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Acalanes girls soccer comes up short in 1-0 loss to Branson in NCS Championship

By Jon Kingdon

It was anticipated that the Acalanes (20-1) and Branson (20-3-1) game on Feb. 26 was going to be a defensive struggle. Each team led with defenses that averaged giving up only .33 goals per game. As it turned out, an early goal by Branson, the only goal of the game, set the tone, but it was not without controversy.

Acalanes had an early scoring opportunity when Branson's goalkeeper was caught out of position. Addie Bailey took a shot and what appeared to all but the officials, a Branson defender jumped up and with her hands blocked Bailey's shot from going in, depriving the Dons of an early penalty shot.

Acalanes head coach Nick Barbarino made his feelings known to the officials. "Obviously, I got upset and I ran down the sideline asking how they could not see was an obvious hands penalty," Barbarino said.

To further the Dons' frustration, on Branson's next trip down the field, they scored on a corner kick that ended up hitting the cross bar and barely crossing the goal line. That proved to be Branson's last real scoring opportunity.

From that point on, Branson was primarily focused on doing all they could to prevent an Acalanes score and expended little effort in trying to score themselves. "It was really frustrating after Branson scored so early in the game and having to trail by one goal the rest of the day," junior midfielder Tatum Zuber said. "They weren't really playing soccer. They were just trying to take everything out of their half of the field, and it was aggravating because we wanted to play soccer and they were just kicking the ball out of their end of the field."

Barbarino knew that they were facing a tough defense. "They had a very good goalkeeper, and their defense was solid. They were well coached and disciplined and once they got their goal, they were able to sit back a little bit and make it difficult for us."

The Dons came into the game averaging 4.3 goals per game and had not been shut out all season. It was a day when "close" was the operative term for the Acalanes offense with Addie Bailey, Emmi Cronin and Natalie Means just missing scores. "We had about 10 shots on goal, and we looked like the only team that was going to score from the run of play," Barbarino said. "Some days it's just not your day and today definitely wasn't ours."

The Branson field was not what one would expect to be played on for a championship game. The game moved to the afternoon because the facility had no lights and bleachers had to be brought in for the spectators. It was also a smaller field than Acalanes and most teams were used to playing on. The field was the minimum size allowed at 55 yards wide and 100 yards long, which was 10 yards shorter and 7 yards narrower than the field at Acalanes.

"We had expected the smaller field but when we first walked up, it really did look like a smaller field," Zuber said. "We had two good practices on Thursday and Friday, and we went into the game with a good idea and sense what the game would be like."

Barbarino accepted the situation, but he did not have to like it: "The smaller field somewhat neutralized a lot of what we like to do but they had to play there as well, so credit to them in getting the goal that they needed."

If there was any consolation for the Dons, it was knowing that after a 3-5-3 season in 2020-21, the Cougars were ranked as the 577th team in California by MaxPreps and heading into the game versus Branson, they had risen to 64th by MaxPreps.

"Last year, we had 16 seniors that had graduated and four players that had their club season overlap with our season, and they didn't want to risk injury, so we basically had a brand-new team last year," Barbarino said. "It actually worked out well for us because we got a year for the players to get used to each other and have some fun. What last year showed the girls was how you can go from a high to a low, and it ended up motivating them to show that last year was a fluke and to get back to where we were the prior year."

Even with the loss, Acalanes qualified for the next round of playoffs, the NorCal Regionals. The key to be successful next time for Zuber was simple: "We need to get the first goal. We worked really hard throughout the entire game, and we need to score off the chances that we created."

Barbarino did not want the players to forget how they felt after this game. "We were sitting there, and we decided that we did not want to feel like this again," Barbarino said. "We played well enough to win the game. Unfortunately, soccer is tough."

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