

# Eastbrook routs Blackford; advances to sectional 39 soccer championship

By Sean Douglas

Coming off an extended break before Sectional 39 play began, the Eastbrook Panthers were not as sharp to start their contest against the Blackford Bruins on Thursday.

Blackford put together a solid game plan, using their physicality to their advantage and making it tough for Sarah Foulk and company to find many easy scoring opportunities in the early going.

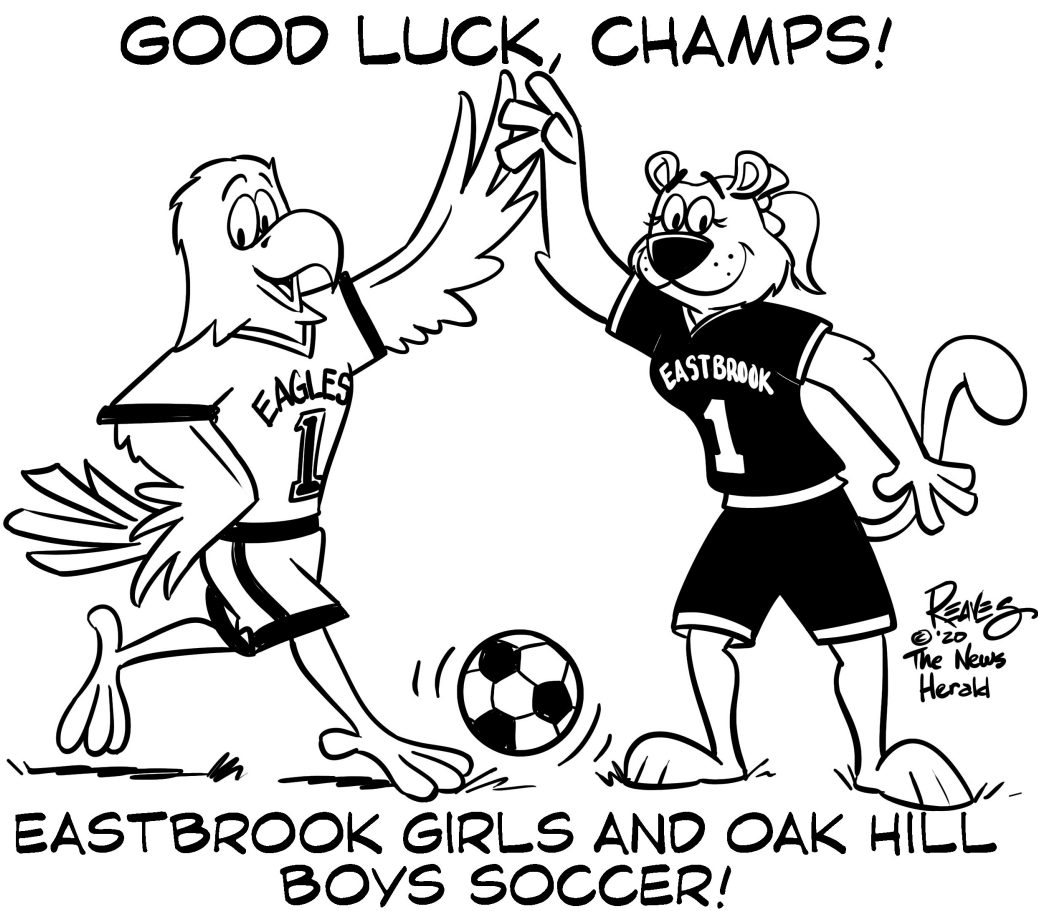
However, a late first-half tally by Naomi Diller helped the Panthers get back on track, and six second-half goals helped punch Eastbrook's ticket to the Sectional 39 championship in a 7-1 triumph.

While Eastbrook con-

trolled play throughout the first half, the Bruins did not allow the Panthers to get comfortable in their game-play in the opening 40 minutes. Through-balls and runs, which have been a key to Eastbrook's offense all year, were not there in the first half as the Bruins packed it in on the defensive end. Additionally, the Bruins were physical, knocking Eastbrook's attackers off the ball at a consistent rate.

