

Pennington girls soccer completes undefeated season with 16th Prep A state title



Pennington players pose for a photo after winning the Prep A state title over Oak Knoll on Wednesday. (Rick Fortenbaugh/ Trentonian Photo)



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PENNINGTON — It's now 16 Prep Class A state championships for the Pennington girls soccer side over the last two decades and there are no signs of this freight train slowing down any time soon.

Competing in the state final on its own pitch Wednesday afternoon, a very young Pennington team was in complete control and the result was a 4-0 cruise over Oak Knoll to complete a dream 17-0-1 undefeated season.

Oak Knoll (17-2-1) came into this game with just one loss and a player (Riley Cross) who was leading the state with 46 goals, but from the outset it was obvious Pennington was operating on a much higher level.

As for Cross, other than one shot that hit the crossbar in the first half, she was practically invisible against a Pennington defense that limited the visitors to five shots and conceded just eight goals the entire season.

Credit a back line calmly anchored by Germany's center half Lina Ballmann and the strong marking of freshman Sara Chrnelich on Cross for much of Pennington's defensive dominance.

Offensively, Pennington's outstanding passing game had Oak Knoll futilely chasing the ball all game as it repeatedly worked effective combinations up and down the field.

After Morgan Kotch opened the scoring with her 40th goal of the season 10 minutes into the first half, Pennington buried Oak Knoll with a three-goal explosion in the second half.

Megan Balerna made it 2-0 off a pass from Kotch, who dribbled her way to the goal line before putting in a cross. Laney Keith got the third goal on an assist from Mackenzie Kotch that was part of a pretty build-up.

Finally, Morgan Kotch completed the scoring with a blast into the far upper corner with 8:08 remaining.

"They have their version (Cross) of Morgan Kotch so part of the plan was to try to neutralize her," said Pennington's veteran coach Bill Hawkey. "We picked a freshman Sara Chnelich to have that assignment, and she just took it and ran with it."

Echoed Ballman: "Sara shadowed her the whole game and did an awesome job on her. She helped us a lot, so we really didn't have to do anything on defense."

Pennington has had so many great teams it's hard to compare one to the others, but this one has to rank right up there among its best. What's more, it started only two seniors in the championship game.

"This team had very good balance," Hawkey said. "And it had really good depth, too."

While Morgan Kotch and her 41 goals understandably got many of the headlines, as Hawkey said it was the team's balance that really make it tough to play.

Adding Ballmann to an already formidable cast of players, of course, just made Pennington that much better.

"I always wanted to play in America," said Ballman, whose game reminds of the great German and Arsenal fullback Per Mertesacker. "I can't tell you how exactly, but I looked at a lot of schools and somehow I ended up going to Pennington.

"Also (I came here) because of (co-coach Patrick) Murphy. I would like to thank him because he wanted the most for me. I really didn't have any expectations when I came here but it turned out to be awesome."

Ballmann indicated she will only play in America for one year, although Pennington is hoping it can convince her to come back. No matter what happens on that front it was a real pleasure to watch her play.

“She’s just an amazing kid with incredible poise,” said Hawkey. “She took the risk to come over here sight unseen and was a wonderful addition to the team. The energy she has. And she’s a left foot player. We had a sense she could play but she exceeded all of our expectations.”

Oak Knoll (17-2-1) 0 0

Pennington (17-0-1) 1 3 – 4

Goals: Morgan Kotch 2, Balerna, Keith. Assists: Davis, Mackenzie Kotch, Morgan Kotch, Keiths: Shots: OK-5. P22. Saves: OK-Boggier 10. P-Brochon 1, Dwyer 2.

