

Conley's family atmosphere lifted Wildcat soccer to new heights



Louisburg coach Kyle Conley hugs goalie Sierra Hahn following the team's fourth place state finish in 2021. Conley stepped down after seven seasons with the Wildcats.

One hundred and sixty wins.

Nine regional championships.

Six state final four appearances.

Two state runner-up finishes.

Those are just some of the many accomplishments the Louisburg High School soccer programs had in the seven years under head coach Kyle Conley.

With all that success, many awards followed and the Wildcats became one of the top teams in Class 4-1A during that seven-year stretch.

In less than a decade, Conley accumulated a resume worthy enough to put him in the LHS Hall of Fame and is considered one of the top coaches in the state.

However, having that much notoriety brings more opportunities and Conley, despite it being a tough decision, has taken on a new challenge as he was recently hired to coach the Blue Valley West soccer programs.

It was one of the harder choices he's ever had to make.



Kyle Conley watches from the bench as his girls team advanced to the state final four in 2021.

“It is bittersweet,” Conley said. “Everything we have established, accomplished and the culture we have at Louisburg has been fantastic. There was just a great teaching and coaching opportunity that came along and it was hard to pass up.”

His decision left a lot his current and former players either sad or shocked – a lot of them probably both.

However, it didn't make them appreciate him any less and it had nothing to do with the stats listed above. It is about more than just soccer.

It is about life.

It is about family.

Year One

It was a wild first season for Conley as he was hired to start and lead the girls program in 2016 and was named as the boys head coach later that year.

No one could have imagine the success that followed.

In the girls' first ever season, Conley led the Wildcats to a 14-4-1 record, a regional championship and a spot in the state quarterfinals.

As if that wasn't enough, he guided the boys to their best finish in school history (at the time) as the Wildcats made their first state final four and took fourth.

"For the girls, we just didn't want to suck for three years so they would cancel the program," Conley said. "The community raised \$38,000 for the first four years. We had about 43 girls come out that were interested before the season and then it went down to like 24. We were trying to have a JV and a varsity and hope we would hold on.

"Then I took over the boys job in the summer and we were doing things a little differently and having the boys get used to our expectations and how we were going to do things. It took the boys six games or so for them to truly buy in and then we just went on a tear. They had a really good year. I think we beat Tonganoxie 2-1 in overtime and the boys' confidence really seemed to grow. We made the state final four and it was pretty exciting. It was wild, actually."



Kyle Conley huddles his team up prior to the program's first-ever game in 2016.

Conley put pressure on himself, especially on the girls side, to get a program out of its infancy and grow it into something Louisburg could look on with pride.

The community had just raised more than \$30,000 to fund the program for three years and Conley wanted to show that their hard work wasn't for nothing.

As it turned out, he had nothing to worry about.

Conley guided the Wildcat girls to four straight state final fours, including two state championship appearances in the program's first five years of existence.

The program went from an infant to being a full-grown adult in a matter of no time.

"It was an incredible situation," Conley said. "The kids did really well. The parents bought in, the school bought in and the community bought in and we just took off. It set the standard. The kids just wanted to keep going back and they made that their goal every year. It has been a heck of a run."



Kyle Conley coached the girls program to four state final fours and two state runner-up finishes.

One of the program's first players, Bailey Belcher, saw that Conley was going to have success even before the Wildcats took the field for that first time in 2016.

Belcher, who went on to play for Missouri Southern after high school, saw a person that cared about more than wins and losses.

"Conley has made a huge impact on the soccer programs," Belcher said. "I don't think it would have ever been where it's at, or what it got to, if he wouldn't have started coaching for Louisburg. He knew every player was different and developing them wasn't always the same process. He took the time to get to know his players and learn what they needed to be coached.

"Of course, there were certain things, like fitness, that were done his way, and for good reason. As hard as it was, we got better and it always showed. He gave everyone a chance to be at the best position they could be in. He is the only coach I've ever had that put as much time and effort into each individual player the way that he did."

