Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
Tuesday, 19 June 2012 21:24

Momentum not enough to carry Grafton past physical Madison West

Coming off a resounding win the previous night, the Grafton Black Hawks appeared ready to soar again in the WIAA state girls' tournament at Uihlein Soccer Park last Friday.

A spoiler named Madison West had other ideas.

Dodging a flurry of Grafton shots in the closing minutes, West hung on for a 1-0 win in a Division 1 semifinal game that could have easily gone the other way.

Although the Hawks generated more offensive chances, they couldn't overcome a defensive miscue early in the second half.

In the 43rd minute, West midfielder Emma Guilfoil controlled a loose ball near the left side of the Grafton box and launched a shot to the far post. The ball eluded the leap of keeper Alissa Viste and found the net.

The score came on West's only shot on goal in the game and was just enough to hand the Hawks a tearful season finale.

"It was just one of those things. We failed to clear a ball, and they got a well-placed shot," Grafton coach Don Arnold said.

"It wasn't like that was the end of the game. We still had a lot of time left."

But the quick-strike Hawks — who outscored foes, 45-4, during a nine-game winning streak entering the match — had no more magic.

In the final 10 minutes, Grafton applied constant pressure to get the equalizer. The rush included two corner kicks and a 25-yard free kick by Alyssa Arnold that put the ball in front of the West net.

But each time, amid a tangle of players, a shot sailed awry or was deflected, and the Regents escaped. Sophomore keeper Meredith Thompson had two saves during the flurry.

The Hawks finished the game with an 8-1 edge in shots and had seven corner kicks to West's four. Arnold, a junior midfielder, took half of Grafton's shots.

"We had our chances, but (West) had a lot of players in the box at the end," coach Arnold said. "It was tough to get the ball through there."

More telling was Grafton's inability to take charge early. Despite controlling the ball much of the first half, the Hawks couldn't crack West disciplined defense.

"I thought we came out a little too slow," coach Arnold said. "I kept telling them, 'Push forward, attack.'"

Senior forward Carley Pfannerstill, who led Grafton with 23 goals this season, also sensed a missed opportunity.

"We didn't make the most of our chances in the first half," she said. "We had two or three good chances at the end, but we weren't aggressive enough earlier in the game."

The match paired two teams that had overcome early season struggles and entered the tournament playing their best soccer. Grafton hadn't lost since May 12, and West was 10-1-1 in its last 12 games.

Not surprisingly, there was plenty of physical contact. The Hawks received three of five yellow cards issued in the game, four of them in the second half.

The win improved West's season record to 17-7-2 heading into Saturday's state title game against De Pere.

Grafton finished 20-7-2 and saw a memorable late-season run end. After struggling with inconsistent play and placing fourth in the North Shore Conference with a 4-3 record, the Hawks came on strong down the stretch.

Their tournament run included a 5-2 upset of top-ranked Cedarburg in a sectional title game

June 9.

Team unity was the key to success, Grafton players agreed.

"We started out slow but came together and played really good soccer at the end of the year," Pfannerstill said.

The Hawks fell short in their bid to reach a state final for the first time since 2010, when they took second in Division 2. They made their 10th state tournament appearance this spring.

In addition to Pfannerstill, Grafton will lose eight other players to graduation: Viste, forward Hannah Knauer, midfielders Gabi Kuester, Emma Fatla, Tess Safstrom, Amanda Lorge and Corey Janssen and defender Symone Wright.

Their contributions were not lost on coach Arnold, who spent several minutes consoling his team after its toughest loss of the year.

"I would say this is probably the most special team I've ever had," said Arnold, who has coached Grafton High School soccer since 1992 and this season guided the girls' team to its fifth straight state appearance.

"To see how they have worked hard and improved as players and as people is amazing. I am so lucky to have been part of a team with these girls."

Image Information: THE GRAFTON BLACK HAWKS had their dreams of a Division 1 state soccer title blocked in the semifinals by a very physical Madison West team. Photos by Sam Arendt