

Birtwistle, Radnor press their way into state final

CHAMBERSBURG – Jackson Birtwistle's name won't show up in the boxscore of Tuesday's night's PIAA Class 4A boys soccer semifinal. But the Radnor junior forward's fingerprints were all over a first half that Radnor controlled at Chambersburg High School.

While Bobby Hydrisko rifled in a shot from 30 yards in the 33rd minute, there was Birtwistle off near the touchline, his hustle the reason why goalkeeper Will Gallagher was caught out, only able to wave at Hydrisko's drive that pinged off the back post and in.

Birtwistle was a spectator on Ben Engstrom's goal four minutes later, only because his ball into the box summoned the craziness that the senior mid exploited, narrowly beating the offside trap to head home.

The shadow contributions by Birtwistle to a 3-0 win over District 7 champ Seneca Valley display the depth that the Raiders possess. And it explains why they're bound for Hershey and a state final.

Ben Engstrom makes it 2!! Eliot Hayes header over.

You can decide if it's onside. Ref said yes. Video says ... Not s'much. pic.twitter.com/Segt7EsNV7

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 14, 2018](#)

Radnor (20-3-2), the fifth seed from District 1, will match up with District 3 runner-up Wilson, which routed Unionville, 4-0, Tuesday. Kickoff at HersheyPark Stadium is 6:30 Saturday night. It's Radnor's first state final appearance since winning in 2004 in Class AA and first big-school final since

1980.

The opening goal encapsulated Radnor's postseason run: A healthy amount of grit and hustle, a little ugliness and a dash of brilliance.

Birtwistle provided the former commodities, chasing down Gallagher on an innocuous seeming back pass, the Radnor press springing to life. It forced an errant pass, which caused a loose touch by left back Jake Smith as Hydrisko closed the vise of pressure.

Hydrisko took possession, took a touch and powered an inch-perfect shot that Gallagher was helpless to deny.

"I took a long touch down the line, saw the keeper was off his line and I just went for it," Hydrisko said.

"It was awesome," Birtwistle said of his teammate's finish. "I was in shock for like 15 minutes, just trying to think about what just happened. It was a crazy thing to do. We were able to close out the half, so it was awesome."

Four minutes later, Birtwistle pursued a clearance of a Hydrisko long throw to the end line. He lofted in a cross that Eliot Hayes headed forward to Engstrom, hugging the offside line to nod over Gallagher and make it 2-0 three minutes from halftime.

Bennett Mueller get up!! 3-0 Radnor. Hydrisko the feed off a short corner. 14 minutes left. pic.twitter.com/uq89JXkdHj

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 14, 2018](#)

Birtwistle's contributions don't always track with the center forward mold. Radnor has eight goals in states, none from Birtwistle, though he has a pair of assists. He spent the second half of Saturday's quarterfinal against State College

on the bench after picking up a knock. But Tuesday, he was busting a lung covering every inch of space he could.

“It’s a state semifinal,” Birtwistle said. “There’s nothing really like it. As we get farther into it, I feel like we have more energy as a team. We just play better and we’re able to put that high pressure up there.”

With two goals in hand, the Raiders followed a familiar playoff script. They haven’t allowed a second-half goal in three states games, and they entered states on the back of consecutive shutouts in win-or-go-home playpacks contests in districts.

It was no different Tuesday. They were aided by a pair of ill-timed injuries to Seneca Valley attacking midfielders, with Ben Francis going out in the first half with an arm injury and Seth Winters leaving on crutches after a second-half collision.

Luke Rupert was dangerous up top, forcing Nate Congleton into a diving save in the first half, while center back Keegan McVicker toe-poked a dangerous effort in the second half that Henry Cooke parried wide. But the chances were overwhelmingly in Radnor’s favor.

Part of the reason is the complementary skillsets in the center of the pitch. In central defense, Bennett Mueller brings the height to Evan Majercak’s covering speed. Jake Lee seemed to be everywhere in midfield as a backline shield, while Hayes is the go-to aerial specialist. And while Seneca Valley rotated outside backs at regular intervals, Radnor’s Ben Verbofsky and Josh Savadove were rock solid out wide.

“I just feel like we work really well as a unit,” Mueller said. “We’ve all got each others’ backs, we all cover for each other. I can rely on everybody else on the back line to clear anything that I mess up or any of that stuff. We work really well together to stop goals.”

That height makes defending leads easy in another regard, as Mueller showed in the 66th, rising to head home a corner-kick delivery from Hydrisko after he and Birtwistle played it short.

The net result is a return trip to Hershey, where Radnor started states play by spotting Cumberland Valley the first two goals. Three wins later, all against districts champs, and the Raiders will play for a state title.

“This is just unbelievable,” Hydrisko said. “I love every single one of these kids. The work that they all put in, it makes it all worth it.”