Raistlin Brewer, who played under coach Ben York before Conley took over the boys program, noticed a change right away.



Kyle Conley gives instructions Brock Bila and Landon Johnson before entering the game.

“One of Conley’s first approaches for us was being in shape, so that meant tons and tons of running, even if it was triple digits outside,” Brewer said. “It wasn’t my favorite thing, but we definitely were in better shape than most teams. I loved having Ben as a coach, but having Conley at the school made things a lot easier. If we ever needed to talk to him about something, he was just down the hall. He would definitely get a little bit animated, but he just wanted us to be our best and to see us succeed.”

Success followed the Wildcat programs for the next six seasons as the boys won three more regional titles and had another state final four appearance in 2020, when the Wildcats finished third overall.

All that success, was due to the work the players – and Conley – put into the program.



The Louisburg boys celebrated their 2016 state quarterfinal win with a bucket dump on head coach Kyle Conley.

"First and foremost he is a great person who cares about every single one of his players," said Braden Yows, a senior on the 2021 team. "One of the big things that differentiates him is the enthusiasm and passion he brings to the program everyday. During his time here we saw both the boys and girls programs grow in the number of players and success. He expected discipline and great effort in everything we did on and off the field."

As much as the Wildcats' accomplishments were formed during the season, Conley never slowed down in the offseason

Recruiting The Halls

Despite the accolades, Louisburg is not loaded with tons of soccer talent.

So, because of that, Conley put on his salesman's hat and hit the hallways – trying to get as many kids out for soccer as he could.

“To be fair, people are always saying we have all these club kids and we don’t,” Conley said. “We have like five or six that play year-round, maybe a little more depending on the year. You buy into a kid, find what they are good at, find what makes them tick and then you just push that kid. Then all of a sudden you have an Erin Lemke.”

Lemke, a freshman in 2017, had plans on competing in track. She had just finished basketball and soccer really never entered her mind.

“Before high school I had only played maybe two seasons of soccer before,” Lemke said. “I planned on running track when I was asked by (Michael) Pickman my freshman year if I would play. Then Conley started asking me in the halls if I would play and to get my friends from the volleyball and basketball team to play. In the end, myself and Carson Buffington were at soccer tryouts that spring.”

Both Lemke and Buffington turned out to be key figures for the Wildcat program.

Buffington went on to be an all-league and all-state goalie, while Lemke had one of the more memorable goals in program history – as a freshman.

Lemke started the 2017 season at the junior varsity level, and due to injuries, moved up and got some varsity time. She saw more and more minutes as the season went along, and in the state quarterfinal game against Piper, scored the golden goal to send the Wildcats to their first state final four.



Erin Lemke is all smiles after she realized she scored the game-winning goal in the state quarterfinals in 2017 against Piper.

"I have used her as an example for a long time," Conley said. "I told other players that they can be like her and not to be nervous. It is just fun to watch kids like that take off and gain confidence in themselves on the field and in life."

One small conversation in the hallway changed Lemke's time in high school for the better.

"Playing for coach Conley created some of my favorite memories at Louisburg High School," Lemke said. "Being on the soccer team built my confidence as a high schooler that has carried into college."

"Conley helped us girls who had never played by teaching the fundamentals of soccer, literally how to kick a ball and who to pass to. Building on each skill and creating relationships with each of the girls really bonded our team."

Lemke's story is not an outlier as Conley has brought on a lot

of first-time soccer players and has had similar successes. It has even trickled down to the younger kids.



Kyle Conley gets dumped with water after one of the girls' state quarterfinal wins.

"We hit the hallways hard and recruited kids to come out and play," Conley said. "We found athletic kids and try to find those who wanted to come out and play soccer. The kids were put off or scared because they thought they had to just run a lot. It wasn't just running, and once we got a kid to practice, we could get them to play.

