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ASHEBORO - There are numerous occasions each year when a high school varsity sports team welcomes a new player into the program. It could be a freshman who has incredible talent or a player who transfers in from another school. Those incidents occur all the time in high school athletics.

But what doesn't occur is the arrival of a special talent which causes a team to switch an entire scheme, even when the previous scheme was used to advance all the way to the state championship finals.

That's how much Southwestern Randolph High School soccer player Chris Betancourt has influenced the Cougars' soccer program since arriving from North Moore High School prior to the season.

"I didn't know anything about him coming in," said veteran SWR coach Jimmy Walker of his newest phenom. "I believe he may have a couple of cousins on the team. He came in with the skill set of a true center-midfielder and we already had Fernando (Hernandez) at center-midfield. He was just too talented to switch positions, so we put in a system where we dropped one defender, went from four to three, and put him and Fernando together at center-mid. He is so fluid with the ball. Incredibly accurate with passing and shots. Anytime he is 30 yards in, he has a green light."

The Cougars entered the season coming off its most impressive campaign in school history, finishing 25-3 and advancing to the state 2-A title match, where they lost to Clinton, ironically Tuesday night's opponent in this year's East Regional finals. The Cougars outscored their opponents last year 156-29, averaging 5.5 goals per game.

Betancourt, meanwhile, missed last year because of an injury after a sophomore season in which he was second on the Mustangs' roster with 14 goals.

When Betancourt transferred to SWR, an already-incredibly talented team became even stronger.



*Cougar senior Chris Betancourt heads onto the field during Southwestern Randolph introductions. Photo provided.*

"The biggest difference is the team overall," Betancourt said of his switch to SWR. "They have so much passion for the game and the coaches really help you a lot . They help you get working, practicing hard. Do what you have to do to get better. And it's an incredible team."

Betancourt has been a big part of the Cougars' success this season. The senior has scored 25 goals and added 16 assists and has been especially effective in the playoffs. After a first-round bye, Betancourt had a goal and an assist in the Cougars' 11-2 win over Cummings. Betancourt scored three times in the 4-0 third-round win over Jordan-Matthews and scored again in the 5-0 victory over First Flight in the regional semifinals.



*Chris Betancourt. Photo provided.*

Betancourt said his role when he arrived may have changed just a bit.

"My goal was to distribute the ball, get it over to our strikers," Betancourt said. "At the end of the day, I have so much confidence and started making runs and I ended up getting some goals."

Betancourt has been a key addition to the scoring as well with Hernandez scoring 39 times, Betancourt chipping in 25 and Aaron Avina and Yael Rebollar-Ortiz adding 23 each, the Cougars are not only averaging just a tick under six goals per game, but they have allowed just 17 goals all season.

"We are better than we were last year," Walker said. "Not only a senior-laden team, but just as dominating in the middle of the field as possible. Having

Fernando and Chris together working off each other and the creativity they have opens doors for players at top."

The doors have swung open with a chance to capture a second consecutive regional title when the Cougars host Clinton, a team they defeated 5-1 on Sept. 24, Tuesday at 6 p.m.

The state championship, should the Cougars win Tuesday, will be held Friday at 4:30 p.m. at Guilford College against either Newton-Conover or Ashe County.