Radnor, Strath Haven a win away from state finals

Only two Delco schools have ever been represented in PIAA boys soccer finals. Perhaps it's no surprise that those two programs remain the last ones standing this fall, each one win away from breaking a decade-and-a-half Delco absence from Hershey.

A finals date is on the line for both Strath Haven and Radnor Tuesday. Haven (15-6-2) gets District 12 champ Archbishop Wood (19-4) in the Class 3A semifinal at West Chester East. Kickoff is 7 p.m.

Radnor (19-3-2) has the longer trip, venturing to Chambersburg to take on District 7's Seneca Valley in a 6:30 start in the Class 4A semifinals.

Both programs have history to build on. Strath Haven owns five

state titles, winning in the old AAA (big-school) classification in 1986, 1991, 1995, 1996 and 2001. They also lost the 1992 final.

Those triumphs under legendary coach Mike Barr included current coach Ryan O'Neill on the field, O'Neill a two-time All-Delco and the Daily Times Player of the Year in 1995.

The most recent Delco finalist, though, was Radnor, which won the 2004 Class AA title. It takes on a team in Seneca Valley (19-2-1) with a more recent history in Hershey, losing in the 2015 Class AAAA final to Central Bucks East. Their journey included beating Springfield in the semifinals at Chambersburg that year.

Strath Haven's style has been to go on the attack. That Panthers have scored 68 goals in 23 matches this season and have yet to be shut out. They are fresh off scoring five goals against District 4 champion Athens, which had allowed five goals all season.

In five postseason games, striker Nate Perrins has 14 goals, including the overtime game-winners in the District 1 final against Holy Ghost Prep and the states opener against Mechanicsburg at East. Archbishop Wood is a win away from its second state final after eliminating Holy Ghost, 3-1, in the quarters.

Radnor's route has been just as filled with drama. The Raiders have a penchant for falling behind and then recovering. They spotted Cumberland Valley two goals in the states opener before notching a 3-2 come-from-behind win. In Saturday's quarterfinal against State College, the Raiders trailed in the 14th minute.

"I think it's our composure that really helps us in those times that we're down by one or down by two," said midfielder Jake Lee, who scored the equalizer against State College. "Coach (Joe) Caruolo really helps us keep composed and self-

aware that we're in these games no matter what and try to find a way back."

One of the keys is the Raiders' defensive rigidity. Against Cumberland Valley, State College and in their district opener with West Chester Henderson, they conceded goals in the first half and then tightened up to post second-half shutouts. They didn't allow a goal in two playback contests, blanking North Penn and Lower Merion on the road by 1-0 scores to nab District 1's fifth states berth. The in-game resilience they've showed seems baked into the journey they've taken.

"Whatever happens in the game, Coach Caruolo knows the game well, so he helps us play around it, play through it," said David Azzarano, the midfielder who scored the second goal against State College. "We've been getting the job done against really good teams lately. We want to keep it rolling."

Seneca Valley has been no stranger to tight games in the postseason, defeating Abington, 1-0, in the quarters after a 3-2 double-overtime victory over Hempfield in the opener.

Difference-maker Lee leads Radnor to state semis

SOUTH LEBANON TWP. – When Ben Vollmer burst past Jake Lee, received a feed in full sprint and buried the shot in the back of the net, Lee felt he had some atoning to do.

Not two minutes later, the Radnor junior had accomplished just that with a goal of his own. The center midfielder's Saturday was a microcosm of what many of the Red Raiders have done all season.

Radnor adjusted on the fly – to a blustery crosswind, to a State College team that struck first, to a full second half of defending – to notch a 2-1 win in the quarterfinals of the PIAA Class 4A tournament at Cedar Crest High School. The Raiders' reward is a semifinal berth against District 7 champion Seneca Valley, which ousted Abington, 1-0, Saturday. Site and time are to be determined.

It's the third time the Raiders, the fifth seed from District 1, have faced a district champ in states, eliminating District 3's Cumberland Valley before taking down District 6's Lions. As it has so often this postseason, Radnor found itself facing a deficit when Vollmer charged in past a stumbling Lee and latched onto a flashing through ball from right winger Marc Rodgers. Vollmer took a touch to wrong-foot a defender and lashed a shot to the far post that beat goalie Nate Congleton in the 14th minute.

"After that goal, I knew I slipped up there," Lee said. "So I knew I had to get a goal back for us and get our energy back and get life for our team again."

That Lee was in central midfield at all is a testament to his adaptability. He started the season at outside back, but the Raiders (19-3-2) have adjusted their core formation time and again. Ben Verbofsky has settled in at right back after stints in midfield. Bobby Kirsch hit the sidelines two weeks ago with an injury.

That's why Lee, not the aerial presence that Kirsh or 6-foot-4 midfield mate Eliot Hays is, found himself in the six-yard box in the 15th as Bobby Hyrisko's long throw rode the wind into a dangerous spot. Lee rose to nod it home cleanly, leveling the score 1:52 later.

