

November 22, 2024

By Dennis Garcia
SportsTone.net

ASHEBORO - One is attempting to do it with a very special purpose in mind and one is attempting to do it to fully reach the potential everyone knew it had when the season first started. Both are going to be playing for the ultimate prize in NCHSAA athletics.

The Southwestern Randolph and Asheboro high school soccer teams have one more step in order to reach the pinnacle of high school sports as both will be vying for state championships this weekend in Matthews. The Cougars, the No. 1 seed in the 2-A West Region, who have dedicated this entire season to Pedro Ortiz, a teammate killed last May 14, will meet Clinton, the No. 1 seed from the East Region, Friday night at 7 p.m. at the Mecklenburg County Sportsplex.

The No. 1-seeded and 3-A West Region champion Blue Comets will meet No 1 seeded and East Region champion Western Alamance Saturday at 6 p.m., on that same field.



The 2024 NCHSAA championships in men's soccer are this weekend.



SWR's Aaron Avina holds up a photo of teammate Pedro Ortiz following a Cougar victory. Photo provided.

Tickets are \$10 plus fees and must be purchased via the digital ticketing system at GoFan.

Ever since the season began, the Cougars have been playing for their fallen teammate. It is amazing or perhaps poetic, that the Cougars scored eight goals in the very first game of the season and have scored eight goals in a game on six occasions.

The team has looked to Ortiz, who wore jersey number eight, for strength and motivation during their 25-2 season. "It's really every practice, every game Pedro is mentioned in one form or fashion," veteran head coach Jimmy Walker said. "Witnessing the signs that are sent are unexplainable, but inspirational and it gives us belief. When you see scores of 8-0 or holding up a picture after a win and there's a player from the other team walking away behind them and he's number eight. Just little things that feel like he's with us. Pedro's not only watching us, but somehow helping us. It's pretty awesome."

Inspired and motivated, the Cougars went through an early-season test of strong opponents.

"Before our conference started, we had games with Page, Bishop McGuinness and Gray Stone Day and when we went through that, I kind of knew what we were dealing with," Walker said. "I knew good things would be achieved this year. And the conference with Randleman and Trinity really tested us."

The next test is Clinton, a 27-2 team which has given up just 13 goals all season. The Dark Horses have 19 shutouts this year, including four in the state playoffs. SWR, on the other hand, has scored 24 goals in its five playoff wins.

"I've been saying this every game, it's about us," said Walker, who starts eight juniors, one sophomore and two seniors. "Let's focus on what's working for us. They (Clinton) are a tall group of young men and their strength is when the ball is in the air. Our strength is when the ball is on the ground at our feet. They have long throw-ins that we will have to deal with. We need to keep the ball on the ground and keep possession."

With as many players with incredible foot skills as the Blue Comets have, possession hasn't been a problem all season. Asheboro has won 23 straight games.



Cougars head coach Jimmy Walker. Photo provided.



(L-R) Asheboro's Daniel Gutierrez, Cam Letterlough, Braulio Gutierrez and Diego Bustamante. following the 3A West Region Championship.

"We said from the beginning, at our very first workout as a group, the endgame is to make it to states and bring it home to Asheboro," AHS coach Nick Arroyo said after the win over AC Reynolds pushed its overall record to 27-2. "After we had that conversation, I said we are not going to talk about that again until we are going to states. Now they can officially talk about it."

Cam Letterlough has a national-best 77 goals and Diego Bustamante gives the Comets added scoring punch.

A key contest added by Arroyo paid off big when the Blue Comets defeated Mooresville in

the extra week allotted teams due to Hurricane Helene. While most teams elected not to play, the victory over Mooresville allowed AHS to increase its RPI and reclaim the No. 1 seed from the West as it overtook AC Reynolds. Reynolds had entered that week by overtaking AHS for the top seed. That became huge when AC Reynolds had to travel to Asheboro for the West Region finals, which Asheboro won 4-2.

AHS and Western Alamance (24-1) are somewhat familiar with each other. The two played against one another on August 19 with AHS recording a 4-3 victory.

"The biggest (difference) is we have now gotten in our groove," Arroyo said. "We play differently. We're in a slightly different formation. We have a few players who weren't playing with us then and they are healthy now. I know they had a player injured as well. I have told them we can't be overconfident just because we beat them the first time. It doesn't mean anything. We're playing for a state championship."



Coach Nick Arroyo indicating Asheboro's fourth straight conference championship on October 23rd, 2024. Photo provided.