

Nov. 4 CJ III Boys Soccer: Bitter end for 'Stars



Nottingham's Gary Rojas (3) pursues the ball along with Allentown's Ryan Darrell during today's CJ III quarterfinal game (Photo by Mike Dill/purchase photos at www.michaeldillphotography.com).

Once again, Nottingham victimized by penalty kicks in tournament play

By Rich Fisher

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Nov. 4: Don't mention the word "shootout" around Nottingham High School soccer players over the next few weeks.

It will not be met by a pleasant response.

For the second time within 24 hours, a Northstar soccer team was knocked from state tournament play via penalty kicks.

After the girls lost to Matawan in sudden death PKs Thursday, the boys lost even more excruciatingly today as third-seeded host Allentown outscored the Northstars 11-10 in penalty kicks to win a Central Jersey Group III quarterfinal game.

The sixth-seeded 'Stars were one score away from clinching it in the regulation portion of the shootout but Redbird goalie Bob Millar made two straight saves and converted the first of his three successful kicks to assure sudden death.

The game was scoreless through regulation and two overtimes as Nottingham (11-5-2) tried avenging an earlier 4-1 loss to the Redbirds (15-4).

Without an experienced goalie on the roster, coach Mike Braender turned to sweeper Obinna Iloka to man the nets for the shootout.

“Obinna played goalie for us a couple times last year to start the season,” Braender said. “I just had a feeling about it. It didn’t work out so well for us, but I just went with a gut feeling.”

Nottingham actually held a 3-2 lead after each team took three attempts, as Iloka, Shiek Bangora and Luca deStasio all converted. Millar stopped Fulvio deStasio and, after Nicolas Prieto shot over the net, Millar stymied Uzo Iloka. On a do-or-die kick, the goalie then converted to force sudden death.

Allentown shot first in the sudden death and made all eight shots. Nottingham countered on its first seven as Obinna Iloka, Bangora, Luca deStasio, Jacob Kouroume, Uzo Iloka, Obinna Iloka and Bangora all connected.

That brought up Luca deStasio again. He had beaten Millar twice to the lower left and tried it again. Millar said after the game that he thought deStasio might go in a different direction but made a “last-minute decision” to dive to his right, and it paid off when the shot deflected off his knee and safely back onto the field.

“For it to come down to him getting stopped is rough,” Braender said. “Luca’s probably the best player I’ve coached in any sport and he deserves more than what he got to end his career.”

If there was one positive, it’s that deStasio didn’t misfire over the net. He took a good shot and got beat by a better save.

It has been a recurring theme for Nottingham in the post-season, as two diving saves by Pennington goalie Jimmy Coyle beat the Northstars in a Mercer County Tournament quarterfinal shootout loss.

At one point during the tense PK session, a nervous Braender turned and said “This sport is



Luca deStasio blasts a headball against Allentown in today's CJ III contest (Photo by Mike Dill/purchase photos at www.michaeldillphotography.com).

supposed to be fun.”

Nottingham had its chances during regulation. In some bitter foreshadowing, Millar actually made a diving save on Luca deStasio’s bullet shot early in the game.

The match was played in a strong wind, which started as a cross wind but began favoring the Northstars in the second half. Neither goalie wilted, however, as Mike Conte made 11 saves and Millar had nine.

Making it even tougher for Nottingham is that it suffered its first loss of the season (4-1) at Allentown Sep. 26.

“We had something to prove after last time on this field,” Braender said. “I think they made a statement today. That’s without question.”

Millar wasn’t about to argue.

“We knew right away they wanted us,” the goalie said. “They said when they were interviewed (after beating Wall) that they want Allentown.

“They’re a really good program, a really good squad and I can completely understand why they wanted revenge. In the long run they had a lot more heart than us today. I’m upset for them they’re out of the tournament. I wish the best for them. They wanted it a little more than us. We were just kind of persistent.”

The toughest thing about the whole ordeal for Braender was saying goodbye to a group of 10 seniors who helped Nottingham to an outstanding season.

“Especially Luca and Aaron (Stovall), being captains and leaders,” the coach said. “I can’t express enough, my pleasure with these guys and the way they played all year. They by far exceeded expectations of not only myself, but a lot of other people in this county. It was just a pleasure being their coach.”

Making it that much tougher to lose the way they did.

“To get knocked out twice like this. . . .” Braender said with a sigh. “I’m feeling the pain, I can’t imagine what they’re feeling.”

They’re feeling intense pain.

But they should also feel intense pride when it’s all said and done.