

## Nov. 7 CJ IV Soccer Preview

### RV visits Steinert in state's most surprising semifinal sectional match-up

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**Nov. 7:** Just call it the Bracket Buster bowl.

In a match-up that even Nostradamus couldn't have predicted, 15<sup>th</sup>-seeded Rancocas Valley brings its 5-13-3 record to Steinert Tuesday to play the 14<sup>th</sup>-seeded Spartans (7-8-2) in the Central Jersey Group IV semifinals.

Steinert is within two wins of a sectional title after beating third-seeded Monroe, 2-1, and sixth-seeded South Brunswick, 2-0. The Red Devils have advanced by beating second-seeded Colts Neck, 2-0, and seventh-seeded Freehold Township in a shootout.

The game is a battle between two teams who are not as bad as their records indicate, as the Spartans have lost seven one-goal games and two by two goals. RV has dropped nine one-goal decisions.

Steinert was reeling at season's end, having gone 0-5-1 before winning a 2-0 Mercer County Tournament consolation game over Robbinsville. It seemed to work wonders as the Spartans have now won three straight.

"In the regular season the ball didn't bounce our way some games," coach Todd Jacobs said. "Now we're winning these close games. The team as a whole has raised its level of play. We had Derek Shearer at sweeper for quite some time but with our lack of offense we pushed Derek up and dropped CJ Harvell back to sweeper.

"CJ has fit in nicely there. That's helped us out. He's an aggressive player in front of the goal and the communication is good between him and (goalie) Devon Downs. CJ is getting more comfortable in the back, he's been there the last five games and he's a very hard-nosed guy back there."

RV entered the states even colder than Steinert, having gone 0-5-1 in its final six games. But the Red Devils have also turned things around quickly.

"Our mindset is that anything can happen once you get in the playoffs, as both teams are proving," RV coach Damon Petras said. "We lost nine one-goal games and have three scoreless ties. It's just one of those years where the ball is not finding the back of the net."

"Their season has mirrored our season," Jacobs said. "They have played very good teams, competitive games and maybe were just unlucky in their ability to find the back of the net, like us."

One of the teams to beat RV this year was Seneca, which took a 3-0 victory on Oct. 6. Seneca is coached by former Spartan goalie Sam Maira, who won a state title with Steinert in 1975.

"We went into that game knowing we had to be organized and disciplined in the back to counteract the speed Rancoas Valley had up front," Maira said. "On the attack we were looking to pressure the other outside backs.

"They're always well coached and have a skilled team. They'll compete throughout the game.

RV is making its second straight trip to the CJ IV semis, having lost to Freehold Township last year after Freehold beat Steinert on PKs in the quarterfinals.

"You know they are going to be pushing to get to that next step, as are we," Jacobs said. "You have two teams that have thrown out their regular-season records and have found themselves at the doorstep of the CJ IV finals."

The Red Devils are also similar to Steinert in that the scoring is distributed throughout the lineup.

"We have a very even team with no superstars," Petras said. "But they're all solid players. Every game someone new steps up. Who will it be this time? I guess we'll find out."

Steinert hopes whoever it is, will be wearing a green and white uniform.

"It's great to be in this position," Jacobs said. "No one but us expected us to be here. However, we are not satisfied yet. We believe we can win this next game."

With what has happened to this point, nothing is hard to believe.