

Shootout superstars win two instant classics

Lakeland girls' soccer advances to state for first time in 18 years

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OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

It has been a dream season thus far for the Lakeland girls' soccer team. A home win vs. a rival and a sectional championship punched the Thunderbirds' ticket to the state tournament.

The Thunderbirds defeated two-seeded Ashland 2-2 (4-3 PK's) Thursday night in a WIAA Division 3 sectional semifinal. On Saturday in Arcadia, the Thunderbirds beat top-seeded Rice Lake 2-2 (4-2 PK's) to advance to state for the first time since 2004.

"All I can think about is we did it. This has been a goal since our freshman year," senior Leah Wolfe said. "We've been working towards it. We haven't gotten past semi-sectionals. That accomplishment and then being able to take it one step further (is amazing)."

"You can't really put it into words. It's just a strong emotion, just pure joy at the highest level," senior Sophia Myshchyshyn said. "It has been a dream since the beginning and we have achieved it through hard work and practice and putting in extra and the fact that it was the second game where we went all the way to PK's and we were able to perform under pressure. It really shows just the strength of the team."

"The girls left everything on the field this last game. I

told them to keep digging deep. It all came down to the battle and who wanted it. It is unreal how hard these ladies worked to make it happen," coach Stephanie Hartzheim said. "We are so unbelievably proud of these ladies. The excitement on the field last night after we won in PK's was one we will never forget."

Ashland

"I think what it means is it shows all the progress that we've had as a team," senior Olivia Melka said about the win. "We've been able to work together on and off the field to produce high quality soccer and we've just come together to do our best."

An absolute thriller, the Thunderbirds showed resiliency and grit, finding a way to win the biggest game of the year. They did so in front of the home crowd in dramatic fashion.

"This was one of the most exciting and stressful games of this year," junior Maria Gironella said. "It feels so good to come off with a win tonight because I know we worked so hard to get here."

Both teams were feeling each other out early on. Lakeland's best look early came on a corner kick, but they were unable to find an opening to shoot.

Naomi Hamerla had a huge game in the net for the Thunderbirds. One of the best saves all night came on a close range direct kick where she leaped and swatted it out.

"Last night's game was challenging and made the girls dig deep," Hartzheim said. "If you wanted to see a good game that kept you on



PHOTOS BY BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

The Thunderbirds storm the field in pure joy after Ashland missed their final penalty kick of the shootout during a sectional semifinal game against Ashland Thursday, June 9 at IncredibleBank Field in Minocqua. The win advanced them to the sectional final against Rice Lake.



Sophia Myshchyshyn puts the Thunderbirds up 2-0 with a goal in the second half during a WIAA Division 3 sectional final game against Rice Lake Saturday, June 11 at Cashen Field in Arcadia.



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Olivia Melka, right, and Leah Wolfe hug after Melka's go-ahead goal in the second half during a sectional semifinal game against Ashland Thursday, June 9 at IncredibleBank Field in Minocqua.

the edge of your seat, last night was that game."

It was a 0-0 game at 20:50. The Oredockers struck first at 23:26. Sienna Mika made a run to the net, forcing Hamerla to come up and make a play. After some contact, Mika got it by Hamerla and scored it from close range.

Lakeland had a quick answer that gave them a jolt. Josie Wentland had a look in the box, shooting it far side and over the head of Ashland goalie Maggie Tutor for the tying goal at 24:08.

"That really just gave us energy and hope and it motivated us to keep going," Gironella said.

Two goals were scored in 42 seconds. The game was tied at 1-1.

The Thunderbirds seized the momentum. Olivia Melka made a pass to Myshchyshyn who took a shot, shooting it high and over the net.

Lakeland kept the pressure up with another shot by Myshchyshyn. Tutor made a diving stop that led to a Lakeland corner kick. On that corner kick, Wolfe took a shot, deflected out of bounds.

Ashland star player Hailee Wilson received a yellow card late in the first half. It

led to a Myshchyshyn direct kick, saved by Tutor.

It was a 1-1 game at the half.

The Lakeland defense came up big time and time again. One thing that helped with that was the play of Gironella, who defended Wilson all game.

"Today I was tasked with man-marking their top player, and I was just supposed to not let her turn, prevent her from doing anything, and it helped the defense so they had one less thing to worry about," Gironella said.

In the second half, Taylor Heleniak had a chance at a goal early on. She received a pass from Melka, but was thwarted by Ashland's defense before getting a good shot off.

Hamerla kept making big saves. Ashland looked to have a breakaway goal attempt until Hamerla came in to make a sliding save.