With Hayes, Hyrisko and center back Bennett Mueller, the majority of Radnor's goals this postseason have arrived via set piece. That's not exactly the niche filled by diminutive

midfielder David Azzarano, a creative player more comfortable with the ball at his feet than in among the trees. But Azzarano put his stamp on one of those set pieces in the 37th minute.

A corner kick had been cleared, one in which the Radnor bench exhorted Azzarano to fill the vacant space at the far post. So when Hydrisko's ensuing long throw got a gusty assist, Azzarano heeded the advice, finding a pocket of green to his lonesome to plant a perfectly-placed header, rising just above goalie James Hook.

"I was like, OK, and I walked to the back post," Azzarano said. "And then the ball came right to the back post. It was pretty much coach's goal."

That left only one more adjustment in trying to see out a one-goal edge. Starting forward Jackson Birtwistle came off at halftime after being kicked in the shin. He wouldn't return. That left a pair of deputies in Charlie Bernicker and Seamus Kennedy to execute the high-pressing style and hold-up play called for from a center forward. They didn't threaten for goals, but they emptied their tanks and made the Lions' comeback attempts more difficult at every turn.

"It's huge when you can give your starters a rest and have some guy come in and sprint around for you and pressure the defense," Azzarano said. "It takes pressure of the rest of our team."

Nate Congleton and Henry Cooke made three saves each in goal. Cooke's best effort came in the 75th when Alex Mikula tried to sneak a shot past him on the short side off a Vollmer through ball, but Cooke tipped it into the side netting. The State College fans, on the far side of the field, saw the net ripple and thought it an equalizer, but it wasn't to be.

All that remained was five more minutes of long-ball clearances, and the game ended with the ball at Lee's feet as

he sprinted jubilantly toward his bench, one whose team-first approach he appreciates more than most.

“We have a lot of versatile players on our team,” Lee said. “I just try to be one of them, get out there and try to make a difference.”

Strath Haven ignores recent history, conquers Athens

Strath Haven coach Ryan O’Neill was aware of the numbers Saturday. He knew that the Panthers’ opponent in the PIAA Class 3A quarterfinals, District 4 champion Athens, had scored 114 goals in 21 contests, had won its last three regular-season games by a combined score of 31-0 and had allowed all of five goals all season.

But he also knew how hard it was to translate results against opposition like Corning-Painted Post, the team from New York that handed Athens its only loss. And O’Neill wasn’t going to let awe of an opponent intimidate his District 1 champs.

So the 5-1 win that the Panthers rolled up may have seemed shocking in the context of Athens’ season, but not to the Panthers.

“We knew the details of 114 for and five against,” O’Neill said. “But it’s always hard to read when they’re from a place that’s so far away that it’s hard to know. It’s difficult when there’s no commonality at all. ... We respected the fact that they hadn’t given up a lot of goals, but at the same time, we figured that the experience that we have and all the things that we’ve gone through would be a pretty good thing for us.”

Nate Perrins scored twice in the first half, his 13th and 14th goals in five games of a fearsome postseason. The Panthers led 2-0 at halftime, with the wind at their back at gusty Hazleton High. But there was still some apprehension as to how that would translate into the wind.

“Is two enough?,” O’Neill said of the thought process. “When this flips and it goes around in the second half, are they going to be at our throats the whole time? It’s good going up two goals and being in at half up two goals, but you don’t know how it’s going to look in the second.”

Jake Zweier put O’Neill’s mind at ease with a quick third goal to open the half. Athens would get one back on a penalty kick, tucking away the rebound after Noah Atsaves (eight saves) denied the spot kick.

But Strath Haven continued to pour forward. Gavin Birch, who set up a Perrins’ tally, used his speed to draw a penalty and converted from the spot, then tacked on an insurance tally late. Zweier added an assist, as did Andrew Lowman and Emmett Young.

The Panthers advance to take on District 12 champion Archbishop Wood in Tuesday’s semifinal at a site and time to be determined. Wood prevented the Panthers from getting a District 1 rematch with Holy Ghost Prep via a 3-1 victory over the Firebirds Saturday.

Despite Backe’s battle,

Sacred Heart falls to defending champ Greenwood

MANHEIM TWP. – At halftime in the blustery conditions at Manheim Township High School Saturday morning, a gust of wind toppled one of the field hockey cages. For most of the first half, the incessant pressure by Greenwood threatened to do the same, with only Sacred Heart goalie Gigi Backe preventing the Wildcats from overrunning the Lions.

Sacred Heart's run in the PIAA Class A tournament ultimately ended in a 9-1 Greenwood victory, but with Backe between the posts, it didn't terminate without a fight.

"We would've lost this game 42-0 if it wasn't for her," senior Danielle Santora said.

The midfielder's math is off, but only just. Backe turned aside 24 of the shots that bombarded her cage from a Greenwood side that earned 20 penalty corners and moved two wins from defending its PIAA title.

