

Pennington girls soccer completes perfect season with Prep state title



The Pennington School girls soccer team poses for a photo with the championship trophy after winning the prep state title on Monday. (Kyle Franko/ Trentonian Photo)



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PENNINGTON — Simply perfection.

Those two words sum up the Pennington girls soccer side's season after its hard-fought 2-1 victory over formerly undefeated Rutgers Prep on Monday in the Prep state championship game.

On a day in which it dominated the first half to take a 2-0 lead and then hung on in the second, Pennington was able to win a second straight state title and complete a 21-0 season in which it crushed the opposition by a staggering margin of 117 goals to nine.

In addition, Pennington ran its unbeaten streak to 39 games and became just the second Red Hawk team to finish the year with an unblemished record if you don't include the Covid season in which it went 4-0. The first one to get through an entire season by winning every game without a draw was the 2008 side that also won the mythical national championship.

"It's hard to say there was any team that was better," said Dr. Bill Hawkey, who in his 37th year as the Pennington head coach. "We've had some great teams over the years. The 2008 team was special, but this is right up there as special.

"We don't think that way (about going undefeated). The goal is to win championships. We hold the girls to high expectations and everything just

came together. We knew this group was special when they arrived here as freshmen.”

One of those special freshman, of course, was Morgan Kotch. She went out in style on Monday by opening the scoring on a point-blank blast after dribbling her way through the box with 15:21 remaining in the first half. It was the 37th goal of the season and the 108th in her career for Kotch, which is a school record for both boys and girls.

Less than five minutes later the Pennington lead was up to 2-0 when Hailey Adamsky took a pretty pass from Kotch and scored her 20th of the season with a well-placed shot that beat Rutgers Prep’ keeper Syrai Parker. This was just the sixth goal the Somerset County side had conceded all year.

With a 2-0 lead after a first half in which it was nearly in complete control, it was understandable Pennington seemed to get a little too comfortable and came out a bit flat after the restart. Truth be told, Pennington had also won so many of its games by comfortable margins it wasn’t exactly used to having to go hard for 80 minutes.

For its part, Rutgers Prep (16-1) picked up its game as well and was able to cut the lead in half on the 29th goal of the year by Addison Halpern with 18:08 remaining.

Halpern's goal was on a 25-yard free kick in which she alertly unleashed a bullet in the high upper corner of the net before the Pennington wall could fully set up.

There were a few more nervous moments from there as Rutgers Prep continued to press the attack, but a Pennington back line anchored by Germany's Lina Ballmann stood firm.

Although they don't get as much fanfare as some of their teammates, the usual valuable contributions were turned in by midfielders Sophia Murphy and Meg Balerna. Throughout the year these two always seemed to win more than their share of 50-50 balls to set up Kotch and Adamsky in attack.

"We knew from the start, our girls have been willing this for four years," said Murphy when asked about accomplishing a perfect season. "Our seniors built this culture. We love each other and that's the reason we won. This is what we've been building for four years. It's worth it. We won all our titles. This is it."

Echoed midfielder Sara Chernelich: "Our chemistry was insane this year. Our captains (Adamsky, Kotch and Murphy) put the team first and we have the best team bond. It (a 21-0 record) is crazy, but it was all for the team. We love each other and played together."

What Pennington also did is win game after game after game to go down as one of the greatest in Mercer County history.

Rutgers Prep (16-1) 0 1 – 1

Pennington (21-0) 2 0 – 2

Goals: RP-Halpern. P-Adamsky, Kotch. Assists: P-Kotch. Shots: RP-8, P-10.

Saves: RP-Parker 4, P-Dwyer 4.