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Saturday, November 20, 2010

## Simonton provides winning punch for C-C

By Matt Stout

WORCESTER, Mass. -- All season, Stowe Simonton has heard it from his Concord-Carlisle teammates. When was he going to score? When was he even going to get an assist?

“How can you be the only one on the team without a point all year?” coach Ray Pavlik recounted of the friendly ribbing.

Apparently, the sophomore was just waiting for the biggest one.

Filtering into the box on a short corner kick, Simonton finished an Alex Puchrik pass for the game-winning goal in Saturday’s MIAA Division 2 boys soccer championship, lifting the Patriots to a 2-1 victory over Nipmuc Memorial at Foley Stadium. It gave Concord-Carlisle (21-1-1) its second straight title and third in five years, while denying Nipmuc (15-5-4) in its first title game appearance in 16 years.

“Luckily,” Simonton said of the goal, “it came at the right time.”

But the fact that it was Simonton -- a goal-less, first-year varsity player -- to provide the deciding score illustrated how special this season has been for the Patriots.

Besieged by injuries, Concord-Carlisle played with the same starting lineup Saturday for the fifth straight game — the longest such stretch this season. Seventeen different players started multiple games, Pavlik said, a result of losing two key players just prior to the state tournament, including Will Toczyłowski, a senior who scored the game-winner in last year’s D-2 final.

This time, it was Simonton, who following his score flew down the center of the field in celebration, his teammates gathering in his wake before catching him at midfield.

It was the Patriots’ 71st goal this fall, Pavlik said, “and he (Simonton) couldn’t have had a better time to step up and get himself on the board.”

“That’s incredible,” junior Mikey O’Brien said. “It always ends like that. In the playoffs, you have to rely on people who don’t usually get a lot of those goals. But Stowe’s been great all season. For him to be able to finish, it was really nice.”

Simonton wasn’t the only hero. Concord-Carlisle’s aggressive defense kept Nipmuc out of the offensive half throughout the game and held Nipmuc junior Tim Peterman scoreless for the first time this postseason.

O’Brien, too, rose to the occasion, scoring his sixth goal in the tournament on a beautiful ball in the 14th minute.

After the Patriots flooded the box, the ball eventually found Puchrik, who wound up and fired only to be blocked by a set of Nipmuc defenders. But after glancing off both backs, the ball fell to the left side of the box to O'Brien, who spun and blasted a shot past goalie Andrew Morin (nine saves) for a 1-0 lead.

"I kind of shielded my guy and it was a little in front of me, so I was able to slide right into it," O'Brien said.

The lead didn't last. Roughly three minutes later, a Concord-Carlisle penalty gave the Warriors a direct kick 23 yards from the goal, where Kelly Rooney tapped the ball to Tanor Jobe. With a whipping wind at his back — it'd come back to hurt Nipmuc, too — the Dual Valley Conference's regular-season points leader sent a left-footed rocket through the box and into the upper left-hand corner of the goal.

"He's a go-to guy," Nipmuc coach Bill Leaver said of Jobe. "He's a guy, both he and Tim, who we count on to make things happen, and they do."

Concord-Carlisle controlled the majority of the play until halftime, even nearly scoring again with 11 minutes until the intermission. O'Brien carried the ball in the right side of the box and found a wide-open Seth Bird, whose shot sailed hard and high, perhaps a result of the wind in his face.

The Patriots made sure they didn't miss again. Eight minutes into the second half, following a hail of chances and corner kicks, Puchrik took a short corner, sprinted past a defender along the left baseline and centered it. Alone in the box was Simonton, whose one-touch blast sped through a crowd and ricocheted off a Nipmuc defender before finding the the back of the net.

"You gotta make sure you get it nice and get it on goal," Simonton said. "It is mental focus, I guess."

But Nipmuc again responded, getting its best chance at tying it in the 54th minute. Rooney lofted a free kick that bounced into the box and onto the foot off Jobe.

The junior forward fought off a draped defender to sneak a shot past goalie Cam McGrory, but put it directly into the right post. McGrory (three saves) quickly gathered the rebound.

"You always say if you win a championship, you're going to look back and you're going to find one chance where you got a little luck," Pavlik said.

Concord-Carlisle didn't leave much to chance either. With the stiff wind now their friend, the Patriots continually pressed Nipmuc's midfielders and backs, never really allowing the Warriors a legitimate scoring opportunity in the final 20 minutes. It was a product of the conditions and the Patriots' experience; they improved to 22-2 in the last five state tournaments, the only two losses coming in overtime.

"All year long, we always talked about how the defense is the core of this team," Puchrik said. "... But the wind definitely played a factor in helping us not let them lob balls over the top as easy."

And delivered the Patriots another title.

"So many people worked hard to make this happen," O'Brien said. "You didn't just have a starting lineup out there with a few subs who came in. Every single player on this team played a big role throughout the

season, whether it was taking over when somebody got injured or stepping in when somebody was out for the season. It was great.”

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