

## All-Western New York boys soccer: Grand Island has pair of area's best players



Western New York's best in boys soccer in 2016: From left, sitting, Bryce Schiltz, Noah Keem, Dylan Guarino, Jacob Gleave, Spencer Frome, Kevin Loftus and Sam Sutherland. Standing, from left, Max Montante, Garrett Robinson, Zachary Westadt, Austin Knorze, Pa Lu, Siang Hnin Lian and Mike Mazzara. Missing is Jackson Retzer. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

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Every year, boys soccer teams from New York State public high schools begin play in the fall. The hope is that they will win the last game of the year. The odds are overwhelming, but the goal gets a little closer with each win.

The Grand Island team's members are going to remember that quest for the rest of their lives. You can't come any closer to a state championship without winning it.

The Vikings lost in the state's Class A final to Somers of Section 1 (Westchester County). The loss came on a goal in the second overtime. And it came a few minutes after Garrett Robinson's shot in the first overtime was swept away at the last possible moment.

"It was kind of like a wave of emotion hit us; nobody knew what to say," coach Frank Butcher said about the defeat. "The closing ceremonies were difficult, because you have to spend them with the team that just beat you."

Everyone got on the bus for the ride back to Grand Island. Within an hour, the players were goofing around like the high school kids that they are, showing their resilience.

"When we got back home, there were hundreds of parents and kids waiting for us," Butcher said. "That made everyone happy, but we all had to relive what had happened. There was laughter and tears."

It was a great year for Grand Island soccer, as both the boys' and girls' teams won Section VI titles. There will be plenty to celebrate and remember whenever the players and coaches look back on the experience. Still, for Butcher, the feelings figure to be bittersweet.

"I was struggling there for a while," he said. "I'll never get to go back with this same group."

"That's the one tough thing. I didn't know if I'd ever make it to one final four. To do two in a row is unbelievable. We got a taste of it, making it through with no injuries. It's difficult to get there. I was proud of making it there. One day, I hope to get to go back and finish the job."

In the meantime, Butcher and the Vikings can think about the "22" in their 22-1 season, rather than the "1." Grand Island went further than any other local team in the state public school playoffs. It might be a tribute to their balance that Robinson was one of two members of the team to achieve All-Western New York status. There is no question that he belonged on that list.

"Everybody looks at goals, but the big thing with him is how balanced he is," Butcher said. "He's not one-dimensional. I can put him at midfield and he'll shut someone down. I can put him at forward, and he'll score a goal. If they are keying on him, he's happy to set someone else up. He can do it all. It's hard to replace someone like that."

Robinson was joined on the team by Jacob Gleave, a center back for the Vikings. Gleave has been a big part of the team for the last two years. Three others - John Griffin, Namanja Simic, and Steven Pufpaff - made the large school all-star team.

Three other teams had two players each on the overall list of Western New York's best. I-Prep knows all about the agony of the playoff system, as the Presidents gave up the tying goal in the final seconds of the Far West Regionals and lost in penalty kicks.

Still, I-Prep had another great season. Pa Lu was selected as the area player of the year. He finished with 32 goals and 21 assists. Siang Hnin Lian anchored the defense of a Presidents' team that often was aggressive in its offensive play.

Clarence lost in the Far West Regionals to Fairport by a goal. Sam Sutherland was the top scoring threat for the Red Devils, and Austin Knorz was a big reason Clarence allowed six goals for the season.

Canisius made it all the way to the Catholic state final after a 15-4 year. Mike Mazzara was part of a team that allowed less than a goal per game when he started. Max Montante had 11 goals for the Crusaders from the midfield spot.

Canisius beat St. Joe's in the Monsignor Martin Association final, but the efforts of Spencer Frome of the Marauders were recognized by the coaches who selected the All-Western New York team.

There's plenty of talent elsewhere too. Noah Keem and Sweet Home reached the semifinals of the A-1 playoffs. Kevin Loftus and Lancaster came up a goal short in the AA final against Clarence. Bryce Schiltz and East Aurora lost to mighty I-Prep in the B-1 final, ending an impressive team run of championships. Zachary Westadt of Lewiston-Porter contributed to a team that went 16-2-1 and made it to the A-2 championship game. Jackson Retzer of Williamsville North was a leader of the team that reached the Far West Regionals.

Finally, goalkeeper Dylan Guarino of Kenmore East was part of a sectional semifinalist that allowed only 24 goals for the entire season.

Butcher was selected as the coach of the year in Western New York.