

OPINION: Wildcats' journey a more impressive feat than state title



Members of the Louisburg girls soccer team break it down shortly before the Wildcats' state championship game Saturday against Bishop Miege.

On the surface, Bishop Miege's string of four straight state girls soccer titles is an impressive one. Anytime a program can win the final game of the season in four consecutive years is an admirable feat.

The Stags have a great program, with very talented players and a tradition that is second to none as far as Class 4-1A programs go. They are the crème of the crop.

However, if you dig a little deeper, you see a program – during the same four year period – that you could say has made even bigger strides without ever winning a state title. I think you all can take a guess where I am going with this.

A little more than four years ago, a group of soccer parents helped raise \$39,000 in less than 12 months in order

to have a girls soccer program at Louisburg High School. That, in itself, is an achievement worth celebrating.

Those parents and community members would immediately see a return in their investment.

In the program's first season, the Wildcats would go on to win a regional title and finish one game short of a state final four appearance.

Louisburg wouldn't have to wait long as it would win its first state quarterfinal game in 2017 and went on to finish fourth at state. It was one of those improbable beginnings to a program that are rarely seen.

As it turned out, the Wildcats were just getting started. In the last two seasons, they have advanced to the state championship game only to come up short both times thanks to the big obstacle of Bishop Miege.

What makes it all the more impressive is the Wildcats have done this in a small town setting. The Louisburg school district probably has an estimated population of 4,000 (give or take a few hundred) from which it can draw students.

Miege, a private school, can draw athletes from both sides of the state line and all over the Kansas City metro area. They aren't breaking rules, but they are using a system to their advantage (which is a different column for a different day).

So, I ask, what is the bigger accomplishment here?

Since the program's inception, everything has seemed to have gone right for Louisburg. The school made the right coaching hires in head coach Kyle Conley and assistant Michael Pickman.

Both coaches have been invaluable to the growth of the team and they have helped create a connection with the town that I couldn't have imagined when it all began. They have great relationships with their players, and the respect is mutual.



Louisburg senior Hallie Hutsell gets a hug from head coach Kyle Conley as she comes off the field for the final time, while fellow senior Leia Shaffer goes to hug teammate Mackenzie Scholtz.

It was all the more evident Saturday as time was winding down and Conley began to sub his

seniors out of the game – one at a time – giving them one final farewell. Carson Buffington, Hallie Hutsell, Kaitlyn Lewer, Leia Shaffer and Julianne Finley all left the field knowing what they had accomplished.

After it was all over, senior Camdyn Clark – a four year starter – who was forced to sit out with an injury midway through the season, also said her goodbyes to her coaches and teammates.

Clark was in the starting lineup four years ago at Harmon High School when the Wildcats played their first-ever game, and it all came full circle when it was all over last weekend.



This was the first starting lineup for the Louisburg girls soccer team when the program began in 2016. Clark (No. 7) was a four-year starter for the Wildcats.

“I think what makes our program so unique is that every year it’s different,” Clark said. “The dynamic changes, the chemistry is new, but through our coaching and hard work that each girl gives, we are successful. Our amount of skill, numbers and talent has varied every year,

but our determination and hard work is what makes our team so hard to beat.

“I knew our team would do big things from the start because we had things to prove and we wanted to make our community proud. They fought for this program and everyone who is on our team knows we couldn’t have done it without them.”

They were the first group of seniors who had the opportunity to stay with the program all four years. All of them played roles on a team that won 17 games this season, but also helped contribute to the team’s past successes.

“It was extremely hard to step off the field,” Hutsell said. “I couldn’t believe it was our last time playing together. Everyone was hugging and crying – it was a bittersweet moment. I cannot express how proud I am of everything the program has accomplished in four short years. That is more than my freshman year self could have dreamt of at my first high school practice.

“I remember the first game in program history and being so unsure about the season. But the past four years has wiped away any doubt about the LHS girls soccer team. I think we have showed everyone that we should never be underestimated and we have earned the respect of other teams in the state. It wouldn’t have been possible though without Coach Conley and Coach Pickman and I can’t imagine a

better pair to run
a program.”

It is that bond between players,
coach and community that has helped the Wildcats rise to the
level where they
are today. Sure, a few good players certainly help the cause,
but the belief in
each other is what carries the load.

“When you look at our community,
they raised \$39,000 to start a soccer program four years ago
and that is what
we do,” Conley said. “We are playing for all of those people.
We are playing
for the town, we are playing for all the people on Facebook or
Twitter that are
trying to follow along because we know that without those
people that this
doesn’t happen. We want to try and honor them the best way we
know how, and
that is playing hard and doing things the right way. It is
unbelievable. The
community is everything to us and everything to me.”

So as the clock hit zero, their season was officially over. It
didn’t take long for realization to set in that this was it
for the Wildcat seniors



Louisburg coach Kyle Conley huddles his team up following their state quarterfinal win earlier this month. Conley has guided Louisburg to a 58-22-2 record since the program's inception.

"Every year I looked forward to soccer season to start and this year my season was cut short, so it was kind of over before everyone else's," Clark said. "Having to accept that my knee would render me from being out there with my girls, made me feel so guilty and helpless. I was supposed to be there for my team and I wasn't.

"The hardest part, however, was watching them earn their second place state medals. It hit me then that that I wouldn't be doing this again. I wouldn't have another chance to fight for a plaque at state, I wouldn't huddle with my team before each game and I wouldn't be with these girls next year. My fellow seniors and I were done and this was our final mark on Louisburg girls soccer history."

So to recap, in four years time the Wildcats started a program from scratch, captured four straight regionals titles, made it to the state quarterfinal in its first season and then rattled off three consecutive state final four appearances and two state runner-up finishes.

But for some that isn't the bigger story. Winning it all ultimately trumps everything in our society.

Not for this group, though. Sure, winning a state title will be great, but it is the family atmosphere that is the Wildcats' biggest asset – starting with their coaches.

“We are a family and we will always be there for each other,” Clark said. “That is my favorite part of the whole thing. The coaches have made a lasting impact on me and will always be a reason I am who I am today. Both of them have pushed me to be the best I can be and have helped me through more than they know.

“From the start, I credit a lot of our success to them. People who have never played soccer in their life have become varsity players because of what Conley and Pickman have done. I had no idea how to play soccer coming into the program and they have taught me everything I know. They have been incredible influences on me and our team. They're what make us a family.”

Because when it comes down to it,
family is what truly matters.