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ASHEBORO - Jimmy Walker saw his Southwestern Randolph High School soccer team enjoy an incredible season last year, as the Cougars advanced to the third round of the state playoffs in finishing 21-4-1.

The success the Cougars enjoyed was a surprise to players and coaches alike as Walker, who is in his third stint at SWR, expected that level of success to come this season and certainly next as a talented group of underclassmen gained valuable experience.

After the unexpected successful season last year, the Cougars are having that expected success early on this season.

Led by an offense sparked by juniors Fernando Hernandez and Aaron Avina, the Cougars have outscored opponents 35-9 in jumping to a 7-0 record.

"With the overall youth of the team, I knew they were going to grow," Walker said. "This is the year I thought we would take off rather than last year. They showed they are more advanced and were ready more than I gave them credit for. This year we are bigger, stronger, wiser and ready to take the next step."

The Cougars are on track despite an incredibly tough schedule that has included impressive wins over Forest Hills, Bishop McGuinness and Gray Stone Day, the defending state 1-A champions, who the Cougars defeated 6-1 Thursday.

"I told (SWR Athletic Director Chris Chapman) we need to step up the competition this year," Walker said. "We needed to be battle-tested for the conference and when playoffs come. We tried to find competition from 4-A to the defending state 1-A champions. We stepped up our schedule to accommodate our skills. I figured before the season started, if we came out the non-conference season with a winning record, we should be set for conference."

Hernandez seems to be ready. After being named a team captain as a sophomore and finishing the season with 49 goals in being named to the all-state team, Hernandez has scored 14 goals in his junior year.

"The passion he shows for the game and the knowledge he brings, I've never been around a player who was so confident but not arrogant," Walker said. "When the ball is at his feet, everyone feeds off him."



Hernandez said the chemistry the team shares began years ago.

"We created a bond our freshmen year and it's us getting closer and gaining that chemistry," Hernandez said. "Really, since middle school. We got stronger the more and more we stayed together."

Avino, who did not play last year while competing for an Elite Club National Team out of Greensboro, was given permission to play this year and he has taken full advantage. He is already in double digits with 12 goals and five assists.

"He's stepped in and he has such amazing speed, he'll pick up goals from people not realizing how fast he is," Walker said.

The Cougars have received strong performances from Diego Matias and Omar Moreno. Walker said the two are "eye-opening surprises."

There are areas that need to improve. SWR has allowed 9 goals and has recorded just one shutout.

"We have to clean up some things on the back row, we have given up some silly goals," Walker said.

That means defensemen Noah Freeman, Jackson Lee and goalie Jonathan Perez are going to have to continue to show improvement as the season progresses.

The Cougars are also still dealing with the death of a teammate. Pedro Ortiz. 16, was shot at a local park last May and later passed away. The team has honored him in many ways thus far, including retiring his jersey No.8, scoring exactly eight goals in the season-opening win and carrying signs and posters at games.



"This team has molded around the idea of doing it for Pedro and every time we break a huddle, we say family," Walker said. .

"We're playing for him," Hernandez said. "We have a purpose and the one thing is to win for him."

And what a job they are doing to honor their teammate.