

Lions, Saints brought honor to Metro soccer

Written by Jim Ecker
Sunday, 07 June 2015 16:48 -



I'm starting to become a soccer fan.

There, I said it.

This might surprise a few of you, who have known me to be strongly anti-soccer for quite some time, but I challenge anyone to watch three straight days of the boys state soccer tournament and not gain an appreciation for the skill, determination and courage on display.

The Linn-Mar Lions won the Class 3A title for the first crown in school history with victories over the No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 teams in the team.

The Xavier Saints captured the Class 2A crown for their seventh title in school history with victories over three ranked teams, including top-ranked Norwalk, and won the last two games in the semifinals and finals in dramatic overtime.

Both teams brought honor to their schools, themselves and the Metro area for giving us two state champions in one year. Dyersville Beckman took the Class 1A title.

As a reporter with credentials, I had the pleasure of sitting right next to the field and not in the stands or press box at the state tournament, allowing for a close look at the players as they battled for the highest honors in the state.

It's truly amazing to witness their skills at close range, whether they're racing at full speed with the ball seemingly attached to their feet, the constant cuts, the headers, the precision passes, the diving full-length saves.

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You don't have to love soccer, or even understand all the rules, to appreciate watching skilled athletes play the sport at a high level. And to have Linn-Mar and Xavier march all the way to the top only added to the pleasure.

I accused Linn-Mar goalkeeper Phil Adams of having mental telepathy after he made two sensational diving saves on penalty kicks in the tournament, one in the semifinals and one in the finals. Those two saves, both at crucial moments, were key plays in Linn-Mar's drive to the title.

If you don't know about penalty kicks, they put the ball right in front of the goal and dare the keeper to make a save without any help from his teammates. There's barely any time to react, yet Adams made one diving save to his left and another to his right.

"I've been working a lot this season," said Adams. "We take PK's in almost every single practice. I've been working a lot this season on reading hits, reading eyes ... those little things that some of the players have.

"Even if you think you see something, you never really know. I thought I saw something and I guessed right again."

Xavier Coach Amir Hadzic said they're successful about 90 percent of the time on penalty kicks. But not against Adams, not in the state tournament.

Adams, a senior, had not played as a goalkeeper since the seventh grade. He volunteered for the job this season after all-state goalie Jared Belin graduated in 2014.

Linn-Mar Coach Corey Brinkmeyer and Adams watched Iowa City High lose a PK Shootout to Sioux City West in the opening round of the state tournament and Brinkmeyer said Adams called every shot before it happened. "He's going right ... He's going left," and sure enough that's how it turned out.

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Adams plans to attend the University of Northern Iowa as a regular student, but somebody might want to invite this kid to join the team.

Linn-Mar was stocked with outstanding players this season, many of whom won state titles with their CRSA club teams. The Xavier Saints also had a strong lineup, as usual, and Hadzic pulled all the right strings once again.

Hadzic is the godfather of local soccer, with many of his disciples succeeding in the coaching ranks. Brinkmeyer considers himself a "Hadzic guy" from their time together at Mount Mercy University, where Hadzic is the men's soccer coach.

Xavier freshman Will Hanigan, who scored three goals in the state tournament, is surely a rising star. He dribbles a soccer ball with his feet like some people dribble a basketball with their hands, juking and faking and leaving defenders in his wake.

It's dangerous to start singling out players, because inevitably you forget to mention someone who was truly deserving of special attention. But suffice to say it was a team effort by both the Lions and the Saints and a terrific weekend for Metro soccer.

They even made a new fan.