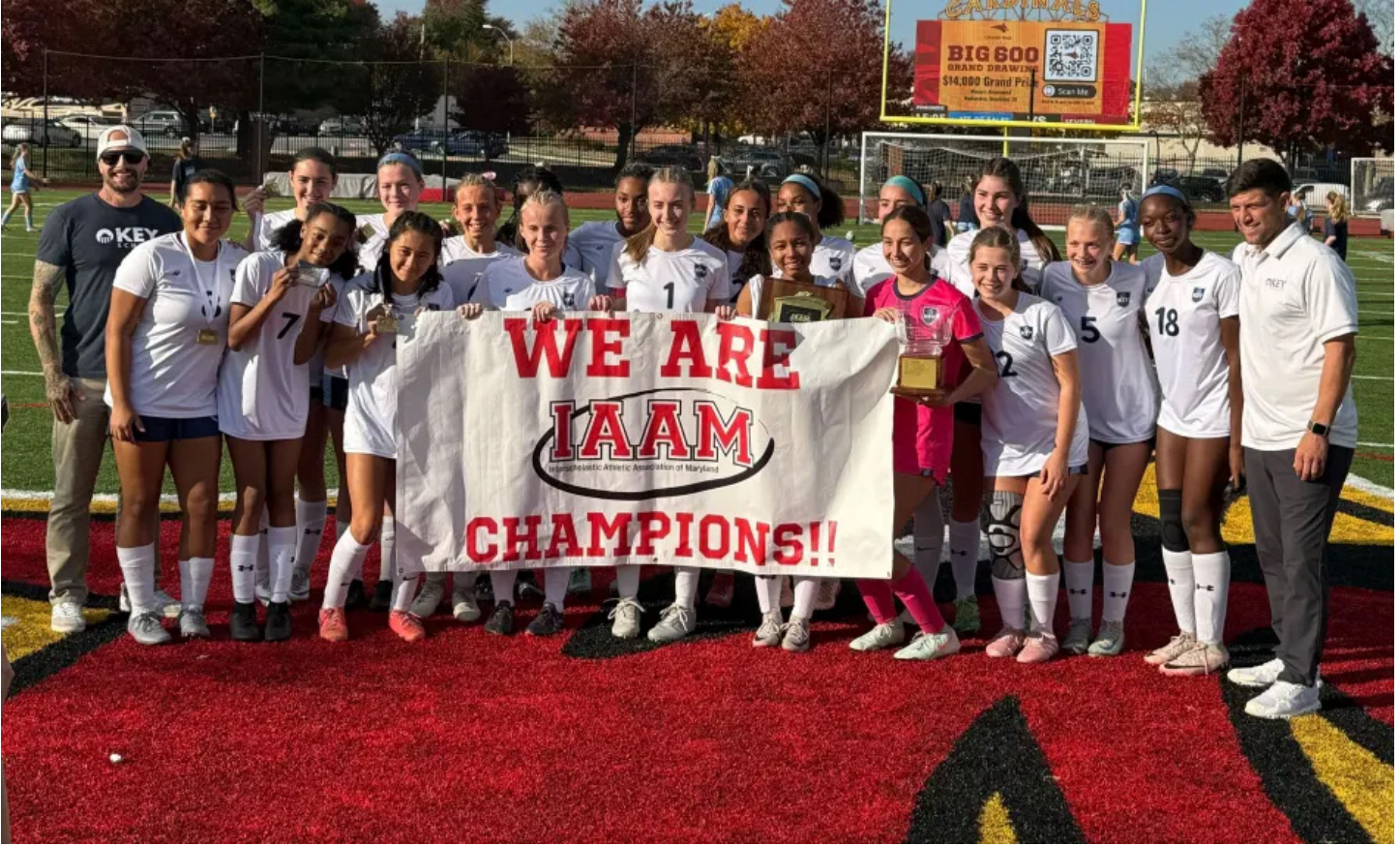


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High School Sports



1 year after going winless in IAAM C Conference, Key girls soccer wins title game

'Do you trust me?' coach Steve Horrigan often asks his team. After Sunday, it's clear they do.