When the Wildcats (21-1) scored four times in the game's opening 7:40, it looked like it could be a long day for the Lions (9-13-1). But they steadied the ship and allowed just one goal over the next 35 minutes of game action, thanks largely to Backe.

"After that, we got our game going and we started playing," Backe said. "And they didn't score until the second half. That's really confidence-building for the whole team."

Gigi Backe a save on Bryner. She has 14 stops. Still 4-0 Greenwood pic.twitter.com/cirMaSAyL5

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 10, 2018](#)

Greenwood's abundance of talent would only be delayed, not stopped. Penn State-bound senior standout Paityn Wirth scored three times, though the last two weren't until after the midway point of the second. Emma Rolston scored twice in the opening frame, Hailey Wormer tallied a pair of goals and Kennedy Stroup notched three assists and a goal.

The reminder that the Lions were in a different league came early. Rolston scored 87 seconds in, followed 23 ticks later by a Wirth goal where she raced just inside the circle and ripped a howitzer of a rising shot, the quality of which Backe (and most high school goalies) rarely encounter.

"I didn't see that one coming," Backe said. "I didn't even see it past my face. It was fast and she did a good job with it."

But Backe got the better of Wirth more often than not, aggressively cutting down the angles on Wirth's preferred backhand sweep off corners. Backe had 11 stops at half to augment a Santora defensive save, keeping the Wildcats off the board for the last 22:20.

"She's the only reason why we're here," Santora said of Backe. "I don't know how goalies do it, but she has such a strong mentality. She's pretty much our team. Without her, we would not be anywhere."

Amanda Heilmann added a defensive save in the second half, and Stroup scored the fifth goal off a rebound of another Backe denial of Wirth. The senior reached 21 saves before Wirth finally powered a backhand sweep home, and a succession of late penalty corners tacked on to the lead.

Catie Gordon got a goal for the Lions in the final minute off a Julia Flood setup. It offered Sacred Heart a little consolation from the day, though their journey provided plenty. As District 1 champions who routed Lansdale Catholic, 5-1, in the first round of states, their program-changing season has presented plenty of memories beyond Saturday's

lopsided score line.

“It’s not a very athletic school, and that’s what the reputation around the Main Line is,” Santora said. “It’s like, ‘oh they’re Sacred Heart, we’ll beat them.’ But to be here and represent our school is awesome.”

“I think that it gives us a big start for next year,” Backe said. “We were the underdogs all through districts and then we won the first state game. We knew they were going to be a hard team, so I think we had a good run. I think we did really well.”

De George: Radnor’s return to prominence eases sting of ouster

RADNOR – Aidan Carter paced the sidelines as though if he kept moving, reality wouldn’t find him. Ifeyan Gavin orbited the final huddle at a wide berth, a towel over his helmet. Jahmair Rider bit down harder on his mouthpiece, a vain attempt to stanch the flow of tears. And Nick Scheri – helmet on, chinstrap fastened – took one final walk, goal line to goal line, before exiting Prevost Field.

The biggest number in Radnor’s season, football coach Tom Ryan would tell you, was not the No. 9, as in the most wins the program has registered since its unbeaten 1976 season, or the No. 1, as in the first playoff game hosted and first district playoff win in program history.

Instead, he would identify that vital statistic as 24 – 26,

identifying 24 seniors plus two team senior managers. All of them, Ryan says, contributed to an historic Radnor season.

Amid an incessant, chilly drizzle Friday night, those careers ended, 28-7 at the hands of Unionville in the District 1 Class 5A quarterfinal. But even in the distraught post-game scenes, there remained a stubborn glow of appreciation that Ryan hammered home again in his final huddle, making sure each and every player leaving the field – especially those departing for a final time – understood what they had accomplished.

“There’s a lot of great memories made that nobody can take away from this group, and it stings right now,” Ryan said. “Of course it does, from the staff down. But that’s why you play the game, ups and downs. ... I couldn’t be more proud of them.”

When the team gathered in August, Radnor knew it possessed promising pieces: A veteran quarterback in Sean Mullarkey, an experienced running back in Matt Cohen, a potent playmaker in Rider to complement several returning skill players and treasured depth in the trenches. But taking inventory of a senior nucleus in the summer swelter and watching that team advance to the late-fall climes are two very different things, making the Raiders’ journey exemplary by any standards.

“Going into this season, we didn’t really know what to expect,” wide receiver/linebacker Teddy Girton said. “We knew we had a lot of seniors. We thought it could be something special. And it’s safe to say we put our heart and soul into the season, every single person on this team. We gave it everything we’ve got. I have no regrets looking back. We did it right.”

Not since 1983 had the Raiders won eight games in a regular season. Those eight wins equal the combined total from 2011-14, including an 0-11 slog through 2011.

