

Mustangs Defeat No. 4 Lewis & Clark College 5-3 in NJCAA Division I Women's Soccer National Championship Round

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BREVARD COUNTY, FL - The Monroe College Mustangs are a win away from making it back-to-back national championships.

Sydney Clarke scored four goals and the top-seeded Mustangs defeated No. 4 Lewis & Clark College 5-3 in the NJCAA Division I Women's Soccer National Championship Tournament Friday.

Monroe (14-0), which has now won 31 straight games, will play for what would be the school's third national title on Saturday at 7 p.m. at Orlando Health Stadium on the campus of Eastern Florida State College.

The Mustangs will face either No. 2 Eastern Florida State College or No. 3 Tyler in the title game.

Monroe previously won national titles in 2014 and 2018 and is unbeaten in the national finals.

Clarke said it felt great to not only help her team get back to the national finals, but to prove wrong those who doubted the Mustangs this season.

"We don't really have many players (15), so everyone doubted us and thought we weren't going to go far," Clarke said. "But we proved them wrong."

Monroe College was particularly adept on the counterattack Friday, taking advantage of some critical mistakes by Lewis & Clark to score quickly.

The Mustangs jumped on top early as they were able to get a through ball past the Lewis & Clark defense and to the feet of Clarke, who put the ball home in the seventh minute for a 1-0 lead.

Clarke would score again in the 16th minute and the suddenly the Mustangs were in control and the Trailblazers (20-4) were down by two goals in the first half for the second straight game.

But once again, Lewis & Clark staged a big second half comeback.

First, it was Boitumelo Rabale – the nation's leading goal scorer with 56 – taking the ball down the right side. As virtually the entire Monroe defense collapsed on Rabale, she was able to flick the ball into the box where there were two Trailblazers wide open in front of the net.

Chelsea Riden took the ball and drilled home the shot to make it a 2-1 game.

Ninety seconds later, it was Payton Corley who sent a ball into the box where it bounced up and Lewis & Clark freshman Kara Crutchley took it out of the air and beat Monroe goalkeeper Stefane Rosa to tie it up.

However, as they have shown all tournament long, the Mustangs are at their best when they're under pressure.

Monroe used a quick counter attack to get the ball to Clarke one-on-one with the keeper again, and the freshman found the back of the net again to put the Mustangs back on top 3-2 with just over 18 minutes remaining in the game.

Two minutes later, Laia Munoz Danon scored for Monroe to make it a 4-2 game.

Lewis & Clark would make another comeback as Rabale scored on a penalty kick with 8:37 remaining, but the Mustangs would put the game away with 2:33 when Clarke intercepted a Trailblazers pass, moved in on the goal and scored with a shot low and to the left for her fourth goal of the day.

"It feels amazing," Clarke said of her four-goal game. "We started off good, and then in the middle of the game, we got a little tired. But at the end, we did our best."

Although his team played well, Lewis & Clark coach Tim Rooney said that in the end, the Trailblazers just made too many mistakes.

"I thought we really played pretty good," Rooney said. "We just made some critical mistakes that turned into goals."

"They did a great job. They're a very good team. When you're playing somebody good, you can afford to (make mistakes)."

Considering his team came into the tournament missing three key players, including second-leading scorer Candice Parziani, Rooney was happy to see his team show as much heart as it did in making the semifinals.

"I just wanted to get out of our bracket because I thought we deserved that much," Rooney said.