"Naomi had some great saves and the defense had some game changing clears," Hartzheim said.

Melka had one of the shots of the year at 67:30. Taking a shot from outside the box, she arced it right over the head of Tutor and into the back of the

net.

"At halftime coach told me to take more shots and I saw the opportunity even though I was far out and I took it and it went in the top corner," Melka said.

The go-ahead goal gave the Thunderbirds a 2-1 lead.

Myshchyshyn nearly put the game away at 77:40. She had some space in front of the net and took a shot. It went high, keeping the game at 2-1.

Coming down to the final minute, it looked as if the Thunderbirds were going to win in regulation. A penalty gave Wilson a direct kick. She took advantage with a perfectly placed shot, scoring the equalizing goal with just 51 seconds left in the game.

The game would go to two 10-minute overtime periods.

Even though the Oredockers had shocked Lakeland, the Thunderbirds kept battling in overtime.

"We knew that we still had play in us," Melka said. "We knew that we could still do it and we just had to fight to make it happen."

The Thunderbirds had an injury scare when Wentland went down during the second

Superstars

From page 13

overtime, forcing her out of the game.

Hamerla kept the game alive with an incredible save at 97:22. The Oredockers took a dead-on shot that Hamerla punched up in the air, making the save.

"I was on the other side of the goal and it had a weird curve on it and I knew I wasn't going to be able to catch it so we've been practicing punching a lot during practice so I just laid it out," Hamerla said. "That was just exhilarating when I had that save."

Melka took one last shot at 98:50, but the game would eventually go to a penalty kick shootout.

Both Wolfe and Wilson made their first penalty kicks to make it 1-1. Next up, Melka was off target, missing her penalty kick.

The advantage went to Ashland where Lily Nye made the next kick, giving Ashland a 2-1 lead. Gironella answered with a successful make.

"We've done (penalty kicks) a ton in practice, we practice a bunch. I know it's just a pass to the corner, but going through my same routine that I got through every time," Gironella said. "I was super scared but just doing what I know how to do and what I've practiced."

Then, Ashland's Emily Nye hit the post for a no goal. It was all tied up at 2-2.

"You just got to not think about it," Hamerla said about defending penalty kicks. "I mean, it's hard to save them and you just focus on the ball and you just got to go what your gut's telling you."

Myshchysyn made her penalty kick as did Sonja Root for Ashland. It would come down to the last kick for both teams.

Alyson Lazaroff buried her shot in the back of the net. All the pressure was on Ashland to match with Hannah Bochler coming up. Bochler hit the post and it was over. Lakeland had survived, moving on to play Rice Lake on Saturday.

"That was just incredible," Hamerla said. "Last year we were so close and it was just so tight and this whole game it was nerve-wracking. When that ball hit the post, I was just so happy right there. It's just incredible."

Rice Lake

It was another thrilling and tense finish for the Thunderbirds. Like they did against



PHOTOS BY BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

From left, Sophia Myshchysyn, Maria Gironella, Olivia Melka, Naomi Hamerla, Leah Wolfe and Alyson Lazaroff celebrate their WIAA Division 3 sectional championship after Hamerla's final save Saturday, June 11 at Cashen Field in Arcadia.

Ashland, the Thunderbirds battled all game for a chance to go to state.

This time, Lakeland struck first courtesy of Wentland. On a direct kick off the foot of Melka, Wentland connected on a header for the first goal of the game at 14:05.

"Just placing myself in open space. Liv, she's got a good shot, a good kick, and I thought she was going to put her in and it came to me and honestly I don't even remember it all going," Wentland said. "I didn't see it, it was crazy, it happened so quick and next thing you know everyone is jumping up so it was an amazing feeling."

Wentland talked about how mentally challenging it was to come back from her injury just two days prior.

"Mentally it sucked cause I got told I might not even get to play today and that's really hard, it's a really awful feeling. I want to be there for my team, I want to help my team. It's a feeling that really sucked, but luckily we have amazing people around here that helped us helped me," Wentland said. "I'm just thankful we have amazing people around here to help out."

It ended up being a shutout for the Thunderbirds in the first half. Hamerla came up with a couple of saves as the Warriors could not find many good looks.

Wentland nearly tacked on another goal late in the first half. Melka made a cross in front of the net. Initially saved by keeper Ayla Zuzek,

Wentland missed from close range.

It was a 1-0 game at the break.

Lakeland wasted no time scoring in the second half. Myshchysyn scored on a pass from Melka to put the Thunderbirds up 2-0, just 2:31 in the second half.