"We haven't had a game in a week, and I think that showed tonight," Eastbrook Head Coach Jamie Hallis said. "I think we came out sluggish...but Blackford did a good job of making it hard

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## Oak

some adjustments over the course of the year as far as where we want to get the ball and how we want to play and how we want to create scoring chances with our possession," Garverick said. "Dalian has done a really good job of facilitating that and doing the things that we ask of him – making the adjustments that are necessary – and as he's done for years, score goals and pick up some assists along the way."

From that moment on, Oak Hill controlled the pace of the game, attacking through the midfield and applying consistent pressure on the Mississinewa defense.

With time winding down in the first half, the Golden Eagles doubled their lead. Off another successful push, Leach fired a shot that looked to be going wide, but Sevier was there on the back post to punch it in, increasing Oak Hill's lead to 2-0 at halftime.

"That's how we want to play. That's how we've always wanted to play – possession oriented," Gaverick said. "If you hold the ball, you have a chance to create good scoring opportunities, and I felt like we did that tonight."

Macy connected on a penalty kick to make it a 3-0 Oak Hill lead with 26:38 to play, but the Indians continued to battle despite the deficit they faced.

Davis scored with 20:50 remaining off a rebound after a Mason Reel free kick, and Yoder nearly made it a one-goal game four minutes later, but his shot rang off the post and



out of harm's way.

That missed chance would come back to haunt Mississinewa. With just under 12 minutes remaining, Pearce stole the ball in the middle of the field and capitalized on the turnover, pushing Oak Hill's advantage back to three goals.

Yoder scored the final goal of the game with 7:42 remaining, but the Golden Eagles hung on down the stretch to secure the win.

Wednesday's match marked the final game for two important cornerstones of Mississinewa's rebuild – Yoder and defender Josh O'Connell. Yoder, the all-time leading goal scorer in Mississinewa boys soccer history, took his game to another level this year and set the foundation for a soccer program that should only continue to get better in the years to come. He helped build Mississinewa into a winner, and his presence on the pitch will certainly be missed next year.

"You cannot replace Colin Yoder's hustle, his intensity, and his physicality," Mississinewa Head Coach Jared Reel said. "I've lived in this county for 20 years – I have not seen a better athlete than him, across the board. As a single-sport athlete or a multi-sport athlete, you aren't going to find a better player and a better kid than Colin Yoder. He worked his butt off in practice. He is the type of kid you want as a captain and a

leader, and we are going to miss him."

O'Connell, under Reel's leadership, developed into one of the best defenders not just on the Mississinewa soccer team, but in Grant County as a whole. He elevated his play, while also lifting up those around him throughout the course of another record-setting campaign for Mississinewa boys soccer.

"Josh is going to be another one that is going to be tough to replace – his ball skills on the back line, his leadership, [and] his commanding of other players while [also being] complimentary," Reel said. "Leaders like that, I've had a few in the years that I've coached, but I don't know if I had better leaders than those two."

While the loss of Yoder and O'Connell are big blows, the future of the program could not be any better. It has been a slow build, one that has taken years and is still a work in progress, but with each passing season, the program continues to improve. The talent is there, the feeder program is alive and well, and most importantly, there is a desire to build the Mississinewa boys soccer program into something special.

"We won 10 games. That's the most that this school has ever won," Reel said. "We've made it to the semifinals two years in a row. It's a work in progress, but I can't say enough about my underclassmen. I just smile because our future is bright. I am going to miss my seniors, don't get me wrong, but a majority of my

players are coming back. I'm excited about our future. We have the building blocks there. We just have to work on it on the off-season."

The Golden Eagles, with their victory, improved to 15-1-1, their best mark under Garverick since he took over the program three

years ago.

Now, Oak Hill is in prime position to has to win their first sectional championship since the 2016-2017 season.

"We know that we lost to them last year in the sectional championship. That's going to weight heavy on our minds," Garverick said. "But we want to get a win.

We want to get a sectional championship, and I'm glad we get a little shot at redemption playing against Western. We will do what we need to do to prepare. We'll talk tonight, create a game plan, and play our game."

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