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<https://www.nj.com/highschoolsports/2023/10/pennington-passes-major-test-against-nationally-ranked-foe.html>

With her angle to the net cut off, Pennington senior **Hailey Adamsky** reversed course, looked behind her and saw the greatest scorer in school history wide open. The choice, in that moment, was easy. The UPenn commit dished the ball off to Villanova commit **Morgan Kotch** and let her go to work.

Kotch had someone step to her immediately but side-stepped that defender and took off toward the end line. Two more girls tried to tie up her feet and knock the ball away, but Kotch pushed through and tapped the ball around another defender before fighting through a second attempted tackle.

That move opened up just enough space to shoot and before a racing defender could close in, Kotch drilled the ball on the ground and just past the keeper to give Pennington a lead against Rutgers Prep. Five minutes later, Adamsky scored off an assist from Kotch and Pennington had all the offense it needed. Rutgers Prep made a late push on Monday afternoon, but it was not enough.

In a battle of nationally-ranked unbeaten, Pennington came away with a 2-1 win and a Prep championship. "That goal barely went in, but when it did and we got on top, it felt so good," said Kotch, who ends her career with a school-record 108 goals. "We had to play ahead against a team like this and I saw a chance to make a play there. The fact that they were nationally-ranked higher than us encouraged us to come out and go even harder. We were kind of the underdogs, but we came out on top here and that's all that matters."

Last fall, Pennington finished the year unbeaten and won the Prep A title, while Rutgers Prep took home the Prep B championship. This season, they decided to combine the tournaments and ever since that choice was made, everyone could see this massive showdown between the two defending champs coming. Rutgers Prep, No. 1 in the [NJ.com](#) Top 20, came in ranked No. 7 in one national poll. Pennington is not an NJSIAA member, so it is not eligible to be ranked in the [NJ.com](#) Top 20, but this is an elite program and the Red Hawks came into this game ranked No. 17 in that same national poll.

This was the type of matchup you dream of.

It became a reality at 4:02 p.m. when Pennington took the first kick.

The level of play lived up to the expectations and the pace was going at a speed that makes your heart race and lets your emotions run high. It was the biggest game of the season and both teams played like it.

Kotch hit the post early in the first half as Pennington came out ready to rip. Then, Rutgers Prep got a chance with the keeper out of the net. The shot went wide though. That sequence made Pennington hold its breath and the Red Hawks were fortunate that its slip-up did not lead to a goal.

A few minutes later, Kotch got the ball at feet again and this time, she did not miss. The senior avoided five defenders and slipped the shot past the keeper. In that moment, she just wanted it more. Kotch did not get to play much during a COVID-shortened season in 2020. The last three years, she has scored 105 times.

That play against Rutgers Prep was the epitome of what Kotch is as a player and why she's been the state's best offensive player. What's crazy is that she came through with an even better play on her assist. Kotch threaded a perfect pass across the field and right onto a charging Adamsky.

The keeper came off the line, but it was a bang-bang play and Adamsky tucked the ball into an open net. It was the first time Rutgers Prep had trailed by two goals all season and only the second time it trailed at all.

"Morgan handed that ball right to my feet and if I didn't score there, it would have been bad," said a laughing Adamsky, who ended the year with 20 goals and 21 assists. "I had to finish that off and I'm glad we went up 2-0. That helped our confidence and really got us going."

At halftime, Pennington clearly had the better play and that two-goal lead seemed unsurmountable.

Rutgers Prep did find a way to give itself though and it played much better in the last 20 minutes of the game. Virginia commit **Addison Halpern** was being marked all game and it was hard to get her the ball without a second defender closing in on her and cutting off an angle to shoot.

The star junior was able to get a few opportunities on free kicks though and with 18 minutes left in the game, she quick-kicked a ball after a foul and caught Pennington's defense sleeping. Her shot kissed off the inside of the post and bounced into the net. Halpern took off running after the goal, picking the ball up in the net and returning it to midfield, knowing that Rutgers Prep could not waste any time.

Pennington's defense did not crack again though and sophomore **Sara Chnelich** made sure Halpern did not get a chance to tie the score. She was all over Halpern from the start of the championship game and had the support of a back line that featured **Arden Galvelis, Olivia Davis, Alexandra Van Arsdale** and **Lina Ballman**. Chnelich's effort in the midfield was matched by **Sophia Murphy** and **Meg Balerna**. Keepers **Katie Dwyer** and **Ava Brochon** splits halves in net for Pennington.

"(Addison) is an insane player and I knew that coming into it," said Chnelich. "The defense had my back the whole time and the whole back line was helping me. I just stayed with her, remembered to stay calm and just played my game while defending her. We proved to everyone what level we could play at today. We played our own game all year and we did not let any team effect the way we play."

**Maya Raghanundanan** started at forward alongside Kotch and Adamsky, while **Kendall Malmros** and **Brianna Turner** came in off the bench and gave Pennington valuable minutes in the championship game.

The Red Hawks combined effort against Rutgers Prep (16-1) capped off a perfect 21-0 season and extended a 39-game unbeaten streak. Last year, Pennington went unbeaten (17-0-1) for the first time since 2008. **Pennington coach William Hawkey** is one of a handful of coaches in the state history with more than 500 wins and his program has featured a lot of talented players over the last four decades.

This is one of the best teams that Pennington has ever had, and it proved it on the field.

If this was last season, Pennington and Rutgers Prep probably both finish undefeated with prep titles in hand and we could have been left to wonder who was the best. Now, we know.

"When I heard we were combining the tournaments, I was hyped," said Adamsky. "We were undefeated and nationally-ranked and they were undefeated and nationally-ranked. It was going to be a good match and everyone knew it. This is the perfect way for us to end our high school career."

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