

Walker goal sparks Cougars back to state

Written by Mike Condon

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For much of the season, Kennedy sophomore Ryan Walker has been a playmaker.

In Saturday's Class 3A Substate 4 final against Linn-Mar, Walker took on a new role - goal scorer.

The speedy 5-foot-3 forward broke away from the Lion defense, took a long stretch pass from teammate Reid Botkin and hammered it past Lion keeper Jared Belin with 17:30 remaining for his first tally of the season.

That goal, combined with another three minutes later from Sameeullah Jung and another stellar performance from goalkeeper Nathan Althoff, gave the Cougars a 2-0 victory and their third trip to state in the past four seasons.

No. 5 Kennedy (15-3) will play Sioux City West (16-2) in a Class 3A quarterfinal next Thursday at 5:10 p.m. in Des Moines. Tenth-ranked Linn-Mar closes its season a 13-7.

Kennedy co-coach Steve Robertson said Walker's role was changed for postseason play in an effort to generate more goal-scoring chances.

"Normally, Ryan has been an attacking mid for us," Robertson said "He had (10 assists) so he has been the playmaker. If you look at our team this year, we have been defensively stingy.

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"One of the things we wanted to do was to try and get a little more offense in the front line," he continued. "So one thing we did was move Ryan up there. He is dynamic on the ball and he can create up field."

Walker said he knew the goal came at a crucial time.

"When that ball went into the back of the net, it was just crazy," Walker said. "The position change has gone well. It's easy to make the adjustment when you have such great teammates around you."

One of those teammates is Althoff. He posted his 10th shutout of the year. His biggest save came early in the game when Linn-Mar's Hunter Wong fired a shot that he batted away. Linn-Mar's Ben Johnson knocked the rebound in, but he was ruled to be offside and the goal was disallowed.

"Coming into the year, I didn't think we were going to be this strong defensively," Robertson said. "We lost a first-team all-state goalkeeper so you have no idea that a guy is going to come in with no varsity experience is going to be first-team all-conference."

"He has just been fantastic," Robertson continued. "You saw that first stop today. They were offside on the rebound but that first reaction and keeping the ball out was huge for us. We were able to stay in the game."

Walker's goal seemed to take a little life out of the Lions. Jung reached out and picked off an errant Linn-Mar pass and fired it past Belin for the insurance score.

"We wanted to use our speed against them," Walker said. "(Linn-Mar senior Justin) Green is a big, strong defender and we were trying to stay away from him and spread him out."

With a stingy defense led by Althoff, the Cougars have to be considered a state title contender.

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They handed top-ranked Iowa City West its only loss of the season. Robertson knows his team isn't going to be intimidated by any opponent.

"I think we have the type of team that can go down there and perform well," he said. "I think we have shown during the year that we have a shot to go down there and bring back a trophy."