

No. 1 Johnston holds off Lions

Written by Bill Seals

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DES MOINES - In the latter stages of the postseason, the margin for error is often very slim, and that was certainly the case for Linn-Mar on Friday in its narrow 1-0 defeat at the hands of top-ranked and undefeated Johnston in the Class 3A semifinals at the Cownie Soccer Complex.

Two key sequences, which could have gone either way, favored the Dragons who were able to advance to Saturday's championship game against Iowa City West.

With 35:53 left to go in the second half, Johnston's Pete Lashier lofted a free kick from the left corner into a crowd. The ball ricocheted off several players, before a Lions defender inadvertently tipped it past senior goalkeeper Jared Belin into his own net. Following the game, Dragon coaches confirmed it was an own-goal and didn't credit anyone with the score.

"It was just a bad session there in the back," said Linn-Mar Coach Corey Brinkmeyer. "Jared came out and got the ball, made a great attempt at it, but there was so much traffic in there. One thing led to another."

Despite the stroke of bad luck earlier in the second half, Linn-Mar was in position to tie the match with just over 18 minutes remaining when Leroy Enzugusi received a ball in the box and was taken out by a defender. Two referees converged, with the head official over-ruling an initial penalty call.

Many in attendance concurred with the assistant referee's call, including both head coaches.

"Their coach told me after the game it should have been a penalty," Brinkmeyer said. "I did enough questioning and he said there wasn't a foul, so I have to respect that decision. Leroy was going after the ball and the next thing I know he's on the floor. I thought it was a foul. I didn't see the defender get the ball."

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The freshman Enzugusi, who came into the postseason with nine goals and eight assists, narrowly missed on a 10th score that might have been the biggest in the history of Linn-Mar's program.

"It's really frustrating," said Enzugusi. "I thought I had that. He came in and took me out. The ref makes a call and he can't change it. In all the years I've played, I've never seen a ref change his call. The (assistant referee) called a foul, but I guess the ref saw something different. I didn't even bothering arguing. I just got up and played the game."

After the non-call, Johnston put the clamps on the Lions attack by crowding top three goal scorers Enzugusi, Daniel Luzindya and Ben Johnson down the stretch.

"At the end, they marked me, Daniel and Ben," Enzugusi said. "They had five defenders, almost six, and pulled the whole team back on every corner kick and free kick. They're a good team and it was a good strategy. We had some chances and couldn't capitalize."

The frustrating turn of events put a damper on a history-making run for Linn-Mar, which had earned a spot in the state semifinals by knocking off Iowa City High on Thursday afternoon. It was the first state playoff victory for the Lions.

Johnson, a junior, said he believes the 2014 season is the start of bigger things for the program.

"It's going to be big for us to carry this into next year," he said. "There's a couple key guys (that are seniors), but hopefully next year we can keep this up and get to state."

Linn-Mar now turns its sights to Saturday's consolation match against Cedar Rapids Washington, which fell to Iowa City West in double overtime.

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“They’re unhappy,” Brinkmeyer said. “Nobody wants to lose here. Our job as the coaches is to try and get them refocused for tomorrow and bring home a third place. That would be an amazing feat for a team that has never won a game at state.”