

Near-miss in sectional final ends Rockets' dream season

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Too-close-for-comfort became a way of life for the Cedar Grove-Belgium girls' soccer team during its memorable postseason run this spring.

In advancing to a WIAA Division 3 sectional final last weekend, the Rockets won three straight games by the narrowest of margins — a shootout victory, followed by two one-goal squeakers.

But the suspense didn't end with Cedar Grove-Belgium smiles Saturday at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, where Racine Prairie emerged with a 1-0 decision that ended the Rockets' season — and snapped their school-record 17-game winning streak.

"This was by far the toughest team we've played this year," Cedar Grove-Belgium coach Papi Pozo said after watching his team give second-ranked Prairie all it could handle.

"They had somebody who could stay with all our players the whole game. We just couldn't get anything going offensively."

In particular, Prairie (16-7-3) used its speed and athleticism to closely mark senior midfielder Hannah Kaul, Cedar Grove-Belgium's field general.

Kaul, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee recruit who joined the Rockets (19-5-2) at mid-season, shook free of the pressure to create a few scoring chances, but it wasn't enough to overcome a 1-0 halftime deficit.

Prairie got the only goal it needed in the 20th minute.

After Carolyn Murphy's corner kick from the left side sailed over the hands of goalkeeper Kristen Slotman, a defender tried to clear the ball. However, when a scramble ensued, the ball was redirected by the Hawks' Kate Lieberman and rolled into the net.

Cedar Grove-Belgium — which was playing in its first-ever sectional title game — still had plenty of time to rally, but Prairie was able to ride the momentum of the early advantage for much of the game.

"I think one of the problems we had was that we haven't had to play from behind very much this season," Pozo said.

"We didn't keep our composure, and that hurt us."

The Rockets were outshot, 12-11, but had several good scoring chances, most notably on two shots by Kaul.

In the 26th minute, she lofted a free kick from the right angle that keeper Elynn Kann snared in front of the net with a leaping grab.

In the 78th minute, Kaul dribbled free of two defenders and had a one-on-one chance with Kann deep in the box, but the keeper smothered the ball for a save.

Racine Prairie also kept the Rockets on their toes with counterattacks that helped neutralize

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their offense.

"We have a young team, and our inexperience showed a little bit," said Pozo, whose starting lineup included four freshmen, including standout forward Halie Schieffer.

"But I'm really proud of these girls. They accomplished so much this season. I was expecting a good season with a young team, but getting all the way to a sectional final is beyond what I could have imagined."

Pozo singled out the effort of Kaul, whose leadership was crucial to the Rockets' success, including a share of the Central Lakeshore Conference title.

"I thanked Hannah before the game for everything she has done for us this season," said Pozo, who completed his 11th year as the Rockets' head coach.

"Having her made all the difference for us. I was just happy to go along for the ride."

Prairie advanced to Friday's Division 3 state semifinals against Neenah St. Mary Central. In the other semifinal at Uihlein Soccer Park in Milwaukee, La Crosse Aquinas will face New Holstein.

The winners will meet for the title at 10 a.m. Saturday.

CG-Belgium 2, Kettle Moraine Lutheran 1 (2 OT)

Schieffer scored twice as the Rockets upset the defending Division 3 state champion on its own field in a sectional semifinal game June 10.

Schieffer provided the game winner early in the second overtime when she slipped past two defenders, corralled a pass from Kaul and drove a shot past the Lutheran keeper.

The clutch play in the 92nd minute ended a hard-fought contest in which the teams battled through 70 scoreless minutes after exchanging early goals.

Schieffer put Cedar Grove-Belgium on the board first with an unassisted goal in the fourth minute.

Samantha Hoerchner pulled the Chargers even in the 20th minute with a goal assisted by Paige Ottow.

"It was a great effort by Halie," Pozo said. "She hadn't scored in the two games before that, but I told her to keep stepping up, and she did."

Lutheran, the state's top-ranked Division 3 team for most of the season, finished the year 18-4-1.