

## Lions overcame tragedy for trip to state

Written by Tom Fruehling

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A season that began in unimaginable tragedy for the girls on the Linn-Mar soccer team is ending with them back in the state tournament after a year's absence.

They'll open against undefeated and Class 3A top-ranked Ankeny Thursday at 5:45 p.m. at the Muscatine Soccer Complex.

For the 10th-ranked Lions, it will be a fresh start after two months of heartache.

The team held its first meeting of the season on April 1 at the home of senior co-captain Erica Noyes. While her mom Martha was fixing a meal inside, her dad Richard was grilling outside.

With the players gathered on the deck, Erica's father collapsed and died from a heart attack a few feet away.

The Lions have worn wristbands with the initials RFN all season in honor of a beloved parent and well-known local optometrist.

"We've had to overcome adversity," said senior co-captain Christina Swenson following

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Monday night's 2-1 victory over Cedar Falls in a regional final at Linn-Mar. "As awful as it was, I think it helped us bond together as a team. Being able to support Erica has been good for all of us."



All season, said Noyes, the squad has played with a mission.

"We've been very goal oriented," she explained. "We've wanted to work together as a team, play at our personal best and never lose hope."

She said all three goals were met Monday as the Lions (13-6) avenged a 2-0 loss to Cedar Falls in the regular season.

"It's really exciting," she added. "We showed tonight what we're made of."

Linn-Mar Coach Steve Dickinson pointed out that the two teams have contrasting playing styles.

"We like to pass and move in and out. They play more of a pressure game," he said. "Both teams gave it their all and played very well. We just got rolling sooner. They played under the gun trying to get back in it."

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The Lions' first goal came with 10:39 left in the first half when freshman phenom Olivia Garcia drilled a free kick from the left corner for a header in front of the net by senior Sarah Fathallah.

The Tigers blew a golden chance to tie early in the second half when Linn-Mar freshman goalie Rylie Frese stopped a point-blank line drive. Her teammates immediately took off on a breakaway with Garcia scoring on pass from junior Molly Brandt at the 33:16 mark.

Cedar Falls did manage a score 10 minutes later when Frese knocked the ball into her own goal following a free kick.

"After that," said Dickinson, "we kept going forward. We didn't hold back, and we missed some good opportunities the rest of the half."

Swenson, photographed by father Jonathan following the match arm-in-arm with boyfriend Marcus Paige, said a return to the state tournament feels like a reward for a team that's withstood hardship.

"But what we've been through together has given us some perspective," she noted. "It is, after all, only a game."