

Cedar Valley girls get their kicks with guys

Written by Tom Fruehling

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"All right, everybody's earrings off," said Coach Adam Conn as his team huddled before the start of a game Friday at the Tuma Soccer Complex north of Cedar Rapids.

It's the boys' high school team from Cedar Valley Christian School, but there are five girls on the roster. That's who he's talking to.

Cedar Valley Christian, with only 70 students at the high school level, did not have enough girls for their own team this spring, so the girls are playing with the guys, which is allowed by the Iowa High School Athletic Association.

Ellen Rodriguez, a straight-A student and free spirit, is a first-year reserve who's never played competitive soccer before. But she's an athlete and was one of the top players on the Huskies' memorable girls basketball team this past winter, so she decided to sign up and join the 16 boys on the soccer club.

"I thought it would be fun," she said, acknowledging that she ducked the first time a ball came her way in the first game of the season. She also acknowledged there have been some taunts from opposing players.

"I'm not going to say what some guys on this one team were saying. But it wasn't nice what they said they were going to grab," she remarked.

Shelby Hembera, the star of the girls basketball team, is on the soccer team as well. She's actually fast, strong and gifted enough to start. And fellow freshman basketball player Izzy Hoffman not only starts for the soccer team, she's one of the best strikers.

"She's tough," said team statistician Dick Hanson. "She'd play on the football team if they'd let her."

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Hoffman is all over the field, banging heads and knees and shoulders with anybody around. "Soccer is my passion," she said. "I love playing on the boys' team. There's better competition."

She's been playing the game since she was 5 and is also in two indoor coed leagues. She has the only assist of any of the girls on the Cedar Valley team. And while none of them has scored a goal in the six games so far, Hoffman vowed she'll get hers.

"I want it so bad," she said. "I've got a real competitive streak. I always wanta be top dog."

In their 5-1 win over Northeast on Friday, Hoffman was just a bit off on several strong kicks. "I could just kick myself for missing 'em," she said afterward.

The Cedar Valley boys don't seem to mind having girls on the team. "I think maybe it pushes them a little harder," said Conn.

Alex Kennedy, one of the top players on the team, put it another way. "Don't want to get beat by a girl," he said.

Friday's victory put the Huskies at 4-2 for the year, and their only two losses came in the first two games when they were missing some players. Conn feels they have a legitimate shot at the Class 1A state tournament in their first year of eligibility since joining the IHSAA, except for one thing: The annual senior class trip to Florida falls during the same week as the substate tournament and he may be without seven of his key players.

"That'll be a big hurdle," he said. "But I'm optimistic. This team has a lot of potential. We won't just roll over for anybody."

Boys or girls.