"It was a perfect layout from Olivia. She is great at taking the ball down the left corner and then crossing it in the right area, and I just happened to be there," Myshchysyn said.

The Thunderbirds were taking advantage of their limited scoring opportunities as Rice Lake controlled possession for much of the game.

The Warriors came back. They nearly scored when they hit the goalpost. Jenna Whitman was there to kick it out. Then on a corner kick, Hamerla tipped it out for a huge save.

Eventually, the Warriors got on the board. Kallahan Bowman had a look at the goal and scored far side past Hamerla. Lakeland still led 2-1 with 28 minutes left to play.

Rice Lake had all the momentum now. They were firing off a lot of shots, putting a ton of pressure on the Thunderbirds. Hamerla once again came up big with a huge save on another corner kick to keep the lead.

But the Warriors would score the equalizer with about 15 minutes left to play in the game. It was Bowman again.

The Thunderbirds were getting tired. Having played 100 minutes on Thursday, the



Naomi Hamerla makes a leaping save on Rice Lake's fourth penalty kick to send the Thunderbirds to state in a WIAA Division 3 sectional final game Saturday, June 11 at Cashen Field in Arcadia.

constant defense of an attacking Rice Lake team wore on them. To help with that, Hartzheim subbed her forwards in and out to give the Thunderbirds a few quick breathers.

"We were trying to slow the play down and disrupt the game for Rice Lake. We also wanted to have that pressure with fresh legs up top," Hartzheim said. "We knew in overtime that we might not get a goal, but we knew we have been to PK's before and can be confident with taking those after having to already

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- Stephanie Hartzheim, LUHS girls' soccer coach

take them once in playoffs and practicing them for weeks. The girls knew the drill and how they needed to get it in the net."

Wolfe took a shot that was deflected and saved with about three minutes to go. The game was destined to go to overtime again.

Lakeland didn't have too many scoring opportunities in the two overtime periods. It was Hamerla and the Lakeland defense that kept the tie. One of the best saves in the game came 23 seconds into the second overtime when Hamerla made a save on a shot from close range.

"I think tonight it really came down to who wanted it. I think our defense went to every 50/50 ball," Lazaroff said. "We cleared every ball that we (could), we slid, we did everything we possibly could so they could not shoot just cause we just wanted it that bad that our defense just put everything we had."

Defenders Whitman, Callie Ullius, Lazaroff and Erika Rein among others were everywhere, deflecting and clearing ball after ball.

With neither team scoring, the game went to a penalty kick shootout. Having just been in this situation two days earlier, the Thunderbirds had a bit of confidence. It was the same five play-

ers for Lakeland from the Ashland game. Wolfe stepped up and made the first one to start things off. Then, Rice Lake's Callie Karstens shot it too high. Lakeland had a one-goal advantage.

"I personally have had a mental block with PK's since I've been in eighth grade. So the Ashland PK was my first PK taken in five years," Wolfe said. "And coach just had us practicing over and over in our practices taking three every single day and saying, 'Leah, senior leadership, you need to take it'. I'm just happy that I got to do it for this team, that it paid off."

This time, Melka connected on her penalty kick, as did Rice Lake. Gironella made her penalty kick yet again. The Warriors answered.

With Lakeland up 3-2 in the shootout, they controlled their own destiny and were two successful kicks away from a state birth. Myshchysyn stepped up and scored her penalty kick once again. They were one stop or score away from state now.

Bowman, who scored earlier in the game, came up for Rice Lake. Hamerla made the save of her life, knocking it out to send the Thunderbirds to the state tournament.

"(Naomi) honestly, she deserved that moment," Lazaroff said. "She had one heck of a game, she's an amazing goalie. She really deserved that save."

Up next, the Thunderbirds (15-2-3) play top-seeded New Berlin Eisenhower in a WIAA Division 3 state semifinal game Friday, June 17 at Uihlein Soccer Park in Milwaukee. The game time is set for 4:30 p.m.

New Berlin Eisenhower comes into the game with a 21-2-1 record, winning the Woodland Conference with a perfect 12-0 record. They were ranked first in Division 3 according to the Wisconsin Soccer Coaches Association (WSCA) girls' soccer state rankings published on Wissports.net on May 31.

"We want to keep going, we want to do well at state," Lazaroff said. "I think it's really important that we work hard this week and work on the things we could really improve on so we can be a force at state."

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BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

Josie Wentland scores the tying goal in the first half during a sectional semifinal game against Ashland Thursday, June 9 at IncredibleBank Field in Minocqua.