

Explorers gather together to celebrate third place in IHSA Class 1A state soccer tournament

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ALTON – Marquette Catholic's girls soccer team got out to a particularly difficult start this season.

The Explorers dropped all three matches they played in the season-opening Metro Girls Cup tournament in March, then drew with crosstown rival Alton in their first match (the Riverbend Derby match) after the tournament. Throughout the season, they encountered much adversity, but overcame it en route to a third-place finish in the IHSA Class 1A Girls Soccer Championship, which was held at North Central College in the Chicagoland suburb of Naperville.

The team, school administrators and their supporters all gathered together at the



Marquette

gym Sunday evening for a reception to honor the Explorers' finish; they dropped a 3-0 decision to eventual state champion West Chicago Wheaton Academy (who defeated Woodstock Marian 2-1 in Saturday evening's state championship match) in Friday's semifinal match, but bounced back to defeat Williamsville 4-2 for the third-place trophy Saturday afternoon, finishing the season with a 15-10-3 mark.

“We put that tournament (the Metro Girls Cup tournament) on the schedule two years ago,” said **Explorer coach Steve Mitchell**. “For us to start the season with that tournament, we know it's tough every year; we always get put into the top bracket. Every year, we know our first three games are going to be Edwardsville, Triad, Rochester, Springfield; that sets the tone early.

“Unfortunately, this year we had some close losses and it started us off on the wrong foot.”

It took a bit of time for the Explorers to come together as a team, but once they did, things began to fall into place for them. “It took awhile for this group to click,” Mitchell said. “Midway through the season, about three-fourths in, we started to turn the corner; we did some bonding things, some team things and the kids just started to jell together. They ended up being a pretty tough team.”

The Explorers did play a schedule loaded with difficult teams from both sides of the Mississippi; they took on sides like Edwardsville, Granite City, O'Fallon, Quincy Notre Dame, Belleville East – plenty of schools in classes 2A and 3A. Their record early on didn't look impressive early on, but Mitchell set up the schedule like that for a reason.

“Some people don't understand that, when you're 0-3 or 2-5, it's done for a reason,” Mitchell said. “It's done for this end of the year; it's not done to put the kids through tough times. It's done for a purpose. I would rather be 14-10 and get up there for a first-place finish, rather than be 22-0 and go up there and get beat.

“We don't worry about the records here; we worry about the finish.”

On their way to the state tournament, the Explorers had to survive three straight penalty-kick shootouts – defeating Waterloo Gibault and Columbia in the Belleville Althoff sectional and then Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin at Illinois-Springfield in the supersectional to reach Naperville.

“I told the kids, 'we're under fire; let's just go to PKs because we've got the better goaltender (Lauren Fischer) and we've got the better shooters (thanks to end-of-practice penalty kicks the Explorers took)',” Mitchell said. “We just took our chances in PKs and it ended up working.”

The Explorers will lose five graduating seniors from this year's team – **Bailey Hartrich, Lauren Schmickley, Adrianna Schindler, Maggie Roche and Mallory Maag**. “It's going to be sad to miss (the seniors), but you've got to let them go sometime,” Mitchell said.

The memories of the 2016 season, however, will be ones that will not soon be forgotten by the Explorers and their supporters. “To be one of the last four teams in the state of Illinois, no matter what class you are,” Mitchell said, “is absolutely terrific. We beat three really good teams to get there; Roxana gave us a fit (in the regional final) too, and with the next three, they got harder and harder each game.

“We knocked off three really good teams. We battled through the whole season; I'm super proud of these kids. We couldn't ask for anything more.”