Along the way, they beat Marple Newtown in double-overtime. They hung 63 points on a Ridley team that would rebound to

make the District 1 Class 6A postseason, despite Radnor's first win in the battle of chromatic Raiders in two decades. They'd post 60 points against Penncrest, a week after giving Garnet Valley its biggest scare in 12 outings, a one-point overtime setback. Then there was last week's playoff perfection, a win over Marple Newtown on a last-second Mullarkey-to-Rider connection.

No one would've wanted that to be the last memory in the scrapbook of the season. But after the dismantling by Unionville Friday, it just might be, and the healing distance of time will bring a sense of peace.

Friday was one to forget in most aspects. The Raiders (9-3) ran just 41 offensive snaps to Unionville's 70. They had just seven plays for positive yardage in the first half, one a Mullarkey pass to Girton for a 64-yard touchdown just 16 seconds after the Indians had opened the scoring. It was a glimmer of hope of another special chapter to the 2018 saga, but instead proved to be a premature ending.

From there, Unionville took over. It battered the Raiders for 286 yards on the ground. Of the Indians' 63 carries, only seven lost yardage, and none was longer than 21 yards. It was death by a thousand cuts.

Mullarkey struggled, 5-for-17 through the air with two interceptions. Rider had only one touch from scrimmage, a two-yard loss on a jet sweep. Girton's four catches accounted for all 105 receiving yards.

"We try to shut down their playmakers," said Unionville quarterback Nick Schnaars, who ran for two scores, threw for one and picked off Mullarkey. "We have to make somebody else other than their playmakers beat us. And that's what we did."

Friday was the outlier rather than the norm. Despite long being a middle-of-the-road team in the Central League, Ryan has had standouts in his time. Raiders have played at the

'unbelievable' win for Radnor

HERSHEY – The operative word for Eliot Hayes Tuesday night was “unbelievable.” Three times on the turf at HersheyPark Stadium, the Radnor midfielder dropped the “u” word, one for each goal the Raiders scored.

And the combination that Hayes offered on his two goals was a perfect blend of the textbook and the exceptional. Some might say, unbelievably so.

Hayes scored twice, including the game-winner in the 76th minute, as Radnor overturned a two-goal deficit to notch a 3-2 win over District 3 champion Cumberland Valley in the first round of the PIAA Class 4A tournament.

The Raiders advance to Saturday's quarterfinals against District 6 champion State College, which toppled Norwin in overtime, 2-1. That game is at a site and time to be determined.

Radnor goal!! It's Big Eliot Hayes off the corner. Controversially won but Hayes finishes it. 3-2. 4:51 left.
pic.twitter.com/Ynxl0y00l5

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 7, 2018](#)

Radnor (18-3-2) is in that position because of Hayes. His winner in the 76th was by the book. The 6-4 midfielder rose at the near post to get his head on a perfect Jackson Birtwistle corner-kick delivery to the edge of the six-yard box. With Bobby Hydrisko setting the screen (read: fortuitously whiffing on a back-heel attempt) on the line, Hayes powered the ball through the bodies and into the net.

“All our corners were going high, which I like because I’m taller than mostly everyone,” Hayes said. “So I saw the ball

come in and I jumped for it and I headed it. It was headed toward the goal and I flicked it in. And Bobby was here to let the ball go past him, which was great because the goalie didn't know what was going on. It was unbelievable."

Though the more consequential goal on the score sheet, Hayes wouldn't have been in position to pound home the winner if not for, well, Hayes at the end of the first half. The Eagles (17-5) were running roughshod over the Raiders early with two goals in a 14-minute span. Dominik Nitecki netted the first on a superb passage of play that included his original shot getting blocked after the Eagles strung together a dozen passes. Then Nitecki played a magical cross-field ball from the right wing to the left channel for younger brother Patrick to sting a shot against the grain and make it 2-0 in the 27th.

But Radnor regrouped. It switched up its midfield formation to flatten out with three central mids, stopping Cumberland Valley from picking its way up the field level by level. And it summoned the toughness that results from the crucible of playbacks to nab District 1's fifth and final states bid.

"We're dogs. We come back, we fight," Hydrisko said. "We know what it's like to come back, so we never lose hope."

Hayes helped that effort three minutes from half with a picture-perfect volley against the run of play. Peter Miller walled off his marker and laid the ball off to Hayes to take an uncertain touch, then blast a volley over Matt Zambetti.

The difference at halftime between a 2-0 hole and a 2-1 deficit was monstrous.

"It was crucial," Hyrdisko said. "I said to the team, we needed a goal before half, and he came through."

"It showed that we were in the game," Hayes said. "Two-nothing, if they get a goal, it's 3-0 and that's pretty much game over if we come out slow in the second half. But that one

goal boosts us. We know we can score, we know that was our first shot on target, so we know that shots will lead to goals, and we took that and ran with it in the second half.”

