

Eureka boys soccer wins in a weird way

Erik Fraser, The Times-Standard
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ARCATA - After 12 league games, Arcata and Eureka stood tied at the top of the Humboldt-Del Norte Conference standings with identical 10-1-1 records, with each team's only loss coming at the hands of the other.

After 80 minutes of a one-game playoff Saturday, nothing had changed as the teams battled to a scoreless draw.

So that means sudden death overtime, and then maybe penalty kicks, right?

Nope. Try controversy and rule book interpretations.

After a good 10 minutes of confusion, phone calls to both schools' athletic directors, and a bit of bickering, Eureka was declared the winner and awarded the automatic bid to the North Coast Section playoffs, setting off celebrations amongst the Loggers and their fans, and an understandable wave of frustration on the Tiger bench.

At issue was whether the playoff counted as a league game or a section game. There are no provisions for overtime in league games, but there are for section games.

Ultimately it was ruled to be a league game, so it came down to goal differential in head-to-head matchups.

In the teams' first meeting, Arcata won 2-1. In the second match, Eureka won 2-0. That meant the Loggers had a 3-2 advantage, giving them the automatic NCS berth.

Predictably, the Loggers didn't mind the ruling, while the Tigers felt they had been cheated. Afterwards, Arcata head coach Jason Ewing posed the obvious question.

"Why even have this game if we're just going to go to goal differential?"

It was a legitimate question, too. The goal differential did not change on Saturday. The standings were the same. It turned out the teams played 80 minutes of meaningless soccer, and nobody came

away fully satisfied.

Eureka won the title, but the Loggers had to sit around for 10 minutes before they could celebrate it.

Arcata felt deprived of a chance to win the championship themselves.

And again, why play it at all if you're not going to play till you have a clear winner? As Ewing pointed out, Eureka had played Friday up in Del Norte, and was apparently risking injury in a game that turned out to be meaningless.

More importantly, why wasn't all this sorted out before?

"Why don't the referees know for sure?" Ewing asked. "Why do they have to get on cell phones? They know what kind of game they're coming to."

The real shame may have been that the confusion and controversy overshadowed an outstanding game by two of the most evenly matched teams you'll find.

"I'm very proud of both teams," said Eureka head coach Daniel Holmes. "I think we handled it very well. (It was) a great performance from both teams, great for soccer for Humboldt County."

"I totally agree," said Ewing. "It was a hard-fought game, a 0-0 draw, but it wasn't like there weren't any shots. "There were shots all over the place."

Indeed.

Both goalkeepers were phenomenal in the match, each making some spectacular saves to keep the game scoreless.

"Ross Kenworthy played an outstanding game (for Eureka)," said Holmes. "He's our anchor back there, I'm very proud of him."

He was matched by Arcata's Erik Martini save-for-save - including a diving stop on a short-range shot by Travis Tollner in the 20th minute - but the save of the game didn't come from a keeper.

In the eighth minute, Arcata defender Matt Macari saved the ball off the line after it had gotten behind Martini.

But there wasn't a single ball that ended up on the other side of the goal line for either team, as both squads played excellent team games.

”It was a team effort,” said Holmes, And I think that's been our whole goal. We don't play as individuals. We play as a team.”

Ewing was pleased with his team's play as well.

”We were strong in the middle,” he said. “We were able to be more composed with the ball and get off some crosses, but it wouldn't go in the goal.”

Even though they won't get the automatic NCS bid, Arcata is sure to get an at-large invitation at today's seeding meeting. And perhaps the two teams will meet in the playoffs. Then they'll get a shot at the overtime they were denied of on Saturday.