

WCA girls soccer advances to state championship

BY STUART STEELE

The Westminster Christian Academy girls soccer team defeated Georgia Christian 3-1 last Thursday night to advance to the GIAA Class AA state championship. The Lions have now reached the state championship game for three straight seasons.

The Lions showed excellent resolve after going 1-0 down in the first half, scoring three unanswered goals to secure their spot in the state championship game.

Georgia Christian scored the opening goal in the 19th minute, when senior Bella Iturralde found the back of the net directly from a corner kick. The goal was against the run of play, as Westminster Christian had controlled the game to that point, with the majority of play taking place in the Generals' half.

The Lions got their equalizer in the 37th minute, just before the end of the first half. A long free kick forward resulted in a loose ball in the box, and sophomore Faith Lawhead fired a shot into the back of the net. Getting that goal before halftime was huge for the momentum of the game, swinging it back in favor of the Lions.

Coming out of the half, Westminster Christian picked up where it left off.



Westminster Christian Academy senior Ansley Hovater dribbles against a Georgia Christian defender. [Photo by Stuart Steele]

Eight minutes into the second half, fellow senior Tessa Drake at the back post. Drake touched the ball home to give the Lions a 2-1 lead.

Drake added her second goal of the night just two minutes later, after a Lawhead shot was saved by the goal-keeper. Drake seized on the deflection and scored from close range, making the score 3-1 in favor of the Lions.

Head coach Liz Werner said she was proud of the response her players put forth after falling behind early in the game.

"We haven't done that this year, we haven't really gotten behind," Werner said. "That was new for them, and we talked about a lot of grit and tenacity before the game and just keeping our composure. I think it helped us a lot that we got a goal going into the second half, and then we just made a few switches and picked them apart, played pretty well."

Lawhead was a standout performer for the Lions. She showcased her versatility, starting the game in a defensive role at center back, going forward to play striker toward the end of the first half and start of the second half, and falling back into her defensive position to close out the win. Her ability to play in both spots at a high level was key to the Lions' win, and the coaches putting that level of trust in a sophomore shows just how talented she is.

"She's the MVP. She is the toughest

player we have, and she loves to play striker. Teams have watched us, so if we put her up at striker, there's at least three people that play on her," Werner said. "So we're trying to mix it up, keep them guessing. She can play back here, and we build from the back when we do that."

She's great, willing to play where we need her. I can't say enough good things about her as a player."

Other top performers on the night for the Lions included Hovater, who brought a consistent attacking threat down the left wing and Drake, whose positioning on both of her goals was outstanding. Juniors Charity Lawhead and Claire Werner formed a strong partnership in midfield, breaking up the Generals' play and consistently playing smart passes forward. Defensively, senior right back Kate Rasmussen and junior center back Josie Stanger were disruptive, flummoxing the Georgia Christian attackers throughout the game.

Editor's note: The Westminster Christian Academy girls soccer team fell to Central Fellowship Christian Academy 2-1 in the GIAA Class AA state championship on Tuesday. Coverage of that match will feature in next week's edition.

North Oconee girls golf wins fifth straight state title

BY STUART STEELE

For the fifth straight year and seventh time overall, the North Oconee High School girls golf team has won a state championship.

This year's state title win was particularly challenging, as the Titans came in third at the area tournament, behind Westminster and Cambridge. That meant they had to even compete at the state tournament, they had to earn a spot through sectionals. Even at the area tournament, head coach Rob Melton said the Titans were nearly eliminated.

"For a minute there, we were actually sitting in fifth place at the area tournament with about three holes to go," Melton said. "Had we finished in fifth place, we would not have even advanced. Our season would have been over that day at area, which is crazy to think about, how close we were to not even getting in the state tournament, much less winning it."

The Titans found a way out of that jam, and at the sectional tournament they played what Melton said was their "best round of the year as a team," winning the tournament by 12 strokes and earning their place at state. Hailey Moffett, Aubree Hill and Olivia Weaver were the Titans' top three finishers with scores of 74, 81 and 86 for a combined score of 241 at sectionals.