"When you have kids out there having fun and winning games, it just takes off. I think the youth camps we did helped tremendously. Diana Moore (Louisburg rec director) said that every year they are getting more and more kids play soccer. We just did a good job pushing information out there to kids and their families through social media or whatever."



Head coach Kyle Conley hugs Mackenzie Scholtz following her golden goal in 2018 that sent the Wildcats to their second straight final four.

Garrett Rolofson was another one of those stories as he played his final two years of high school under Conley during the 2019 and 2020 seasons.

He turned into an all-league and all-state goalie with the help of assistant coach Michael Pickman, who worked with the keepers. His time with Conley and the program changed his life for the better.

“Personally, playing for Coach Conley shaped me into the student athlete I was and person I am today,” Rolofson said. “I learned a lot in the two years I played for him. He taught me how to play soccer, understand the game and was very inviting for someone that had never played soccer before. Conley was encouraging when I was learning and encouraging when teaching other newcomers instead of just cutting someone from the team. He truly cared about each individual player no matter the skill or athletic abilities.

“Playing for Conley not only taught me a lot about soccer and athletics but he changed the person I was before playing soccer. My motivation to get better and succeed in sports went up as well as my overall confidence. Outside of sports Conley taught me how to be a leader, how to set an example for others and how to be a good person.”

Rolofson built a relationship with his coach that many other players did as well – one that became even more important after he graduated.

FAMILY

“1...2...3...Family”

That was the breakdown of every huddle – girls and boys – throughout Conley’s seven seasons and it was more than a simple gimmick. It was a mindset.

Soccer became Rolofson’s second family and they were there for him when he needed them the most.

Shortly after he graduated, his mother, Gloria, was diagnosed with cancer. It was a scary time for the Rolofson’s and for Garrett.

During his time as coach, Conley put together a cancer awareness game every season in hopes of raising money for a local family battling the terrible disease.

Little did Garrett know his family would be the ones touched by it all.

So, in the fall of 2020, Garrett found himself back at the field he played on, but this time as a spectator for the annual cancer awareness game as people came out to donate to the family in need – his family.

“My mom was battling breast cancer at the time and I will

never forget watching Conley walk across the soccer field and through the stands directly to me and giving me a big hug,” Garrett said. “Not only did the hug make me cry, but seeing his tears made me cry and really shows how good of a person Coach Conley is and how big of an impact he can have on someone’s life.”



Kyle Conley celebrates with his boys as they won the regional title back in 2017.

Gloria is currently in full remission from her breast cancer diagnosis, and according to Garrett, “She is finally getting back to feeling normal again.”

The Rolofson’s were just one of several families touched by the kindness of the Louisburg soccer family and Conley made it a point to make sure all of his players – current and former – were looked after.

“Conley was the kind of coach that was always there for any of us, no matter what it was,” Belcher said. “He constantly pushed all of us to strive for more and reach our greatest potential in literally everything.

“To me, he and his family were like family to me, even after I graduated. He has always made me want to do more and has shown

me there is always someone in my corner that believes in me, and no matter what it is, he has supported me. He has always been someone I can talk to when I need someone, with the most serious of things or just catching up. He is someone that I will always look up to.”

It was the family atmosphere that brought his players together and a big reason for all of the Wildcats’ success.

“It was an amazing environment to play for Coach Conley,” said Trinity Moore, a 2020 graduate. “The impact he had on my life and for soccer was amazing. He made me more confident and put me where I was needed and it helped impact my confidence and strive to help my teammates.”



The boys soccer team honored coach Kyle Conley following his 100th victory.

Treston Carlson, a 2021 graduate, believed Conley was a unique coach and got the best out of all of his players.

“The impact he had on his players lives and on our program was unmatched,” Carlson said. “The way he coached was different than any coach I’ve been around. He wanted us to realize it took hard work to get better and that nothing is just handed to us. He always made it clear that we had to outwork the other team. The way he affected who we were helped me have a

new mindset to the game.”

It is that family aspect that Conley will miss the most.

