

Opinion: Wildcats pulling off improbable season



The Louisburg High School soccer gathers on the field to celebrate Thursday's regional championship win over Basehor-Linwood on Thursday. In just their first year in program history, Louisburg has posted a 14-3-1 record and is one win away from the state tournament.

Two months ago, 24 players got off the bus for the first time nervously anticipating history.

The butterflies in their stomach wouldn't settle down and they didn't know what to expect. That night in March at Harmon High School, the group of Louisburg High School girls soccer players were about to become something bigger than themselves – they were becoming a team.

It was a new frontier for the players, along with coaches Kyle Conley and Michael Pickman. Neither had been a part of a new program before as they embarked on trying to form a group of girls – some who haven't played soccer in several years – into a cohesive unit.

After the Louisburg community helped raise nearly \$40,000 to help fund the team, no one on the Wildcat roster wanted to let anyone down. They wanted to make everyone proud, but with that, comes a sense of anxiousness.

The Wildcats came together to win their season opener 2-0 over Harmon and the entire team breathed a collective sigh of relief. That night gave Louisburg the confidence it was looking for.

As it turned out, the players had nothing to worry about. Fast forward to the present and the Wildcats have put together a record no one in the program could have ever imagined in its first season.

Louisburg racked up 13 more wins since that night at Harmon and just captured a regional title with a 3-1 victory over Basehor-Linwood on Thursday. The Wildcats are also currently ranked No. 4 in Class 4-1A.

“I don’t think you can ever envision a new program winning a regional title,” Conley said. “We don’t have a bunch of super club kids and we aren’t a school that gets a bunch of kids to come in every year, but these kids work so hard. We may not be the most skilled teams at times, but we play with so much passion and heart.”

That they do.

This is my first go-round at covering a team in its infancy stages, but I can’t imagine many programs can boast about the start this group of Louisburg players is having. Before the season, Conley was hoping his team could reach the .500 mark – which still would have been a great stepping stone.



Senior Lilly Scott gets ready to pass off to teammate Savannah Reinhart during Thursday's regional title game.

Instead, Conley and the Wildcats decided to take the elevator to the top floor. There apparently was no reason to stop in the middle.

Louisburg used the leadership of seniors Maddie McDaniel, Lilly Scott and Rylee Bergh to help form the team early in the season and the underclassmen have responded.

Sophomore Bailey Belcher is on a frantic scoring pace as she is sitting at 33 goals for the season, which would probably be a record in many long-standing programs, but Belcher keeps making Louisburg history with every goal.

Then there is Shay Whiting. The Louisburg sophomore had never played goalie before this season, but it hasn't shown. Whiting has eight shutouts on the season and has emerged as one of the best goalies in the Frontier League.



Louisburg goalie Shay Whiting dives on ball to prevent a goal Thursday.

Whiting has done this being vastly undersized, but what she lacks in size she makes up with tenacity.

“She is a bulldog,” Conley said of Whiting. “She has great instincts, her reaction time is pretty solid and her footwork isn’t bad. She is undersized, so she has to fight that. She just plays hard and doesn’t want to let anything in. If it is going to hit her, she doesn’t care. She is going to break a ball one of these times because she is going to stand there, wear it and eat it up.

“Shay is a smart kid, she learns quickly and she figures it out. Her and Sarah (Wilson) both know what is expected and both work their butts off. Shay has played well all year but Sarah has been right there with her to push her. She has the right attitude and I am really proud of her.”

Although they have been major cogs in the Wildcats’ success, the most astounding thing is Louisburg is winning with a roster filled with freshmen and sophomores. They have all played their roles and done them well.

Those underclassmen have come through with game-winning goals, big stops on defense and have been there to pick each other up.

Yes, this group of Wildcats is quite the story. In just two short months, interest in girls soccer has taken off and more and more people are coming out to see what they are all about.

“Every one of them is playing so hard right now and I don’t think they want to let each other down,” Conley said. “That is awesome. We have avoided any drama and we are playing for each other. We are playing for everyone that comes to watch us, we are playing for this community and for all the girls that want to play high school soccer because now they have this opportunity.

“The girls are embracing that responsibility and they are going to run with it. We are a dangerous team because of it, because we are playing for everyone but ourselves.”

Louisburg hopes that run continues with a win Tuesday against De Soto in the state quarterfinals. The Wildcats defeated then-state ranked De Soto earlier this month in a dramatic come-from-behind win – a victory that put the rest of the league, and state on notice.

These girls are no fluke.

‘It just shows that we can work to get what we want,” Belcher said. “Granted, nobody expected us to be here but we want to go to state and this is what we are going to do.”

Even with a loss Tuesday, this team has nothing to hang their head about. Louisburg has overcome the odds in its first season to become something no one could have fathomed.

They have already won.