

Wash boots Cougars in intense battle

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Washington and Kennedy boys soccer teams enjoy an intense rivalry that features coaches, players and fans at a feverish pitch.

This time, even one of the Washington ballboys got into the act and was ejected for firing two balls at a Kennedy player.

When the smoke cleared Saturday, the fifth-ranked Warriors claimed a 1-0 victory over the sixth-ranked Cougars at Kingston Stadium for a cherished spot in the Class 3A state tournament.

Washington (14-4) will face Sioux City West (18-1) in the quarterfinals of the state meet Thursday at 5:15 p.m. at the Cownie Soccer Park in Des Moines.

The Warriors were clinging to a 1-0 lead in the second half when a Kennedy player, needing the ball for a throw-in, was startled when the Washington ballboy fired one at him from close range. The Cougar could not handle the hot toss, so the ballboy tried again with another fastball that also was too hot to handle.

Kennedy was on the attack and wanted to make a quick throw-in, but the hot tosses by the ballboy slowed everything down. The head official was not amused and stripped the ballboy of his duties for the rest of the game.

"That was interesting," said Washington goal-keeper Gunner Lenzen. "I don't think he was intentionally trying to delay the game or anything. But that happens."

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Normally, the ballboy will gently toss the ball to a player or perhaps roll it to him, but not this time. Washington Coach JP Graham declined comment on the situation, but noted the intensity of the rivalry between the two teams.

"You can feel the tension between the two programs," said Graham. "It's not a bad tension. It's a good rivalry. The parents get into it, the alumni come. They get into it. We love it that way."

It's not unusual for the Warriors and Cougars to butt heads along the tournament trail. This time, two highly ranked teams collided for one trip to Des Moines.

"I've been the head coach for 13 years now, and it seems like half those years it's come down to us and Kennedy in the substate," said Graham. "It just feels that way."

"We beat them a few times when we were the underdogs and a few times when we were favored, and they beat us a few times."

The guys on both teams grew up playing against each other. Some of them have played on the same club teams, developing a friendly (but heated) rivalry.

"They beat us our sophomore year to keep us out of state (in 2012), so it feels good knocking them off senior year and getting some revenge," said Washington's Mike Eken, who was credited with the only goal Saturday.

"I've played with a lot of the guys on that team," said Lenzen, who made several tough saves. "They've been talking about how good they're going to do this year. It feels great to knock them down."

"They played great," said Lenzen, saluting the Cougars. "All credit to them."

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Nobody scored in the first half, but that changed quickly in the first minute of the second stanza. Kennedy was called for a foul near the goal, resulting in a free kick by Connor Geuder at point-blank range.

"We got a free kick from probably like four yards out," said Eken, who wears a wild mop of long, curly reddish hair on his head. "He (Geuder) played it in and I just ran in with everybody. I'm not even sure it went off me, but they gave me credit, so I'll take it."

Kennedy kept attacking, but its best shots either missed the target or were stopped by Lenzen.

"We knew it would be a good game and we knew they would probably control most of the possessions and we'd have to defend really well," said Graham.

"That's part of the game and our kids are pretty mentally tough.

"Once we get a goal, we feel pretty confident that we can get the shutout. It's just our style of play this year and it's working."

The boys on the Washington swimming team shave their heads before district and state meets, but don't look for Eken to follow their example.

"No way. I'm keeping the hair," he said. "I've got to keep it."

It's been a long time since he's had a haircut.

"A real haircut? It was probably like the fourth or fifth grade, it seems like," he said. "I get it

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trimmed regularly, so it doesn't get too long."