

October 11, 2025

By Dennis Garcia

SportsTone.net

ASHEBORO - Meeting expectations is sometimes hard to achieve. Exceeding them can be near impossible. Yet, the Southwestern Randolph High School soccer team, which has such high expectations this season, is right where they hoped they would be as the final weeks of the regular season begin.

The Cougars, who returned almost everyone from a year in which they advanced to the state 2-A championship match, have been playing like champions as SWR took a 16-1 record into action this week, a week that included battles with Four Rivers Conference foes North Moore and Uwharrie Charter Academy. The Cougars defeated both teams 9-0 in the first round of conference games.



"We've been trying to be a little creative," veteran SWR coach Jimmy Walker said. "We're starting to run into some weak teams and we need to come up with new challenges for them. We've come up with a Bingo game, different ways of scoring, whether it's a header or one off the crossbar. They fill their cards and if they make it, we skip practice and go eat. We're trying to find creative ways to keep them competitive with more of a team concept."

The Cougars used a tough non-league schedule to prepare themselves for a deep playoff run. SWR opened the season with a hard-fought 3-1 win over Montgomery Central, which is 14-1 this season, and they own a 5-4 win over Wesleyan Christian Academy, which is 16-4.

The only loss of the season came on September 3, a 2-1 setback to defending 3- state champion Western Alamance, which is 18-0 on the year.



Chris Betancourt (6) celebrating with Fernando Hernandez (10) and Yael Rebollar-Ortiz (22). Photo provided.

A key non-league victory came at Clinton on September 24, when the Cougars dusted off the team that won the state 2-A title last year, 5-1. The Dark Horses recorded a 3-1 win in that 2024 title game.

"We've been challenged in our non-conference schedule," Walker said. "The Clinton game, going all the way down there and accepting that as a playoff game, we just took it to them. We came into it with a high level of expectation, put a game plan together and they executed. We showed the state that the 4-A title will go through Southwest."



*SWR junior Aaron Avina.
Photo provided.*

In all, the Cougars, who currently are No. 1 in the RPI rankings for 4-A teams, have outscored opponents 96-10, including a 33-1 advantage in the FRC. The only close battle SWR has had in the conference was a tight 2-1 win over Jordan-Matthews.

"J-M gave us a run for our money," Walker said. "We dominated that game, but it didn't go in the back of the net."

The Cougars, who are averaging 5.6 goals per game this season, are led by senior standout Fernando Hernandez, who is quickly closing in on the top five all-time scorers in NCHSAA history. Hernandez, who scored 25 goals his freshman season, 49 his sophomore year and 50 as a junior, has added 25 more goals so far this season. His 149 goals are currently tied for the ninth best all-time. He is two goals away from the eighth spot, three away from seventh, four away from sixth, seven away from fifth and nine away from fourth place. The top career goal scorer

in the state of North Carolina is Maynor Espinoza of Wallace-Rose Hill, who scored 214 goals from 2013-16.

"Just when you think you have seen it all from him, he steps up in big moments in big games," Walker said of his senior. "What he has meant to this program and to me, his leadership. Kids have looked up to him for four years. As a sophomore, he had seniors looking up to him. He brings a passion to the field I have never experienced. He eats, sleeps and breathes this. Some college is really going to get a good player they haven't talked to yet."

Walker said he is surprised more colleges aren't calling, but the portal plays a big role in college recruiting.

"The things he does that I don't even see are the things that help make him great," Walker said. He definitely put our school on the map."

Ahead are two road games scheduled for this upcoming week followed by a three-game home stretch the following week. SWR will host Eastern Randolph on October 20, J-M on the 22nd and Bishop McGuinness on October 23.

"There have been challenges we had to work through, but it's been a pleasure to have these kids who are invested in a program and are as attentive as they are," Walker said. "They stayed hungry through all the process and have had fun."

Winning does that for a team.



*Cougar senior Fernando
Hernandez-Dominguez. Photo
provided.*