

Rochester claims Division 1 soccer title

BY C.J. RISAK
STAFF WRITER

One — that proved to be the number that matters. And it belonged to Rochester, which nursed a first-half goal scored by Christopher Ticholir all the way to a Division 1 state championship, edging Salem 1-0 Saturday at Novi Meadows Field.

For the Rocks, it was their first loss after 17 straight wins; they finish the season at 20-6.

For the Falcons, it was their fifth shutout in six state tournament matches — a span in which they surrendered just one goal. They finish the season at 21-2-1.

Salem was making its sixth appearance in the state finals, with one championship (1995) to its credit. Rochester was making its first.

In fact, it was Rochester's first-ever state championship in any sport.

In a game featuring teams with great offensive strength, few believed one goal would be enough to win. But it was.

"I would never have guessed we'd be shut out," Salem coach Ed McCarthy said. "That was never even a possibility. But Rochester did a great job defensively, and they did a great job on (Kevin) Savitskie."

"I'm heartbroken." The Rocks had relied on Savitskie and Brian Popeney to supply their offensive spark all season long — which made Rochester's task straightforward enough. Just stop those two.

That's something teams have been trying to do all season and have failed. Both have scored more than 20 goals.

"All year long, we've played strong defensively," Rochester coach Todd Hough said. "We've seen all the top soccer players in the state except for Popeney, and we have tremendous depth on defense."

Indeed, the only goal in the tournament Rochester has allowed was an own goal surrendered against Sterling Heights Stevenson in the semifinals. And yet, even with such a strong defense, did Hough believe one goal would be enough?

"No," he answered, "I didn't. I

told them at halftime that if you go back in the state final archives, one goal is usually the difference. I just told them to play with heart."

Certainly there were several turning points in this match, but it must start with Ticholir's goal, scored with 9:32 left in the half and with Rochester going against a strong wind. Gonzalo Napolio took a direct kick from 40 yards and sent the ball into the box in front of Salem keeper Tom Huls. Ticholir got to it and tapped it in for the only goal of the match.

Defense took over after that. And although the Falcons were appearing in their first state final, it was the second in a row for defender Adam Brent, who played for co-champ University of Detroit-Jesuit last year.

Brent was one of the players assigned to marking Savitskie (along with Napolio), and he did it well; Savitskie was never a factor.

Popeney was, but with most his delivery options clogged, he was effectively neutralized by Ryan Omilion and Ticholir. Still, the threat was always there, particularly on direct kicks.

That's where keeper Gabe Winberry came into play, saving a half-dozen scoring opportunities — three on direct from Popeney. The last came with 4:06 to play; Popeney's restart got to Steve Shull, who redirected it at the goal, only to be stopped by Winberry.

"I saw a guy coming in and he hit a shot low," the senior keeper said. "I didn't have time to react, to get down. I just dove at the ball, trying to hit at anything I could. It just hit me and popped out."

It was the kind of play the 6-foot-6 Winberry, in his first season as a keeper, has been delivering all season. "He's a 6-6 monster out there," Hough said.

One other "one" factor that favored Rochester throughout: a step. The Falcons always seemed to be one step quicker. Certainly they listened well to their coach, particularly in the closing minutes as he screamed, "First to the ball."

They did just that, and eliminated Salem in the process.

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Knights lose in final to East Lansing, 2-1

BY WARTY BUCHER
STAFF WRITER

Leave it to coach Andy Wagstaff to put things in proper perspective.

After his youthful Bloomfield Hills Lahser boys soccer squad dropped the state championship game Saturday afternoon to East Lansing, he acknowledged the team's sensational playoff run and looked to the future.

"It's no consolation to the players right now, but it's a tremendous accomplishment for them just to play in this championship game," said Wagstaff. "Let's hope they can get back here next year."

East Lansing gained a measure of revenge by defeating Lahser, 2-1, at Lowell High School for the Division II state championship. It was a rematch of the 1999 state title game that Lahser won in overtime, 1-0.

"We didn't talk a lot about that game two years ago. We just wanted to stay focused on what we had to do to win this game," said veteran East Lansing coach Nick Archer. "It's just a coincidence and it certainly added a lot of interest that it happened to be the same two teams as 1999."

"We knew a lot about (Lahser) and they knew a lot about us. We played them to a 2-2 tie back in August," he said. "They certainly have a lot of talent."

Most of that talent will be back, and that's what had Wagstaff excited about next season. Only three of Lahser's starters against East Lansing were seniors, including goalie Brandon Reed, midfielder Ryan Drutchas — who was on that 1999 team — and forward Glen Wicklund. The lone junior starters were sweeper Ryan

Doyle and midfielder Rob Ranney.

The remaining players were sophomores and freshmen.

"I've got a very, very young team and I think we'll be back again and hopefully go one step further next year and win it," said Wagstaff, whose team finished the season with an 18-2-4 overall record. "I can't ask for anything more than what the guys gave today," he said. "They gave me everything, and, East Lansing is a very strong team. They're well-coached, have big, athletic players and have more upperclassmen than what we've got and that probably showed in the end."

Lahser's youthful exuberance showed itself at the game's onset.


"The Knights controlled the first 20 minutes of action, scoring seven minutes into the game to take a quick 1-0 lead. Sophomore Bobby Casalou booted the ball into a crowd of players on a restart and Ranney used his height advantage and leaping ability to head the ball past Trojan goalie Pete Boes."

East Lansing slowly began to pick up its play. Finally, with just 49 seconds remaining in the first half, the Trojans tied the game on a restart when junior forward Kevin Hagan headed in the ball on an assist from Dan Kelly.

"We did come out strong and got the lead. I don't know if we got burned out or not," said Wagstaff. "There's never a good time to give up a goal, but to give it up with 49 seconds left in the half, it was heartbreaking. That was a bit of a sucker-punch for us."

It appeared as if the game was headed into overtime like the 1999 clash. But, with just 5:51 remaining, East Lansing's John Tshimama booted in the game-winning goal.

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