

September 14, 2023

By Dennis Garcia
SportsTone.net

ASHEBORO - With as many freshmen as Southwestern Randolph High School soccer coach Jimmy Walker had to play last season, he estimated by the time this talented group were juniors, the Cougars would be a tough team to handle.

That has happened a little sooner than he expected.

Led by a talented sophomore class that has shown incredible leadership, the Cougars have become a definite threat in the Piedmont Athletic Conference as the Cougars upped their league record to 2-0 with an impressive 2-0 shutout of Trinity Wednesday night. The Cougars, who are 9-1 overall, are scheduled to battle 3-A North Davidson tonight in non-conference action.

Using 18 underclassmen in 2022, the Cougars finished 7-12-2 overall, including a 4-8 mark in the competitive PAC. Walker said the experience the freshmen gained that first season would certainly be beneficial in the distant future, a distant



Head Coach Jimmy Walker of Southwestern Randolph. Photo provided.

future that has already arrived.

"We're a year early," Walker said the morning after the key PAC win over Trinity. "I would have really thought it was going to be another year. Our main talent is in our sophomore class and I thought it would be when they were juniors or seniors when we would start having this type of success.

"That sophomore class plays all year round, they play seven games a week," Walker added. "That's all they do is play. They leave my practice and go to Greensboro and play. They have a passion for the sport. It is embedded into them and it's contagious throughout the team. If a senior sees a sophomore outworking him, he knows he has to at least match or outwork him. They brought a winning attitude and everyone is buying into what the coaches are saying."



Cougars sophomore Fernando Hernandez. Photo by Emily Ramon.

That sophomore class is led by Fernando Hernandez, a player so advanced in skills, discipline and leadership qualities, he wears the captain band. Quite an honor and responsibility for a sophomore.

"It was an easy choice," Walker said of naming Hernandez a captain. "I saw him as a freshman and saw how everyone embodies him as a player. Whenever he speaks, they listen. I don't care how old you are. If you notice that as a coach, you have to take advantage."

Hernandez hasn't disappointed as he has displayed maturity well beyond his years. His 24 goals leads the team and he has added nine assists.

"I've never seen someone so young command the respect he does even from seniors," Walker said. "They see his passion for the game and technical ability and his will to win and they fall right in line with him."

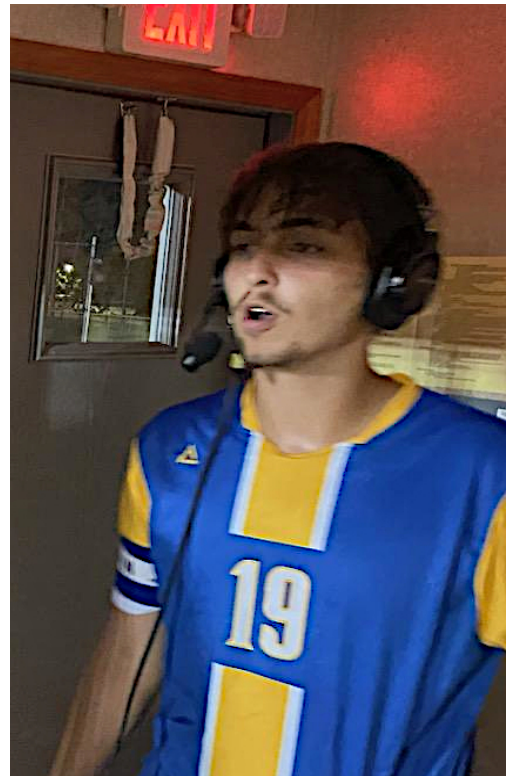
Other sophomores include Jonathan Lopez, Pedro Ortiz, Jackson Lee and goalkeeper Jonathan Perez. There are more.

"Last year was one of the worst coaching records I ever had, but after every loss, I would tell the guys to keep plugging away," Walker said. "I can see the sun on the horizon and if you trust me, you will be better in the long run. These losses will turn into wins."

They have quicker than expected and defense has been a big part of it. Senior Kaleb Freeman leads a group that has given up just eight goals all year.

Other players enjoying solid campaigns include David Lopez Dominguez, Braydon Tyl, Daniel Arellano and Janaksel Perez.

"We are living in the moment and taking this year very seriously," Walker said. "We're taking this one at a time and we're excited for what we have. We are going to live in the moment knowing that the sun is going to be even brighter in the next few years."



Southwestern Randolph senior Kaleb Freeman. Photo by Emily Ramon.