

## Prairie boys make soccer history

Written by Jim Ecker

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It took eight tries, but the Cedar Rapids Prairie boys soccer team finally cracked the glass ceiling and reached the state tournament for the first time in school history Saturday.

The sixth-ranked Hawks edged Bettendorf, 1-0, in the Class 3A substate finals at John Wall Field on a goal by sophomore Joel Collett in the second half.

Prairie (14-3) will face Ankeny Centennial (18-1) in the quarterfinals of the state tournament Thursday at 5:05 p.m. at the Cownie Soccer Complex in Des Moines.

The Hawks collected their 13th shutout of the season and leaped into each other's arms when the defensive struggle ended in a light drizzle.

"It feels absolutely incredible," said Prairie goalkeeper Alec Balta. "I've been in this game (the substate finals) three times out of my four years here.

"It's heartbreaking when you lose this game, but it feels absolutely incredible to finally get through."

Prairie lost in the substate finals in 2012 and 2014 before the seniors like Balta got they wanted this season.

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"It feels amazing," said senior Logan Rinderknecht, who leads the Hawks with 16 goals. "Coming so close every time, it's finally a great feeling to make it to state. It's been a dream.

"It's good to set Prairie standards and kind of leave a legacy behind."

Collett, a left-footed kicker, drilled a shot from about 35 yards into the far right corner of the net for the game's only tally early in the second half.

"I saw that it was going to be on target, but I thought the keeper could have saved it," he said. "Then I think back and we had the wind at our backs, so that could have been a factor.

"I was just so happy, because I really didn't expect it," said Collett. "Right away I thought about going to state when I scored that goal."

Prairie's air-tight defense kept Bettendorf (8-11) at bay the rest of the game, making life comfortable in goal for Balta.

"My defense is incredible. That's all I can say," Balta remarked. "They make it so easy as a goalkeeper. They make it so easy and so much fun to be a goalkeeper on this team.

"I love those guys," he said. "We're the best of friends. The chemistry is just incredible between us."

Prairie Coach Curt Lewis relished the victory after so many near-misses during his 12 years as head coach.

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"They worked hard, they dedicated themselves, they bought in, they believed, they got along," he said. "We haven't had any serious problems throughout the season. We're really a family."

Now the Prairie family will be making its first trip to the state tournament in school history. The Hawks are not sure what to expect on the big stage in Des Moines.

"We've never been there, but I honestly cannot wait to find out," said Balta. "I'm pumped."

Nathan Seaberg, Bettendorf's leading scorer with 18 goals, missed the game with a shoulder injury.