

Unlucky Lions fall with 32 seconds left

Written by Bill Seals

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DES MOINES - Linn-Mar's trip to the state soccer tournaments ended on a stroke of bad luck Thursday night.

West Des Moines Valley's Sami Pick's sent a header into the right corner of the net with 32 seconds remaining to give her team a 2-1 victory in a Class 3A state quarterfinal match at the Cownie Soccer Complex.

The 80th-minute goal came off of a Tiger corner kick that was deflected off a Linn-Mar player's arm prior to Pick's header, and could have been called a hand ball.

"I was on the post and one of my players actually hit it with their arm," said defender Jenna Ajram, who scored the lone Linn-Mar goal in the first half.

"The last cross that they had (on the corner kick), she was running in and it hit off her arm. Since there were so many people, it's one of those things that's really unlucky."

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Instead of Valley getting a penalty kick and the Lions gaining an opportunity to at least send the game to overtime, play went on and coach Steve Dickinson's club went home with a tough defeat.

"Both teams were going up and back," said Dickinson, whose fifth-ranked team wrapped up the season with a 15-5 record. "They got a corner out of it and served a great ball.

"Any time the ball gets down in that area, there's a chance of something happening. Unfortunately for us it went in.

"They played great and are heartbroken," Dickinson said of his club. "The team did fantastic this year. We'll get over it, but it will take a while. We'll come back next year and try again."

Both sides cashed in on long shots in the first half on their way to a 1-1 score at intermission.

Valley's Grace Breiholz lofted a shot over Linn-Mar goalie Rylie Frese for the game's first goal in the seventh minute. Breiholz's shot originally looked like a pass into the box from around 45 yards out, but instead sailed into the net over the out-stretched arms of Frese.



Olivia Garcia, Linn-Mar's leading scorer, had a golden opportunity to tie it in the 17th minute,

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but her shot from five feet struck the bottom of the cross bar and bounced out of the goal. The senior caught up to a pass from Jensen Sevensen near the goal line, but missed the open shot.

It was the most unlikely of heroes that would get even for the Lions later in the first half, and from a much longer distance than Garcia's.

Ajram lofted a 30-foot shot over leaping Valley goalkeeper Lexi Ebensburger. The goal came in the 26th minute and tied the score at 1-1.

It was the first goal of the season for the Linn-Mar junior.

"I just saw the opportunity, I took it and it went in," Ajram said. "It was great and felt really good. It's one of those goals that goes over the keeper and it's hard to get to those."

Outside of the lob balls, both teams owned the momentum at various stages of the game. The Lions controlled the tempo throughout the midpoint of the game, before Valley came on strong toward the end.

Rainy conditions in Des Moines also slowed down the game's flow.

"Both teams are very strong in the defense and determined to hold onto the ball or gain possession of the ball," Dickinson said. "It's very tough. This wet condition made it a little tougher."

"It was a little bit slippery and I think you saw a few of the girls slipping. The ball skips when it's wet."

It was a disappointing end to a terrific season for the Lions, one in which they avenged a

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regular-season loss to Dubuque Hempstead with a 2-1 regional final victory that sent them into Thursday's state quarterfinal matchup with the Tigers.

"When you come to state, there is no easy draw," Dickinson said. "I'm very proud of the girls. We were fifth in the state and took on every team they played so far and did what they could do with it.

"We had a fantastic season and ended up at 15-5. Of all those games, only one was not a one-goal game. When you play like that, all I can do is stand back there and be proud of them."

Valley advanced to Friday's semifinal round where it will face cross-town rival Dowling Catholic.