Henry Cooke a save off the second shot from a free kick. Still 2-2. 20 minutes left. CV pushing hard again.
pic.twitter.com/QgheNkmM75

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 7, 2018](#)

They reinforced the point three minutes after the break. Bennett Mueller, the 6-4 center back, got a head on Birtwistle’s corner that Zambetti spilled, but Hydrisko planted himself on the doorstep to toe it home. From 2-0 to 2-2, just like that.

Play evened out from there, with both teams chasing the winner in regulation. Henry Cooke, who came in for the second half, made four saves, none particularly challenging. And Radnor massed for another challenge from a set piece.

When they got it, Hayes obliged. And the result was, you guessed it ...

“We drive two hours out to HersheyPark Stadium and play a team that just won their district title and to come back from 2-0 down, it’s great for the school,” Hayes said. “It’s unbelievable for the team.”

George goal gets Penncrest

first states win

All it took for Penncrest girls soccer to get its first states win was, in order, a rise in classifications to 4A, a three-hour bus ride Tuesday and a penalty kick goal conceded inside of five minutes.

From there, it was all clear sailing, really.

Goals by Kara Mullaney and Juliana George sent Penncrest, the fourth seed from District 1, past District 4 champion Williamsport, 2-1, at Loyalsock High School.

Mullaney's goal in the 24th minute came off the rebound of a Kate Sparling shot that rang the crossbar. The sophomore attacking mid stuck with it, though, and buried the rebound.

Mullaney's goal equalized a Sydney Bruno penalty in the fourth minute, which speedy forward Katie Penman won off a sliding Bryn McLaughlin near the edge of the penalty area. But the Lions (11-7-4) didn't give their goalkeeper much more to do on the night, McLaughlin making two saves, plus a crucial slide tackle on Penman outside the back early in the second half.

George finally got the Lions ahead with 15 minutes to play, the diminutive winger finally poking home the ball on a penalty-area scrum, the likes of which the Millionaires had survived on several occasions, thanks in large part to 11 saves from Lila Vogelsong in goal. But not this time.

George's tally bucks another trend. Penncrest's win is their first in their three appearances, the last two in Class 3A. Last year, they lost in double-overtime to Fleetwood and fell 3-0 to Manheim Central two years ago, both times as the District 1 runner-up. But that's in the past, from a team that entered its district tournament as the 20th seed and had to win three road games to get to states.

“Last year, we thought we had our best year and our best chance,” Mullaney said. “This year, we really surprised people. We were the 20th seed in districts and just the fact that we made it this far and won a game is really great.”

This time, they did enough to book a date with District 11 second seed Ephrata, which upset District 1 and Central League champion Conestoga, 2-1. Site and time for that game Saturday is to be determined.

For the six upperclassmen who’ve been a part of each states team – McLaughlin, defenders Logan Morris, Kenna Kaut and Sparling, midfielder Julia Mullaney and defender-turned-forward Sarah Hughes team – Tuesday’s win isn’t a culmination but a just reward for years of efforts.

“It’s a great win for the girls,” coach Mike Deleo said. “And a lot of these wins are the effort and desire and hard work, and I couldn’t be more proud of them.”

From Serbia to Haverford, Sekulic finds opportunity in the pool

HVERFORD – Sean Hansen was overseeing the summer renovation of Haverford School’s McQuillen Pool when the swim coach wondered if the decorations needed some international flavor. The pool, after all, is occupied not just by the reigning Eastern Interscholastic Swimming and Diving champs. In the fall, it plays host to the Fords water polo team.

So after rearranging record boards and nestling the American

flag over a new window, Hansen asked one of his polo captains, junior Matej Sekulic, his thoughts on flying another flag, of Sekulic's home country of Serbia.

"I was like, 'I'm not sure if people would like that,'" Sekulic said recently. "(Hansen) was like, 'who cares; this is our team.' I think it's nice for the atmosphere and everything."

It also represents how the Belgrade native has made Haverford School his home. A rare underclassman captain and a standout on both sides of the pool attracting interest from major college programs, Sekulic arrived in the States as a seventh grader with the quintessential dream of American opportunity. His future path is inextricably linked to the pool, one of the places he first felt comfortable in a new country.

"I love water polo," Sekulic said, just after leading the Fords to a 14-3 walloping of rival Malvern Prep last month. "I really want to play maybe after college, maybe in a club team somewhere. It's an amazing sport. It keeps you in shape. As much as it is physical, it's also very mental. You need to be able to look around, see who's open, not get your emotions involved at all because once there's emotions, it leads to errors. It's just amazing."

• • •

Sladjana Sekulic cuts an imposing figure, even astride her 6-foot-2 eldest son, enlisted to translate. An emotional resonance unites them, too.



