

Del Norte boys soccer hosts first home playoff in 24 years, narrowly losing

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Some two dozen Del Norte fans bundled in blankets and lawn chairs as they watched the local high school boys soccer team take on McKinleyville High School on Wednesday.

Above the field, a weathered blue sign read, “Home of the Warriors.”

The Del Norte High School boys soccer team played its first home playoff game since 1995, losing 1-0 to the McKinleyville High School Panthers.

After losing to Fortuna High School 3-2 in the North Coast Section finals last year, the Warriors hoped to advance to the finals again this season, but fell to the Panthers in a tense first game of the playoffs.

“A lot of the returning players from that team are on this team, so they’re kind of hungry in a way. They want to get a second crack at it,” said assistant coach Scott Sousa.

For the past three years, the soccer team has made the playoffs. The first and third years, they lost in the first round, but last year the Warriors defeated two teams and made it all the way to the finals.

“After last year, we wanted to make a statement that [making the playoffs] was no fluke, so I’m glad that the boys have performed admirably again this year,” said coach David Sanyaolu. “It’s always a privilege to rank among the best teams in our division.”

The post-season playoff arrangement has gone through considerable transformation in recent years, according to Sanyaolu. Sixteen teams can enter the playoffs, based on a numerical record. That way, schools from smaller areas have a greater chance of reaching the playoffs.

Prior to the change, only the top teams in each league were selected to play in the playoffs. In 1995, the last time the Warriors had playoff games on their home turf, Del Norte had finished in the top two in the league, allowing for a home game.

This year, the 24 Del Norte team members got to play – win or lose - with the redwoods and the ocean as a backdrop and their hometown cheering from the sidelines, something Warrior soccer players had not experienced in 24 years.

“Everybody’s really excited to witness a playoff game in front of our friends and in our city,” Sanyaolu said.

Sousa, a graduate of Del Norte High and veteran soccer player, never experienced a hometown playoff game in his four years on the team. “It’s a big achievement. I told them that. It’s not too many Del Norte soccer alumni have done it, so they’re in some territory there that’s never been touched.

“I’m very proud of them,” Sousa said.