

Aquinas girls earn state crown again

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

HONEOYE FALLS — The ball seemed to hang in the air forever. When it landed, Jacquie Lacek was waiting — with the goal line only a few feet away and no goaltender in her path.

Lacek tapped in the rebound of her own shot early in the first half, and all that entered either team's net after that were a bunch of snowflakes. Overcoming blustery, slippery conditions, the Aquinas Institute girls' soccer team edged Chittenango, 1-0, to win its third consecutive state Class B championship.

The final was held Saturday, Nov. 16, at Honeoye Falls-Lima High School. Aquinas had gained entry into the title game with a 3-2 semifinal win over Lynbrook one night earlier, also at Honeoye Falls-Lima.

In the final, both teams started off slowly before Aquinas began controlling play. The pressure paid off as Lacek got free in the middle and bore down on Chittenango goalie Nikki Dudley. Lacek's shot was deflected upward by Dudley, and Lacek quickly maneuvered around the fallen goalie to steer the ball into the net with 27:57 remaining in the first half.

"I was thinking, if I could just get a foot on it," said Lacek, who explained that although the ball was rolling toward the goal, it probably wouldn't have gone in without her persistence "because there was a defender on the line." The senior striker was named the game's Most Valuable Player.

Aquinas kept the heat turned up right through halftime as the Bears, of Section 3 (Syracuse area), remained in a defensive shell.

"I think Chittenango was nervous in the first half," Aquinas Coach Gary Page said. His team, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to big-game jitters. "I don't think they're affected at all," Page said with a laugh. "The experience does play into it. We had quite a few juniors for whom this is their third state championship."

Chittenango did make a second-half run, but AQ junior goalie Ali Sharpe, who finished with three saves, made a couple of key stops. Aquinas held a 14-3 edge in shots on goal for the game while overcoming the brutal weather. "It definitely slows you down, there's no doubt," Page said.

Page, Lacek and junior forward



Kristin Lawson (from left), Jacquie Lacek and Janee Cariello cheer Aquinas' defeat of Chittenango.

Lauren Popovich all invoked the word "heart" in describing their strong physical play against the Bears (22-2), who came into the state final with a 22-game winning streak — including a 1-0 win over the Irish on Sept. 7.

"We just wanted it more. We played harder," Popovich said. "I didn't pay attention to how cold I was, or how sore I was from the game before."

Popovich missed most of the season due to a concussion suffered Sept. 14, but she returned for the Section 5 final and excelled in the state tournament. In addition to creating good scoring chances against Chittenango, Popovich had a goal in AQ's win over Lynbrook of Section 8 (Long Island) the previous night. Other goal-scorers in the semifinal win were senior midfielder Karen Achtyl, who gave the Irish a 1-0 lead, and Lacek, who delivered early in the second half to make it 2-1 before Popovich scored six minutes later for a 3-1 edge.

The win over Chittenango capped another amazing run for Aquinas, which was perfect in the post-season despite finishing with a 9-5-3 regular-season mark. AQ's final overall record was 16-5-3, and the Little Irish have now won 23 consecutive post-season games en route to their three state titles.

Little Irish advance to state final four in football

Aquinas Institute's football team has moved one step closer to defending its Class A state title.

AQ outscored Buffalo Sweet Home of Section 6, 56-27, in a Nov. 16 state quarterfinal game at Buffalo's Ralph Wilson Stadium. The victory boosted Aquinas' record to 10-1 and put the Little Irish in the state semifinal round. Aquinas, ranked No. 1 in the state, faces Elmira Free Academy (9-2) of Section 4 on Saturday, Nov. 23, at 1:30 p.m. at the



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Aquinas' Lauren Popovich (left) battles Chittenango's Allison Stankavage for control of the ball during the state Class B championship game at Honeoye Falls-Lima High School Nov. 16. Aquinas won the game, 1-0.

They have also been to six straight state finals and are riding a seven-year winning streak in Section 5 championship games.

Page noted that AQ was afflicted throughout the season by injuries and illness to such key players as Popovich, junior defender Mary Palermo and freshman forward Alicia Garofalo.

"We didn't expect the state cham-

pionship. To think of it, it's very difficult to think we could accomplish that. I wish I had words for that," Page said.

Popovich may have found the right words, saying, "We don't know how to lose." So don't be surprised at a "four-peat" in 2003, she warned.

"Yes, we've definitely been talking about it," Popovich said.

49-19 after three quarters against the previously unbeaten Panthers (10-1).

Other big AQ performers were Arel Gordon, who scored touchdowns on a 63-pass play with Zappia, a 90-yard kickoff return and a 5-yard run; Calvin Hall, with TD runs of 1, 2 and 2 yards; Lou Ricci, who caught a 23-yard TD pass from Zappia; Chris MacDonald, on a 2-yard scoring run; and Ian Goodberlet, with five catches for 140 yards.