

Opinion: Team comes together to break barrier



The Louisburg High School boys soccer team celebrates following its state quarterfinal victory Tuesday over Trinity Academy in Louisburg.

Late in Tuesday's state quarterfinal game against Trinity Academy, Louisburg senior Herman Knipp was laying on the ground in pain.

His legs were taken out from under him by a Trinity player, who was later given a red card for the incident. He got up, walked it off and moved on.

Three minutes later, Knipp was on the top of the world – and so were the rest of the Louisburg soccer faithful. His goal in the 75th minute gave the Wildcats a 1-0 win over Trinity and their first state quarterfinal victory.

Knipp's goal not only put his team in the state semifinals, but alleviated years of pain past Wildcat players have endured with his one shot. Prior to this season, Louisburg had advanced to the state quarterfinals six times only to see its season come to an end.

Several alumni from the program were on hand to witness history under the lights Tuesday at the Wildcat Sports Complex. Some were just as excited as the players.

"It is unbelievable," said Louisburg coach Kyle Conley, who is in his first year with the program. "All the stuff that coach (Ben) York and the previous players did prior to this year was great. There were some really good teams that came through here, but they always got stuck in this round. We are always talking about let's take the program on our shoulders and see where we can go and do something different.

"All the pressure was on (Trinity), not us. They had been in this spot 15 of the last 16 years and the pressure is on them. This is our field and we don't lose at home. We are undefeated here and this is what we do. I mean, how hard did these kids play? It was just awesome. I couldn't be prouder of a group of kids."



Louisburg head coach Kyle Conley is doused with cold water thanks to Herman Knipp and Eric Vazquez (14) following Tuesday's win.

In fact, one could even say Knipp's goal might be the most important in Wildcat soccer history –depending on your point of view. There have been many vital goals, or plays, in the last 14 years, but Knipp's might stand out more than most.

There is no one else that could say their shot put their team in the state semifinals – which speaks volumes.

At the same time, I am not saying this one goal was the lone reason for the Wildcats' success. It absolutely wasn't. This was a team effort and it started on the other end of the field.

Louisburg's defense has carried the Wildcats in the postseason as they have given up just one goal in three games. Goalie Ambrose Stefan has earned back-to-back shutouts of Field Kindley and Trinity, and he has racked up several very large saves in the process.

When teams have found cracks in the Wildcat defense, Stefan has been there to protect the net. The Wildcat back line of junior Kristopher Light, along with seniors Kolten Ragan, Curran Conklin and Jacob Benne, have provided a solid front.

It has been fun to watch them grow as many of those players didn't see significant varsity minutes last season and have come together as a unit. Benne and Conklin have made it tough on the opposition as the team's outside backs.



Senior Jacob Benne clears the ball away during Tuesday's state quarterfinal game.

"Teams go after those two and I don't get it," Conley said. "I am not sure if they aren't scouting us or what, but if you are going after our outside backs, you are not going to win that battle many times. All year, teams go after them. They might be bigger and faster than our guys, but those two keeping grinding and do their job. They keep it simple and they are fantastic."

"They are a huge anchor on the outside and that gives us a little freedom to stay compacted to take away the middle. It is a credit to them because they work so hard and do all the ugly stuff. They are coachable and they listen. Their progression from June 1 to now has been unbelievable."

The Wildcats also have a solid midfield with one of the best players in Class 4-1A in Noah Juarez. The Louisburg senior

leads the Wildcats in scoring and will no doubt make the all-league team for a fourth straight season.

Juniors Grant Ryals, Scott Murphy and Raistlin Brewer, freshman Landon Johnson and seniors Calvin Cassida and Ty Martin have all come up big from the midfield spot at one time or another this season. Sophomore Jonathan Ventre is the same way from the forward position.

Conley has brought this team together and has them believing that they have nothing to lose – which quite honestly – they don't. No one, including me, thought this group was going to be one of four teams left standing.

"We are playing with house money right now," Conley said. "We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. All those teams have everything to lose. We are just going to ride it out and see what happens."

That is what makes this story even more special. In the nine years I have covered Louisburg athletics, I have seen more talented teams take the field and watch as their season has come up short. This group, though, has overcome a lot and they are stronger for it.

These Wildcats have won the hearts of a lot of soccer fans in this town and it was evident Tuesday night following the win. I don't get goosebumps often, but it was hard not to after watching fans line up the length of the field to congratulate the team.

"The student section was great and the atmosphere was just fantastic," Conley said. "You can't ask for a better group of kids who just scream, yell and have fun. The kids feed off that and was great."

The fans joined the players in the 'Icelandic Thunder Clap' following their victory and the party was on. It lasted for several minutes as several hugs were given and countless

pictures were taken to document what was an historic night for Louisburg soccer.

A night many Wildcat fans won't soon forget.