

# Freshman Sara Chernelich delivers for Pennington girls soccer on biggest stage



Pennington's Sara Chernelich (2) kicks the ball against Allentown during the Mercer County Tournament girls soccer final at Ackerson Field on Thursday night in Hopewell Twp.. (Rich Hundley III/ For The Trentonian)



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HOPEWELL TWP. — Sara Chrnelich wasn't expecting to start the Mercer County Tournament final, but when Kendall Malmros picked up an injury in training the day before, it was her name that veteran coaches Dr. Bill Hawkey and Pat Murphy called into the 11.

Then Chrnelich delivered on the biggest stage.

The freshman scored the game's lone goal to lift the Pennington School girls soccer team to a 1-0 victory over Allentown and its fourth straight county crown and record 13th overall.

"I didn't expect to start, (so) hearing my name from the beginning, it was a feeling I never felt before," Chrnelich said. "I'm forever grateful for that."

Chrnelich watched the Red Hawks win the MCT title last season from the stands as an eighth grader, and couldn't wait to be part of the team this season.

She's quickly making a name for herself on the local soccer scene.

"Love her energy, love her soccer IQ," Hawkey said. "Just everything about her is fun to watch. She gets better every week and she works hard at it. All the credit to her."

The deciding goal showed her quality.

Chrnelich controlled a pass from Hailey Adamsky and dinked the ball over the top of the goalkeeper, who had come off her line to cut down the angle.

“I saw the keeper coming at me and I’m like, ‘I have to chip this,’” said Chrnelich, who has six goals on the season.

“She’s been great,” sophomore midfielder Meg Balerna said. “We have a lot of good freshmen, but she is one of the ones out there playing really consistently and getting a lot of good goals for us. She’s performed really well.”



Allentown's Colleen Fanning, left, and Pennington's Sara Chernelich, right, chase after the ball during the Mercer County Tournament girls soccer final at Ackerson Field on Thursday night in Hopewell Twp.. (Rich Hundley III/ For The Trentonian)

If there were any nerves for such a big occasion, Chernelich brushed them off quickly.

"It was more anxious. I was ready to play," she said. "All the captains and the older girls were like 'it's fine, it's just a game.' They've helped me a lot. I have a big goals for myself and they are helping me make my goals and lift me up and treat me not as a freshman but as one of their teammates."

There's still more work to be done this season.

Pennington has a regular-season game against Princeton Day next Tuesday followed by the Prep A Tournament as it tries to reclaim a title it lost last season to Hun.

“As a team, we know hard work pays off, so we have to keep working and working,” Chrnelich said. “I’m hoping this is one of many good moments that happens.”