

Photos: Del Norte boys' soccer ends long drought

November 7, 2023



Thanks to some outstanding defense this fall, the Del Norte boys soccer team ended a 28-year championship drought.

The Warriors were crowned H-DNL champions on Wednesday (Oct. 25) after a 2-0 over McKinleyville in Crescent City, securing just the second-ever league title for the program and a first since 1995.

And they achieved it with some stellar defense, posting shutouts in eight of their final nine games, including five straight to close out league play.

Senior goalkeeper Isidro Montanez and his defense have not allowed a goal in more than 440 minutes of play, last conceding in a 1-1 tie against Fortuna on Oct. 7.

“I am very proud of my boys for this great achievement and thank them for all the time and effort they put in to make this happen,” said head coach David Sanyaolu, whose team has outscored its opponents by a combined 42-1 over the last nine games.

Even more impressive, this is a junior-heavy team that many people around the league felt was a year from challenging for a league title and a team that lost its leading scorer from a year ago, when junior Mario Ledezma suffered a season-ending injury just before the season opener.

Sophomore Deken Hanks has filled that void with 14 goals.

“His development has been amazing,” Sanyaolu said.

Another key to the success is the chemistry the players have built on the field and the team is playing more as a unit than before, according to the coach, with “everybody chipping in.”

It all really began when the Warriors gave up two late goals in a 2-1 loss to Arcata on Sept. 23. That’s when something clicked with the players.

“They have turned it around since then,” the coach said. “Their mentality changed after that game. They changed their attitude and had a desire to be better.”

Central defenders Alexis Ortiz and Greyson Franklin have anchored the defense all season, alongside fullbacks Jacob Ramsey and David Aguilar, the latter of whom is just a freshman and has been “spectacular,” the coach said.

Defensive midfielders Lyon Rigden and Saxon Taylor, each of whom scored in a 3-0 win at Eureka on Monday (Oct. 23), have both also played a pivotal role in the suffocating defense.

“We have two good central defensive midfielders that shield the back line and also create offensive opportunities,” Sanyaolu said.

Outside midfielders Pedro Garcia-Maravilla and Brandt Pennington have also played key roles and have done a good job setting up opportunities for Hanks.

The Warriors also had a more challenging run-in than any of the other three contenders for the league title — Arcata, Fortuna and Eureka — but they held their nerve down the stretch.

Monday's win at Eureka followed a 2-0 win at Arcata just two days before, a victory that eliminated the Tigers from contention.

Sophomore Daniel Gomez got the breakthrough goal late in the first half in the championship-sealing win over McKinleyville, with junior Adrian Contreras adding a second goal midway through the second half.

“As expected, it was a very intense match, and Mack came to play,” Sanyaolu said. “We managed the game well and saw out the win.”

Del Norte finished league play with 19 points from 12 games with a record of 9-2-1.

Fortuna was second with 18 points, followed by Eureka with 16 and Arcata with 13.