Haverford School's Matej Sekulic with the flag of his homeland, Serbia, in the background. (Digital First Media/Pete Bannan)

In 2013, Sladjana and her husband, Goran, saw how limited opportunities would be for their children in Serbia. For Matej, Jovana and Luka to maximize their potential, leaving their parents' homeland was the best chance. It didn't matter that Goran, a colonel in the army, worked in information technology for the Ministry of Defense, or that Sladjana was a physical education teacher at a high school. It didn't matter that a year earlier, they had built a house in Belgrade. America remained a promised land.

"The decision was exclusively for the future of the kids," Sladjana said. "I didn't know what it was to change from one continent to another. We were leaving our full life behind us."

Then, with Matej taking a moment to wipe away tears – it's two hours goggle-less in a pool, he swears, even as tears well in his mother's eyes – Sladjana continues in resolute if heavy accented English.

“Every time I’m thinking back, it’s very difficult for me and for my husband, for my kids,” she said. “Because we are very close to Serbia because we have family, parents, sisters, missing them.”

Matej and his siblings are thriving because of their parents’ leap of faith. Five years ago, Goran entered the State Department’s Electronic Diversity Visa Lottery (the pejoratively termed Green Card Lottery in the realm of partisan politics) and acquired green cards in the summer of 2014. Their only connection in the States was the best man at the Sekulics’ wedding, an American citizen. After a month in Brooklyn, Goran’s best man told him about a friend in the Philadelphia area who could help them get settled and find work. So they followed the tip to Media, Matej enrolling in Springton Lake Middle School.

To instill a sense of normalcy, Sladjana contacted water polo clubs to get her kids back in the water. (Luka and Jovana also swim and play water polo, Jovana on varsity at Episcopal Academy.) Only one answered, with a name to fit the boldness of their situation: Maverick Water Polo Club, coached by Haverford School head man Kevin Van Such.

“We saw multiple clubs and sent emails out to them, but only Kevin believed in us and sent us back an email,” Sladjana said. “We’re very grateful to him because he gave us a chance, not just for water polo but for an education.”

As soon as Van Such got a look at Matej, he knew that any trouble bridging the language barrier would be worth it. Getting someone so steeped in the sport was a rare gift that Van Such was eager to nurture.

Where water polo in the U.S. is almost entirely confined to California and the Ivy League, it’s massively popular in Eastern Europe. Serbia is the four-time reigning men’s European champion. The partitioning of Balkan states has

hardly dimmed their dominance, with Serbia and Montenegro (previously part of the dominant Yugoslav program, then united in a single federation before splitting) among the preeminent powers alongside Croatia and Hungary.

“Every time Serbia wins any kind of European championship or world championship, it’s basically like when Philadelphia won the Super Bowl,” Matej said. “A lot of people come out, cheer for the team. There’s a lot of camaraderie for the team. Let’s say you’re in high school and play water polo, it’s like you’re a football player.”

Matej started relatively late in the sport, joining VK Beograd in third grade. When Van Such first saw him play, his talent was clear.

“He was head and shoulders above, like literally,” Van Such said. “Physically taller, bigger than kids his age, just more physically developed and the intensity he brings, the awareness of the game situations, his IQ and knowledge of the game is far advanced over kids his age.”

“He was massive, in pure size and pure skill,” Haverford School teammate Bram Schork said. “I would play against him and I was helpless. But over time, he’s been able to coach me and the team has been able to coach him to where we play as one.”

Matej started out playing with kids his age, but soon proved capable of competing with the 18-and-under squad at 13. The connection to Van Such urged Matej to pursue Haverford School, one of the scant local options to play scholastically.

It set up another challenge, with Matej serving as his parents’ translator at admissions meetings, not just stating his case to attend the school but also explaining the school’s position to his parents. He’s taken English classes since age four, at the prescient behest of his mother, and his speech betrays only faint hints of his Serbian accent.

“(Van Such) gave us hope, he gave us support,” Sladjana said. “And we did it.”

Matej has led the Fords to 23 wins this season and the Inter-Ac title with a game (against rival EA) to spare, plus a runner-up finish at Easterns for the first time in program history. He’s attracting attention from college powers in the Ivy League plus UCLA. He’s willing and able to pass on information about the sport he was steeped in to an American population with scant access to such enthusiasm for the sport. Even Van Such, who played collegiately, benefits.

“With Matej, if this happens or that happens, he knows instantly what to do,” Schork said. “There’s no looking at the ref, no questioning. He knows what’s going to happen. ... He’s obviously an excellent player. His shot and pure ability help a lot, and he’s a great teammate.”

“I’ve learned from just talking with him, watching him, just seeing how he does certain things, and then it goes both ways,” Van Such said. “It’s been a long road of him adapting to different styles and different coaching tactics, and it’s a good relationship in that we’re able to kind of learn from each other but we’re all pulling in the same direction. It’s pretty special.”

Trickery pays off for Springside Chestnut Hill against Haverford School

HVERFORD – Springside Chestnut Hill Academy quarterback Aaron Angelos wasn’t having the best of first halves Saturday

afternoon.

