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Poised Grafton girls take control early against Neenah in 3-0 triumph

Soccer may be the epitome of a team sport, but there was no mistaking who stole the show in Grafton's quarterfinal game at the WIAA girls' state tournament last Thursday.

Alyssa Arnold put her strong, accurate right foot to great use in leading the Black Hawks to a 3-0 win over Neenah.

In the 19th minute, the junior midfielder gave her team all the offense it needed when she lofted a free kick from the right side of the Neenah box. The ball floated over keeper Brooke Hiltunen, who had strayed off line, and landed inside the far post.

With less than five minutes left in the first half, Arnold came up big again.

This time, she launched a perfectly placed corner kick from the right side that sailed in front of the net. Hiltunen got her hands on the ball, but it bounced free and was immediately headed into the net by an alert Tess Safstrom.

Grafton took a 2-0 lead into halftime and was never seriously threatened again.

"I think we just got some good opportunities to score, and we wanted to take advantage of them," Arnold said.

"That's what you have to do, especially in these kind of games."

Any thoughts of a Neenah comeback were dashed early in the second period.

In the 46th minute, senior forward Carley Pfannerstill outraced the Rockets' defense to a loose ball and scored a breakaway goal that gave the Hawks a 3-0 cushion.

After seeing his daughter lead the first-half surge, Grafton coach Don Arnold had no doubt about what his team needed to do the rest of the way.

"It's attack, attack and attack," he said. "We had to stay aggressive. If we had laid back on defense, we would have lost, 3-2."

The Hawks finished with an 8-4 edge in shots. Pfannerstill, who had a team-best 22 goals entering the game, took half of the attempts.

Grafton's hard-nosed approach allowed it to keep the ball on Neenah's end of the field during much of the second half.

"It was close early. Neenah possessed the ball a little more than we did," coach Arnold said. "They have a good passing team."

But Grafton's superior skills and experience showed as the game unfolded. With the Hawks appearing in the state tournament for the fifth straight year, nearly all their players had been on the big stage several times before.

"It does help having this many players who know what to expect," coach Arnold said.

"I think you're a little nervous before the first game, but they were able to put all that stuff behind them a little more quickly."

The win continued a late-season roll for Grafton, which scored its ninth straight victory and improved to 20-6-2 for the season. The Hawks advanced to a semifinal game Friday against Madison West.

Neenah finished 15-7-2.

Image Information: THE GRAFTON BLACK HAWKS took early control in its WIAA Division 1

soccer quarterfinal game against Neenah on Thursday. Junior midfielder Alyssa Arnold (above) opened the scoring with a first-half goal in the 3-0 victory. Photo by Sam Arendt