

November 20, 2025

By Dennis Garcia

SportsTone.net

ASHEBORO - There was plenty of excitement, loud cheers, backs being slapped, high-fives, hugs and a few tears after Southwestern Randolph High School's varsity soccer team recorded a stunning 2-1 come-from-behind victory over Clinton Tuesday at Ivey B. Luck Stadium.

The Cougars erased a 1-0 deficit by scoring twice within a 27-second span with 7:25 to play in the East Regional finals and held off last year's state 2-A champions to advance to their second-straight NCHSAA state championship match, which will be held Friday at 4:30 p.m. at Guilford College.

SWR (26-1) will meet West Region champion Newton-Conover (24-1-3) after the Red Devils recorded a 2-0 win over Ashe County in that region's finals.

Just moments after the gutty performance by the Cougars, senior Fernando Hernandez, whose game-winning goal tied him for third place all-time among NCHSAA players in career goals, said the job isn't done yet.

"It's a blessing to be a part of this team," said Hernandez, whose goal with 7:25 remaining came just 27 seconds after Kevin Garcia had evened the contest at 1-1. "We keep fighting and we're going to keep on going. Our magical run ain't finished yet. Our job isn't done yet. We have one more game."



*Kevin Garcia.*

If not for an incredible rally in the regional semifinals in front of a huge crowd, the Cougars wouldn't have had a chance to finish their story. But even after allowing the Dark Horses to break a scoreless tie with just 13:39 left to play in the game, the Cougars never wavered.

"It's crazy, Clinton is a very good team," said Garcia, who blasted a shot in to tie the game. "I felt we had it and it just was a matter of time when we would come back."

Clinton made things very difficult for the Cougars as they sent nine players back defensively in the box. That allowed very little room for the Cougars to execute what they love to do with their through balls and despite both teams having chances in the first half, neither team capitalized.



"We were supposed to be able to knife through the defense, but what they were doing was compacting and not letting any through balls," said SWR veteran coach Jimmy Walker. "We were looking to make dynamic runs on the backside to get it into the box, but they weren't having any of that. At halftime we talked about doing some different things, but although we really didn't do what we were hoping to do, it worked out. I told them at the end of the day, it's going to take a special player to go ahead and break down and get the ball in the box. Once the ball gets in the box, as packed as they were, they were going to get nervous and we were going to be able to exploit a hole or two and somehow we did."

But not before Clinton scored on a shot from in front to make it 1-0 with 13:39 to play.



Then, in the final 13 minutes, perhaps the Cougars drew on the inspiration of Pedro Ortiz, a soccer player who was killed in May of 2024 for whom the team has dedicated this season to, or perhaps it was to help lift a grieving teammate, who lost his father this past weekend, but still elected to play with his soccer family.

Garcia's goal, off an assist by Chris Betancourt, tied the game and Hernandez scored the game-winner just seconds later.

"We struggled a little, they knew how to play us," said Hernandez, who scored his 40th goal of the season and 164th of his career. "They let us possess the ball. It took us a long time. We found a little spot that we needed and we took it. We took advantage of it and capitalized."

*Seniors Michael Jaimes (top) and Aaron Avina.*

The goal was poetic in that while chasing the third-spot on the all-time scoring list, Hernandez declined penalty kick opportunities, instead giving those to other players. His historic goal couldn't have come at a better time.

"He's a real team player to have that goal amount and be so close to getting third by himself in the state and he keeps giving up the ball," Walker said. "He's unselfish. The right person scored that game winner for us. When we need someone big, he's always there for us."

The Cougars defeated Clinton 5-1 on September 24, so coach Brad Spell said he knew he had to change things up.

"We haven't played like that all year long, but we knew they were an offensive explosion," Spell said of dropping back nine players



*Senior Jonathan Perez.*

in front of their goaltender. "They have a great team. We knew it would be difficult to possess the ball on them. They have some phenomenal talent. I'm being straight, they were the better team. I hate it, but they were the better team. When they went down one, they could have hung their heads and said 'darn, we lost to Clinton again,' but you have to give them a lot of prompts. I think they are going to take it all."



*Senior Braydon Tyl.*

Like last year, just one win to go for SWR to finish the story.

Newton-Conover has outscored its opponents 130-22 this year and they have recorded 14 shutouts, although one ended in a draw. Their only loss was a 1-0 decision to Clinton back on August 22.

Newton-Conover, the regular-season champions from the Western Foothills 4-A/5-A conference, has tied Hickory (2-2), East Lincoln (2-2) and battled to a scoreless draw with North Lincoln. The Red Devils have defeated Lake Norman Charter 4-2 after receiving a first-round playoff bye, Burns 4-0, Lincoln Charter 7-1 and Ashe County on the way to the title match.

SWR has outscored opponents 157-18, own a 20-game winning streak and have recorded 16 shutouts with their lone loss coming to Western Alamance 2-1 on Sept. 3.

The Cougars, who won the Four Rivers Conference, have defeated Cummings 11-2, Jordan-Matthews 4-0, First Flight 5-0 and Clinton to reach the title match.

"I hope we can say we've been there and done that and understand what it takes to win one of those, but they keep changing that field surface on us," Walker said, saying it will now be on a fully-turfed field. "Newton Conover's home field is turf. They play with a lot of speed, too. Last year in the fourth round, we won 5-4 and it was a doggone track meet."

Just the way the Cougars like it.