

Stunning comeback sends St. Joseph's back to final

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Frank Kucinic watched and wondered why his players would score goals and throw up their index fingers as if they had horns, unaware at first that he was the instigator.



Three years ago, Kucinic, St. Joseph's Catholic School's boys soccer coach, showed his players a motivational video in which a herd of buffaloes comes to the rescue of one of its younger members, who was being attacked by a lion and an alligator.

"I thought they forgot about that," Kucinic said of a video that went viral.

Instead, they revived it. The theme of the video goes hand in hand with what Kucinic calls "our program maxim," which is, "You'll never walk alone."

All of that was never more apparent than Tuesday night, when the buffaloes — er, the Knights — rallied from a 3-0 deficit in the final 14 minutes and defeated visiting Christ Church 4-3 in the Class AA Upper State championship match.

"I think that resonated with them," Kucinic said. "They knew that they weren't going to let down. They were going to be there for each other, and they were going to push each other."

The bottom line was they advanced to the state final for the sixth consecutive year. St. Joseph's (15-6), which will play Academic Magnet at 4 p.m. Friday at Irmo High School, won five straight Class A titles before moving up to AA this season.

The St. Joe's-Christ Church rivalry has been an annual event to decide the Upper State champion, but it had never been anything like this.

"I'm still kind of numb," Kucinic said Wednesday. "I'm 42 years old. In all my years as a player and as a coach — and I've coached high school, I've coached college, I played in college — I have yet to see a comeback take place in the fashion that it did."

The epic rally began with a goal by Drew Luzzatti with about 14 minutes remaining. At that point, the Knights were pressing to get on the board.

"It came off a service, and the ball got behind one of the Christ Church defenders," Kucinic said. "It kind of fell to Drew's foot, and he played it on the side of the net away from the keeper. It was just a great technical finish."

With about six minutes left, the Knights' Adam Green played the ball forward from about midfield. The ball hit a defender and bounced a few feet away, toward the middle of the field.

The ball rolled in the direction of Alfredo Diaz-Santillan, who was about 40 yards away.

"You knew instantly he was not going to pass it. He was not going to dribble it. You knew that he was going to shoot it," Kucinic said. "He was in a zone, he was in the flow, I don't know what, but I have never seen a goal struck so well from such a great distance by a high school player. It was mind-blowing."

Diaz-Santillan's shot sailed into the upper right corner of the goal, pulled St. Joseph's to within 3-2 and sent Knights' faithful into a frenzy.

With less than four minutes remaining, a long throw-in by James Capelle put the Knights onto the attack, and Brandon Vogt wound up with a header that tied the score at 3-3.

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Vogt had just entered the match; St. Joe's had a player go down right before the throw-in.

Now fewer than three minutes remained, and Kucinic's first thought was to sit back and play for the tie.

"But then something came over me," he said. "We had just scored three goals in (a little over 10 minutes). 'We've got the momentum, we've got the crowd, we've got everything going. Let's just keep pushing.' "

The play started with another throw-in by Capelle.

"There was chaos in front of the box," Kucinic said. "The ball was bouncing around and Brandon Vogt comes to the rescue again. The ball kind of falls on his foot. He side-volleys it in and we're winning 4-3."

Seconds after play was re-started, the final whistle blew.

The matchup has always been bittersweet for Kucinic and good friend David Wilcox, who was in his last game as coach of the Cavaliers.

Not long after it was over, Kucinic made his way to the press box and addressed the crowd with a few words on behalf of Wilcox, who has accepted a teaching position in New Jersey. In his 18 seasons at Christ Church, Wilcox won more than 290 games, including a national-record 11 state titles in a row.

"The reason why we at St. Joe's push so hard and train so hard is to try keep up with David Wilcox," Kucinic said. "He's been the measuring stick."

"Even within the rivalry, there is beauty in the game, and done properly I think it pulls out why the game is so special to me. It's a rivalry, but to me the rivalry just won't be the same without David around."



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