

Armstrong helps Saints kick Cougars

Written by Tom Fruehling
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With her top-ranked team trailing Kennedy 1-0 after 40 minutes at home Friday afternoon, Xavier girls soccer coach Bailey Dorrington used it as a teaching tool.

"It's the first time we've been behind at halftime all year," said the mild-mannered first-year coach. "I told the girls it was a great learning experience and to pretend that we were in the state tournament, where if we lose we're done."

The Saints came out on fire after the intermission.

Besides holding the powerful Cougars at bay the rest of the way, they scored four goals in a flurry to win their sixth straight game, 4-1.

Kayla Armstrong scored three of those goals for the Saints (10-1).

"I guess they didn't wanna lose," Dorrington explained afterward.

In a battle of defending state champions, Class 3A eighth-ranked Kennedy (7-4) was riding its own six-game winning streak coming into the game with its Class 2A arch-rival.

Ranked second at the start of the season after running together four straight upsets to win the state title last year, the Cougars lost three of their first four games. Since falling to Linn-Mar 2-1 a month ago, they had not allowed a goal in their six victories.

Just this week, Kennedy had beaten Jefferson, 8-0, and Waterloo West, 10-0.

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"I thought we played very, very well for the first 20 minutes tonight," said Cougar Coach Andrew McKnight.

After staring at each other eye to eye for the opening 10 minutes, Kennedy freshman Sydney Hayden caught Xavier flat-footed and scored on a straight shot just past diving Saints goalkeeper Sarah Chicchelly at the 30:21 mark.

"We got that first goal, and we had every intention of going in right away and getting another," said McKnight.

They were stymied, however, by the stout Xavier defensive line of seniors Sarah Dickes, Lucy Martin and Lizzy McWhinney. The Cougars got just four shots at goal the rest of the game.

"Very simply, we stopped doing the things that had been successful for us," McKnight noted.

Still, they kept the Saints on their heels and both teams went at it hammer and tong for the remainder of the half without scoring.

"I thought we were playing fine the first half," Dorrington said. "But on offense we just weren't finishing."

A halftime adjustment changed the course of the match.

"We started out having Sammi Shepard play wide," Dorrington said, "but she just wasn't touching the ball enough. So we moved her closer in to the mid-center."

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From there, she was collecting what Dorrington calls “early long balls” from way back of the defensive end and adroitly passing off to Armstrong, the all-state speed demon.

When she gets the ball up high with all but an empty field ahead of her, Armstrong is hard to stop.

“In the first half, we pretty well cut off her supply,” McKnight pointed out. “But Kayla is a special player. And we did not adjust very well to the adjustments that they made.”

Armstrong tied the game with 33:10 left in the second half by taking a pass from Marisa Berutti and pooch-kicking it at close range over the head of Cougar goalie Olivia Weigel.

The diminutive Berutti herself scored next at 25:53 with a nifty header on a corner kick from Shepard.

Armstrong supplied the last two insurance points over a two-minute span on full-steam breakaways after getting lobbs over the defense at midfield. Weigel, who had seven saves, had no chance to stop either rocket.

For the four Xavier seniors who have been starters their whole career (Armstrong, Shepard, McWhinney and Martin), the win marked the fourth straight over their 42nd Street rivals.

“It’s the first class ever to have done that,” Dorrington pointed out. “They’re a special group of girls.”

And Kennedy Coach McKnight, whose team is dominated by underclassmen and often has seven freshmen on the field, agreed they’re tough to beat.

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“Let’s face it,” he said, “when you have nine seniors on a team like they do, that’s a lot of experience out there to overcome.”