At the state tournament, it quickly became clear that it was a two-horse race for the 4A girls title between North Oconee and St. Pius. At the end of day one, the Titans were just one stroke behind the Golden Lions with a score of



The NOHS girls golf team poses with the state championship trophy. Left to right: Head coach Rob Melton, Olivia Weaver, Josey Bufford, Aubree Hill, Hailey Moffett, Kyler Hammond and coach James Hedrick. [Submitted photo]

241, made up of a 77 from Moffett, a 79 from Hill and an 85 from Kyler Hammond.

The conditions were tougher on day two, but the Titans played well, posting

a 251 from Hammond's 82, Hill's 84 and Weaver's 85. St. Pius finished with a 255 on day two, giving the Titans a 492 overall and the Golden Lions a 495.

Hill, a senior, will continue her golf career at Piedmont University after winning the state championship in each of her four seasons at North Oconee. In spite of all her success on the golf course, Hill said what she valued the most in her time

as a Titan was the relationships built with her teammates and coaches.

"I'm just thankful for the girls and how personable they all can be," Hill said. "It was more than just golf for me. It was meeting everyone, seeing all the new experiences I've had and all the life lessons I've learned. I'm so thankful that I'll be able to bring those to college golf with me." Hill said Melton stayed with her throughout her final five holes of the state tournament. She reflected on Melton's impact on her life and credited him for helping her and her teammates achieve so much.

"His encouragement and him just talking to me about anything else but golf, it just meant the world to me," Hill said. "The last five holes, I parred them, and without him, I don't think any of us would be where we are."

Melton said one of the most important aspects of the team's success has been its chemistry, something that can be overlooked in a sport like golf that features players competing as individuals in the framework of a team.

"We're talking about an individual sport that's also a team sport in the way we do it. I think it matters that we spend so much time together as a team and that we try to build that morale and that culture," Melton said. "It's not me versus you versus them, and all of us playing as an individual, we actually think of ourselves as a team when we step on the golf course. We're all rooting for each other and want the best for each other. I think that's the way it's got to be if you're going to be successful as a team."



Cadence Keese had an outstanding senior year at OCHS, winning two state titles and being appointed to the US Naval Academy. [Photo by Stuart Steele]

Athlete of the Week: Cadence Keese

Presented by Oconee Physical Therapy & Sports Rehabilitation

Cadence Keese caps high school career with two state championships

BY STUART STEELE

Cadence Keese has had a busy last month or so.

In April, the Oconee County High School senior earned an appointment to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

In May, she became a state champion in both her sports, winning the 800-meter run with a time of 2:17.63 and helping the Warrior girls tennis team win its first state championship since 2006.

Keese said she was only able to compete in both sports because of a weather delay that pushed the tennis state championship match back a week. She initially had to pick between competing in the 800-meter and playing in the tennis state championship, but instead was able to do both.



"That was a very, very difficult decision to make, because I knew that I had a good shot either way," Keese said. "Either I go run my individual event and place for myself, or I go play for the team. Then somehow the stars aligned and they rained out tennis the day before, which no one thought was a possibility."

Last year, Keese was also able to compete in both sports, finishing 15th in the 800-meter and coming up short in a tough match against private school opposition Wesleyan.

This time, she triumphed in both,

winning the 800-meter and her game for the tennis team against Southeast Bulloch.

Jenny Hu and Mary Linda Veit won the other two singles sets for the Warriors who beat the Yellow Jackets 3-1 for the title.

"It hasn't really sunk in, I don't even think the Naval Academy has really sunk in. People are like 'You're leaving in what, 30 days?' and I'm like 'Oh yeah,'" Keese said. "But it's nice to see everything finally coming together."

Keese capped off her busy month plus last week, when she officially graduated from Oconee County High School.

Oconee Physical Therapy & Sports Rehabilitation/Oconee Enterprise Athlete of the Week is chosen by the sports staff of The Oconee Enterprise. Anyone may email nominations to sportseditor@oconeenterprise.com by Monday at 10 a.m.

Oconee Physical Therapy & Sports Rehabilitation can be reached at www.oconept.com.