shot attempts, however, and scored their second goal 10 minutes into the second half.

Meghan Callahan took the ball up the right wing, and sent a pass behind the defense to Nicole Adena, who maneuvered free of a defender, made a move to her left and put the ball in the corner of the net.

"It was a beautiful goal, but the pass was just sensational," Russell said.

"Nicole was running right on to it. It was a beautifully set-up goal."

With four minutes left, Lauren McKianey sent a lateral pass into the center. Lauren Hogan took it, spun to her left and sent a shot over Waldecker's head

into the upper corner.

"We were very solid," Russell said. "We wanted to make sure we used this game as a tune-up for Saturday. Once we got ahead we wanted to keep playing tough."

"(Harrison) continued to trap in the second half. It's a tough defense to run if you have to be sprinting the whole game, and we were able to wear them down a little bit that way."

A lot of people played well for the Raiders, Russell said, adding Melissa Navas had a strong game at stopper.

"Early in the season she wasn't playing as much," he said. "We had a talk after that. She has totally picked up her play. She's very solid in the center of the field right now."

"Callahan had a great game again. She controls the midfield for us, plays smart defense and offense. She can play all over the field very easily."

"Sara Jakab had a solid game at forward. If she's not the fastest player on the team, she's one of the fastest. Today her crosses were right on the money. She created a lot of opportuni-

ties.

"Christine Taylor generally plays defense, but she also can play anywhere on the field. She played forward today and, along with Nicole, put a lot of pressure on a team that was set for defense."

Russell added he felt good about the overall effort, because the girls played as a team the whole game.

"We didn't score like we could have, but it didn't seem to matter because it was a good game for us going into Saturday as far as unity."

Despite the outcome, Harrison coach Stacey Lange-Punzal thought the Hawks played a good game, too.

"We had been in a slump lately, and I think we finished the season on a strong note," she said. "The progress we made showed in the last game."

"The girls came together and worked hard. It shows we have a bright future for the Harrison girls soccer program."

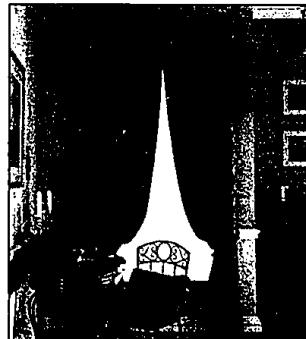
She added Waldecker did a fantastic job, making 21 saves, and Cicieri and Stacey Potrykus were defensive standouts.

"North Farmington had pressure on most of the game," Lange-Punzal said.

"They carried the play to us, but we did hold them off. The goals they scored were hard-fought and quality. There were no gimme goals there."

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