

DES MOINES - Less than eight minutes stood between top-seeded Xavier and a 1-0 victory over the defending Class 2A state champions, but a collision in front of its own goal that involved keeper Owen McCarron would help change those fortunes and lead to a third title in four years for Norwalk.

The Warriors took advantage of a fallen McCarron to even the score at 1-1 when Kason Crall booted a rebounded ball into an empty net. McCarron couldn't recover quickly enough as Crall found an open net and didn't miss from the left wing.

With the score knotted at one, both sides continued fighting for an elusive title for another 27 minutes, including a pair of overtimes, before Norwalk triumphed 4-1 in a shootout. Krall, Nick Eltjes, Chase Sinclair and Jack Palen notched penalty kick goals, while the Saints were 1-for-3 in the extra session with only Nick Koechner finding the back of the net.

"I knew it would be a hard, close game, and unfortunately for us it ended up this way," said Xavier Coach Amir Hadzic. "It's really hard to lose in penalty kicks, especially when we spent so much energy in a game. It's like finishing a basketball game shooting free throws."

The late second-half sequence was also tough to stomach for Hadzic's senior-laden roster that included veteran forward Luke Duball. The veteran forward's thoughts echoed those on the Xavier sideline, which felt McCarron was fouled on the game-tying goal.

"I think the team just kept pressing," said Duball. "I've got to chalk it up to the referee's decisions, which I don't think was very good. Over there on the goal, I thought it should have been the foul. We should have had a few penalties. And we missed a few chances in the end."

Further diminishing the Saints' chances was an untimely injury to their goalkeeper during penalty kicks. McCarron's face hit the ground during a save attempt and he suffered from a bloody nose during the decisive stretch.

For much of regulation it was Xavier in control thanks in large part to its ability to take a lead. Duball broke a scoreless tie just after the start of the second half, slipping past a couple Norwalk defenders after receiving a ball from Will Hanigan and firing a shot into the top-left corner of the net.



Xavier's second-leading goal scorer's left-footed shot came from the front of the box near the half-circle, bouncing off the bottom of the post.

"Will got the ball under his feet and played it back to me," Duball said. "I was going to shoot with my right foot, but saw he was going to block it so I cut back to the left. When it came off my foot, I knew I hit it clean and it flew right into the back of the net. It was great to get an early lead."

Xavier nearly made it a two-goal lead seven minutes later, as Matt Been lofted a corner kick to Thomas Bean who fired a shot from the left wing. This time, Warrior keeper Hunter Kappan came up with the stop.

For much of the first half, physical play and fouls on both sides highlighted a defensive first 40 minutes. One brief exchange near the sideline sparked a brief scuffle between players from the

Saints and Warriors.

Norwalk forward Chase Sinclair's cross from the left wing in the 15th minute became the first scoring threat by either side, but a diving save by McCarron and clear from Hanigan kept the game scoreless. Hanigan also made his presence felt on the front side of the Saints' attack, but for the most part it was the defense that dominated the first half of play.

Following the game-tying goal from Crall, both offenses nearly cashed in on scoring opportunities down the stretch, only to see the defense stand tall and the scoreboard remain knotted at 1-1.

The Saints nearly put an end to it early in the first overtime when Davis Wagner missed high on a wide-open right half of the net. The freshman forward arrived on the right wing and received a nice centering pass from Thomas Bean, but could not convert.

Norwalk's Jacob Connelly received his team's first yellow card with under seven minutes remaining in the second overtime, but Xavier couldn't answer on a shot following a throw-in following the defender's foul. Neither side threatened through much of the second overtime, and the score remained 1-1 headed to penalty kicks.

While it certainly wasn't the way Xavier wanted to end its season, with a 14-5 record and falling short of its eighth state title, Hadzic said his team did what it needed to do in order to win.

"We played hard and executed our game plan well," he said. "The kids played the game the way we anticipated. We had that lead and wanted to get that lead, but unfortunately, we couldn't hold onto it. Norwalk pushed up a little bit.

"We had an unfortunate foul. Then, our keeper had his hands on the ball and usually in a little box in those scrambles the keepers get the benefit of the doubt. One thing led to another for that goal. We had some chances after that to score, but couldn't convert."