

District soccer: Palm Harbor University 2, Steinbrenner 0

By Chuck Frye, Times Correspondent

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PALM HARBOR — Just 90 seconds, a small amount of time that made a big difference in Friday's Class 5A, District 7 championship game.

Palm Harbor University's offense came alive in a second-half flash as senior Beau Pearson and junior Hampton Lombard combined for a pair of goals, then the defense barred the door for a 2-0 victory over Steinbrenner.

In winning its third straight district crown, PHU (16-2, 7-0) will host Sarasota Riverview on Wednesday. Lakewood Ranch, which defeated the Rams 8-0 in the 5A-8 final, will host Steinbrenner (18-4-2, 4-3).

After 30 minutes of balanced play, the Warriors busted loose.

Deft corner kicks from junior Kiel Fleming set up Griffen Richter and Steve Soronellas on keeper Jack Gallagher's doorstep. Gallagher gobbled up Richter's 20-yard blast but saw a Soronellas cross dribble off his fingertips and behind him to Richter. PHU defender Thomas Rugel got his legs on the shot, popping the ball up and out of bounds to keep the scoresheet clean.

Gallagher (five saves) opened the second half with a superb diving stop to deny Soronellas once again, then the Hurricane attack went to work.

Closing down the left wing, Pearson fed a perfect pass to Lombard out front, and the junior chested down the ball and tucked it home in the 49th minute to put the hosts on top.

"It was a great feed from Beau," said Lombard. "He did all the work. I just tapped it in."

"(Pearson) played it right over one center back and in front of the other onto (Lombard's) chest," said Warrior head coach Chad Ebright, a former Palm Harbor resident. "Just a good play from good players."

PHU pressed for No. 2 immediately after as Pearson sent in another solid cross that got past keeper C.J. Wyatt (two saves) but was cleared by his defense. Lombard picked off the ball 15 yards out and drilled it into the open right side with 29:34 left.

"At halftime, my coaches told me to stand behind their holding midfielders so I'd have more space with the ball," Lombard said. "They'd pass me through, I'd lay it out to Bogden (Ciulei) and Beau to take down the line, cross it and all we had to do was finish."

Palm Harbor's defensive core of William Cotter, Rugel and Dan Wintermeier finished strong, denying Steinbrenner entries into the penalty area and preserving Gallagher's shutout.

"We worked hard for this win," said PHU head coach Wipoj Huse. "We stuck tight with their midfielders, put four or five guys on the ball, then played the ball to our target guy (Lombard). Our goal is to get past the region finals (after losses the last two seasons), and we still have a lot of work to do."

Lombard concluded: "We got knocked out of our own tournament. We went to the PCAC final, tied it 1-1, thought we'd win and didn't. We were disappointed, and we wanted this (win) bad to take it back to Palm Harbor U."

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