Special Feature

November 6, 2026

By Dennis Garcia

SportsTone.net



ASHEBORO - Whenever a high school sports team captures the state tournament, the next season it is often said that the program is playing with a proverbial bullseye on their chests. And that was the case for the Southwestern Randolph High School soccer team this season.

After winning the 2025 state 4-A championship, the 2026 Cougars were indeed the hunted as they followed up a state-tournament winning season of 27-1 in 2025 with a 12-8-1 campaign in 2026.

But when the 2026 playoffs rolled around, this group of Cougars looked as if they were certainly the hunters and all Eastern Wayne could do was, well, absolutely very little about it.

Gio Hernandez scored twice and Alejandro Jimenez and Cristobal Lopez all scored in the game's first 10 minutes Thursday night as the Cougars rolled to a 7-2 victory over Eastern Wayne in the second round of the state 4-A playoffs. The No. 7-ranked Cougars, who received a first-round bye, will now have to hit the road for the next round as they will travel to No. 2 North Pitt Monday night.

Following the graduation of 13 seniors, who netted 130 of the team's 160 goals last season, this season was going to have some hurdles to jump. The loss of senior Kevin Garcia to a season-long injury just weeks into the season and another injury to senior Yael Reboliar-Ortiz certainly didn't help matters as the Cougars battled throughout the Four Rivers Conference season.

"It's been pretty good, but it's been hard," said Hernandez, a junior, about defending the state championship. "We are always a family and we always stick together. It's about love at the end of the day."

Hernandez has scored 19 goals and added five assists to the SWR offense.

With the loss of two key seniors and knowing every opponent was going to give the Cougars their best shot throughout the season, it was important that other players stepped in. Senior Cristobal Lopez was one of those players. He scored twice Thursday night and now has three goals and five assists. Garcia and Rebollar-Ortiz had combined for 22 goals and nine assists before being injured.

"We lost two seniors who started, but we have a pretty good bench and young players who are playing hard," Lopez said. I am just trying to do my best and enjoy it and if I can help the team, I will do it. Teams look at us as a worse team (compared to last year). But we're pretty much the same as last year. We play hard and give it our best."

The Cougars were certainly at their best Thursday night against the Warriors. Playing under the direction of assistant coach Joe Herring and former coach Jimmy Walker, who led the team to the state title last season, the Cougars started lightning-quick.

With delayed flights keeping head coach Jeff Tyl out of the country, SWR used a goal from Hernandez just 1 minute and 30 seconds into the match for a 1-0 lead.

The Warriors, the No. 10 seed who finished 12-6-1 overall, tied the contest a minute later on a two-on-none breakaway but it took less than 17 minutes for SWR to get goals from Jimenez, Hernandez and Lopez for a 4-1 lead halfway through the first half.



Cougars assistant coach Joe Herring.

"That was the goal, to come out hot, with intensity," said Herring, who admitted he was a bit nervous, but with Tyl on the phone and Walker by his side, handled the head coaching duties very well. "We know they had a long ride, two hours on an activity bus is not good for anyone. We saw them out here warming up early before the game, kind of wearing themselves down. So the idea was to start quick, fast and try to wear them out."

Griffin Hall scored his 17th goal of the season 11 minutes into the second half and after a goal by the Warriors narrowed the Cougars lead to 5-2, Johan Perez-Dominguez scored off a long free kick and Lopez added his second tally with 14:29 to play.

"We had a great night tonight, we played our best and I knew we would tonight," said Hernandez. "We gave it all we can. We were going to give 100 percent."

Herring said he was pleased with what he saw on the pitch.

"The way everyone stepped up and played," he said. "The level of play was much better than what we have seen consistently through the last half of the season. And even our bench players. We don't see much of a drop in play when we go to our bench."

Everyone will be needed Monday at North Pitt, a team that defeated Eastern Wayne 3-1 and 6-1 this season. North Pitt, which beat North Johnston 4-0 in round two Monday, is 19-3-2 on the season.