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“Do you trust me?” Steve Horrigan asked.

The Key girls soccer players had answered their coach’s question many times:

In the offseason, following an 0-10 season.

When setting goals for the season to clinch a playoff spot and through the postseason rounds.

Before the Interscholastic Athletic Association of Maryland C Conference championship game.

After, as they posed for cameras with a plaque, a trophy cup, the IAAM banner and 1-0 victory over Beth Tfiloh in hand.

“Yes, coach,” they declared in unison.

“We found cohesion through challenge and slowly but surely, it built that trust in me and what we stand for as a team,” Horrigan said. “Our mantra is pride, passion, resilience, integrity, discipline and empathy — and we live it in everything we do.”

Sophomore forward Kendall McMillan put confidence in her then first-year coach that their winless record wouldn't be an annual ailment when he started recruiting more talent. All but three of the players celebrating in white and dark blue on Calvert Hall's field Sunday afternoon were underclassmen, and eight freshmen at that.

“But I never imagined we would be here and playing,” said McMillan, who took a long break from playing between fourth and ninth grade. “I think it's crazy.

“Now everyone knows Key School is the team to watch. No one expected us to come out like this.

One of the senior trio swapped a Chesapeake uniform for the Obezags — and happened to share a surname with the coach.

Tears welled in goalkeeper Leilah Horrigan's eyes as she wrapped her arms around her coach, and said, “We did it, dad.”

“My dad told me coming in the most important games aren't the ones we want to win. It's always the next one,” the keeper said. “I just thought his coaching mentality is what I needed in my life, to continue my passions.”

Not one instruction that Steve Horrigan gave to his players was laced with frustration. He made sure to address them all by name. He respected their boundaries if they needed a minute to calm down. It gave the feel of partners collaborating, rather than soldiers strategizing for war.

“Our chemistry is so strong on this team,” McMillan said. “I feel comfortable talking to everyone.”

When time expired, Leilah Horrigan accidentally fell before her teammates crashed in on her. When her first teammate reached her, Horrigan embraced her tightly. Pretty soon, a would-be dogpile transformed into a group hug.

“Feeling everyone around me, just being with me, was worth more than the championship itself,” the keeper said.

Key wove several set-ups in its attacking third in the first half, directing the path toward the left side. That strategy had worked well for the Obezags all season, but illness and injury forced them to rework who would be operating where. McMillan's forte wasn't on the left, but assistant coach Jared Ramsey kept assuring her: just do your best.

Luckily, Horrigan noted, his sophomore is a “phenomenal freak athlete who understood the assignment.”

“It's a chess match, not checkers. We don't need to play long, be fast or be big,” Steve Horrigan said. “We need to control the ball and build through possession.”

In the second half, McMillan didn't remember getting elbowed in the jaw by a Warriors midfielder, nor did she hear the gasps of horror that rippled across the sideline and from the crowd on the other side of the field. It wasn't memorable, compared to what happened next.

Sophomore midfielder Beza Stephen strung a long cross toward the corner, where McMillan received and sprinted into the box. For two touches, she scrapped with Beth Tfiloh defender Adina Baron. On the third touch, she released.

The ball struck goalkeeper Sam Brown's hand, but abandoned her in the end.

“My coach told me a couple practices ago, ‘Kendall, you’re so fast. If you see space in the middle, just cut in,’” McMillan said. “And you know, I just saw that space.”

The Warriors found four genuine chances on Key’s net, but Horrigan rolled atop or flung away every one. The closest shot grazed her fingers, the keeper launching to her right to protect her team’s advantage.

It wasn’t the move her father initially wanted, having rather had his daughter return the ball toward Key play. But he’d learned long ago not to question her choices.

“On a personal note, it was amazing to spend time together every day in her senior year for a few extra months,” Steve Horrigan said. “But as far as a goalkeeper, bringing in a senior with some leadership experience, understanding how to play the position but also how to lead the girls off the field, has been amazing.”