For many passing attacks, that would be the final word on the situation. But for the Blue Devils, there are ways to get around a slumping QB. With plenty of chicanery and a surge from Angelos, SCHA found just enough offense.

Three Blue Devils threw touchdown passes Saturday in a come-from-behind 27-24 win over Haverford School. Pat Elliott tossed a three-yarder to Angelos in SCHA's homage to the Eagles' Philly Special. Wide receiver Ke'Shawn Williams found Brian Richardson on a 16-yard score. And Angelos got in on the act, zipping a 52-yard catch and run to Richardson with 3:28 to play, the tight end bouncing off tacklers and running into the end zone for the game-winning score.

"I'm not a quarterback, so it was a lot of concentration," Williams said of his touchdown throw. "I had to make sure I got the perfect ball to my receiver. I took a hit, but as long as I put it on the money, my guy Brian is going to get it no matter where it was."

A little Philly Special from Springside Chestnut Hill. Pat Elliott to Aaron Angelos. Blue Devils within 14-6.
pic.twitter.com/1QWP94eccd

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 3, 2018](#)

Haverford School had a chance to tie the game with 55 seconds left, but Chris Clark's field goal from 36 yards drifted wide left, his third missed field goal of the day.

Both teams knew that Saturday could come down to trick plays. Haverford School (3-5, 1-3 Inter-Ac) prepared for gadget plays all week, making the failure to read and execute on them all the more disappointing. And the Blue Devils (6-4, 1-3) understood that if plan A faltered, they could rifle through their bag of tricks for alternatives.

“They don’t see it coming,” Williams said. “If we score a regular touchdown running, it’s like, ‘dang, they just didn’t tackle us.’ But us faking them out, them getting tricked out, made it even better of a play.”

“We trip up on that, we’ve got to guard on that better and limit the trick plays,” Haverford School lineman Asim Richards said. “... We worked on it all week in practice and then they scored on it anyway. It felt bad.”

The SCHA offense, where everyone throws TDs but the QB. Williams to Richardson. 20-17 Blue Devils. 7:04 left.
pic.twitter.com/7eg2N6B03k

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The teams combined for 24 points in the fourth quarter after just 27 in a ragged first three frames. The sides totaled 12 punts, nine in the first half.

The opening 24 minutes wasn’t pretty for the signal-callers. Angelos and Haverford School’s Dante Perri entered the break a combined 8-for-23 for 44 yards, but each rose to the occasion after the break.

Perri finished 13-for-27 for 173 yards. He tossed a pair of key third-down hookups with Bryce Broadus in the fourth – a 15-yarder that set up Logan Keller’s 8-yard score to make it 24-20 with 4:58 left, and a 45-yarder to Broadus to rescue the final series.

Haverford School’s first-half damage was done mostly by return man Jake Spencer. He returned the opening kickoff 42 yards, and two plays later, Mekhi AJose-Williamson was in the end zone on a 23-yard burst. Two punts later, Spencer burst through a crowd to return it 70 yards to the house. He had 119 punt return yards in the first half.

Logan Keller untouched to paydirt. Now we've got some offense. 4:58 left. Fords up 24-20 pic.twitter.com/8sS6rjZcGA

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 3, 2018](#)

That papered over rickety offensive execution from the Fords, who finally got on track in the second half via Keller and Nate Whitaker on the ground. Keller escaped a pile of tacklers for 38 yards on third-and-1 to set up Clark's field goal from 21 yards with 10:25 to play, which put the Fords up 17-13. Whitaker supplied runs of nine and 11 on the drive capped by Keller's score, to go with five catches for 51 yards.

"That was exciting," said Richards, who provided two sacks on defense. "We really felt like a team, getting different players the ball. But we've got to do more of that so that we can win a game."

How did Logan Keller escape that? First and goal Fords. pic.twitter.com/vNRAbEuz1

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 3, 2018](#)

Clark was just wide with his fourth field goal attempt of the day. The others, efforts from 50 and 46 yards with a stiff wind at his back, weren't close. But he had the distance on the final kick on fourth-and-6 from the 19, but couldn't sneak it inside the left upright.

SCHA made better use of its options on the day. Rob Gentile ran for 120 of his 134 yards in the first half, giving way to others after the break. Williams ran for a 13-yard score before they took to the air for the last two touchdowns.

To Williams' dismay, Richardson offered that of his two scores, Angelos' delivery was more spot on, while Williams is quick to point out that he had the benefit of throwing to his

best available target in Richardson – that is, the second-best overall, behind himself.

Perri to Bryce Broadus for 45! Fords at the 35.
pic.twitter.com/Rcz4JlCo7C

– Matthew De George (@sportsdoctormd) [November 3, 2018](#)

They're the kind of joking debates that sound a lot better when there's finally a one in the Inter-Ac win column.

"We worked hard in practice all week with it," Richardson said. "We just wanted it. We know this is a bounce-back game and we needed it here, so we put it all on the line."