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Acalanes girls win NCS soccer championship

By Jon Kingdon



Acalanes girls soccer team with their NCS trophy.
Photo provided

In a game that will be long remembered and not soon forgotten, the second seeded Acalanes Dons defeated the No. 1 seeded Branson High School 1-1, a game that was decided by a shootout. After finishing regulation time tied at one and two scoreless 10-minute overtime periods, the game was ultimately decided in the third period of a penalty shoot-out with both teams combining for 29 shots with Acalanes finally coming out on top 10-9.

Branson had won the Northern California Regional championship last year and three North Coast Section titles in the last four years. "I aged about 20 years from this game. In the first half, we were definitely nervous," said Acalanes head coach Nick Barbarino. "It was the first time that we have been there but our defense did a great job holding them scoreless in the first half while our offense was creating our own scoring opportunities."

Coming into the game, Branson was averaging just under three goals a game but were shut out in the first half by a stifling Acalanes defense led by goalie Kate Carter and defensemen Chloe Quintella, Sami Hansen, Aliya Wingate and Dylan Hagglund. "Kate made some fantastic saves and was the vocal leader on the team, keeping us set, being the driving positive force on the field and lifting everyone up," said Barbarino. "Chloe did a really good job in shutting down their best forward. Sami and Aliya handled the middle getting to balls in the air and not allowing the Branson forwards getting in front of them and Dylan Hagglund at left back was phenomenal."

Acalanes scored with nine minutes left in the first half off a free kick by freshman Tatum Zuber, who led the team in scoring, from 25 yards out going into halftime leading 1-0. In the locker room, Barbarino stressed to the team to keep their eye on the prize: "We were very excited at the half but we knew that the next 40 minutes of the game would be a battle (60 minutes with the two overtime periods) with them coming out as hard as they could with their season on the line. We preached to the girls to stay focused, keep working hard and working for each other and give everything that they had and to not leave anything on the field."

Branson attacked relentlessly in the second half, constantly keeping the ball in the Acalanes side of the field. Branson finally scored with 13 minutes left in the game, tying the game at 1-1. With both teams battling exhaustion, there was no further scoring in regulation.

In the first overtime, Acalanes found their second wind and had a number of scoring opportunities, said Barbarino: "In the first five minutes we hit one ball over the post, their goalie made a save and we then missed one off frame. We came out with a lot of energy but both teams were really tired for the rest of the two overtimes."

The first set of five penalty kicks ended up with each team scoring four goals. From that point on, it became sudden death which went on for 14 more kicks, with Acalanes making one more penalty kick than Branson. Adding to the tension was a blackout on Acalanes' 13th penalty kick that forced everyone to stand around and wait for five minutes. Ironically it was two girls who had not played in the game, junior Olivia Parnell and senior Jordan Pratt, who stepped up big in the penalty shootout: "We do penalty kicks after every practice and I knew they both were very good penalty shooters. I looked at Jordan and Olivia and told them they could make it which they did." After a missed Branson shot, Parnell ended the match by putting the ball in the upper right corner of the net.

Overall on offense, it was a team effort led by center midfielders Ivy Souza, Gabby Ortale and freshmen center forward Addie Bailey. "Ivy and Gabby were tremendous with their decision making, their passing, defending in the midfield and in shutting down Branson's top player which were keys to us getting opportunities forward, said Barbarino. "Addie held the ball up for us by herself, working as hard as she could, making great passes, great runs down the line and created some really good scoring chances."

In the two seasons prior to Barbarino's arrival at Acalanes, the team had a combined record of 9-22-4. In these past two seasons, Acalanes had a 28-11-8 record. Barbarino came in with a plan: "I think it came down to creating a culture and a place where the girls want to come and they want to have fun and they want to work for each other on and off the field. The big thing with us is that we are family and that's something that I stressed this season. You work for your family, you love your family and you protect your family. If you have that bond, on and off the field, it will help propel you past teams that don't get along as well and if you're in the 100th minute of a game, the girls knew that they are all working as hard as they

can for each other."

There are 15 seniors that fought through the problems that began in their freshman year, and Barbarino acknowledged what all of them brought to the team: "I have to give our seniors a ton of credit because in their first two years, they did not have the best experience and they bought into the things that I was saying. They were very welcoming to the freshmen on the team and they made sure that they were involved in everything."

In the end it was a successful season overall for Lamorinda with Miramonte (13-4-4), Campolindo (15-3-5) and Acalanes (17-5-3) combining for an overall 44-12-12 record, going 22-9-5 in league play. Campolindo lost in the second round to eventual finalist Maria Carillo, Miramonte lost in the semifinals to Branson but provided some assistance to Barbarino in the championship game: "I did speak with (Miramonte coach) Barry McQuain (who had lost to Branson in the semifinals) who I coached under as his JV and freshman coach and he gave me a little heads up on who to look out for."

Even though Acalanes finished seventh in league play with a 6-5-1 record, it worked out for the best in the long run said Barbarino: "It was such a competitive league that even though we finished in seventh place, we were only two games behind the second place team. Every one of our league losses was by only one goal. Looking back at our season, our losses were from our own mistakes so the girls learned what not to do in the future games. We had some tough losses when we made mistakes that cost us some games, but we learned from the mistakes and that helped us learn how to win the tough games in the playoffs. I believe that if we had not experienced those losses, we would not have been at this point as NCS champions."

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