“The thing I will remember most is the relationships, whether it is with the kids, the parents or community members,” Conley said. “Having kids invite me to their wedding, or just texting me out of the blue to check in and see how things are going. Those are what mean the most to me in the long run. I am with these kids so much that they are almost like they are my own.”

Fond Farewell

As the final seconds ticked away, Conley realized his time at Louisburg was coming to a close.

The Louisburg girls lost to Topeka-Hayden in the regional championship game – a team they had beaten twice previously in the state semifinals and both in dramatic fashion.

It was Hayden’s turn this go-round and it was time for Conley to let go of a program that grew up before his very eyes.

Despite all the successes, Conley only had one regret with his time at Louisburg.



Kyle Conley gets a hug from Braden Yows following the team's regional championship loss to Bishop Miege in 2021.

"Not beating Bishop Miege," Conley said with a smirk on his face.

Miege ended the Wildcats' season, or handed them a loss in the state semifinals, on seven different occasions – including five on the boys side.

As tough as those losses were, Conley has nothing but great memories of his time as the Wildcat leader.

"At the end of the day, when I reflect on everything, looking back on this ride, I just want people to know that me, my coaches and my family went all in for these programs," Conley said. "I wouldn't do anything different on how we started a program, or how we carried another one on.

"I have zero regrets on how we did it and I think we gave everything we had, and in turn that is when the parents gave everything they had to us. The kids gave everything they had and we fed off each other. We built a fantastic culture and

did things the right way. We talked about improving kids, not just on the field, but in life as well. We wanted to make them better people.”



Kyle Conley embraces his wife, Kelli, following his final game on the Wildcat sideline last month.

Conley seemed to do just that as the seven former players interviewed for this story, echoed each other’s statements.

He changed their life for the better.

“The impact Conley has had in our lives goes deeper than soccer,” Carlson said. “He was a great coach that helped me get a better understanding of soccer, but he also taught us good life lessons to take with us past soccer. He always told us the saying ‘hard work will beat talent when talent doesn’t want to work’ and I think that saying goes way past just the game.”

Rolofson, who had played baseball for most of his life, grew to love soccer thanks to one person.

“I think it’s hard not to say he built an amazing program at Louisburg,” Rolofson said. “I think a testament to him as a

person and coach is his ability to not only attract people that had never played soccer before, but his ability to coach them to enjoy and love the game as it is with all of their teammates.

“What I think makes Conley unique isn’t his winning nature or motivational speeches, I think it’s the fact that he, as a coach, enables his players to enjoy and love the game of soccer. You always hear about athletes that had their dreams and love for their sports crushed by bad coaches at school and club, but you never hear about a coach that can make student athletes fall in love with a game they’ve never played before.”



Now it is time to move on to a new school, with new players and different expectations. However, Conley knows Louisburg soccer has a bright future ahead of itself.

“For me, I know it is a great opportunity,” Conley said. “At the same time, I am asking kids to be loyal to me and buy in and be a part of our family. Part of me feels that I am letting people down, letting the kids down, but at the same time I feel both programs are in a really good place. The girls team was pretty good this year, but they can potentially

be really, really good next season.

“The boys program is absolutely loaded right now. We graduated a few seniors, but there are a lot of boys ready to roll. There are a lot seniors that are ready to lead that program. I am not bailing in a situation where there is talent no longer there. I think I left both programs completely stocked and ready to roll and that makes me feel better knowing that I did the job I wanted to do.”

Bobby Bovaird (boys) and Ben York (girls) will now pick up where Conley left off as they prepare to guide the Wildcats to bigger and better things. Now is a chance for him to follow from afar.

“We will still be fans,” Conley said. “We are still going to live in Louisburg and it will be easy for me to walk up, put up my lawn chair and watch some games when I’m not coaching. We are giving all our social media stuff to Ben and Bobby so that they can continue to grow the programs and we can get ourselves out of it. That way we can follow how the teams are doing and we can become a fan too. We want to support the kids and the program.”

Just like any family member would.