

Nov. 10 CJ IV Boys Soccer Preview

Steinert-EB title game a classic match-up between underdog and big dog

By Rich Fisher

Fish4Scores.com

Nov. 10: You can't be a sports fan and not be fascinated by Friday's NJSIAA Central Jersey Group IV championship game.

On one bench, you have the top-seeded East Brunswick team sporting a 20-0-1 record and looking for its first Central Jersey title since 2001.

On the other bench, you have a spunky, 14th-seeded Steinert team at a pedestrian 8-8-2, but with a four-game winning streak. The Spartans are trying for their first sectional crown since winning CJ III in 1988 with current coach Todd Jacobs on the team.

East Brunswick has outscored its opponents by a whopping 63-7, has 15 shutouts and has won 18 straight. It's only mark was a scoreless tie with North Brunswick on Sep. 15, unless you consider its shootout win over Edison in the quarterfinals a tie, as some outlets do.

In the tourney, EB beat North Brunswick, 3-1, had the shootout with Edison and nipped Howell, 2-1.

Was all this expected?

"I think any time you go unbeaten through 21 games, it's a little surprising, especially considering the tough competition we face," Bears coach Terry McKibbin said. "We certainly knew we were going to be good, though, and we have a group of 14 seniors who finished last season with a very bad taste in their mouths."



Pat Remboski and goalie Devon Downs are two of 16 Steinert seniors hoping to prolong their career on Friday (Photo by Mike Dill/purchase photos at www.michaeldillphotography.com).

That's the one thing the teams have in common. EB's hunger stems from losing in the Greater Middlesex Conference Tournament final and first round of states last year. Steinert, with 16 seniors, was stung by a shootout loss to Freehold Township in last year's states.

Numbers-wise, however, there are big differences. Steinert has not been over .500 since the end of September and has only outscored its opponents 24-19. But in its past four games, the Spartans are 4-0 and have outscored opponents 8-1.

In the states Steinert has upset third-seeded Monroe (2-1), sixth-seeded South Brunswick (2-0) and Rancocas Valley (2-0).

For comparison's sake, EB beat Monroe and South Brunswick a combined five times by an 8-0 score.

In a nutshell, Steinert has nothing to lose. If any team is playing with the house money, it's the Spartans.

“Several years ago we wouldn't have had this opportunity with the old system (of being .500 at the cutoff) to qualify for states,” Jacobs said. “For us to get in the states at 5-8, and being here as a number 14 seed, this is unbelievable.”

“East Brunswick is undefeated and the number one seed. They are supposed to be in this position. The pressure is all on them.”

But Steinert is hardly approaching it as if a good effort will be satisfying enough, win or lose.

“We're having good practices and the team is very loose yet focused on the task at hand,” Jacobs said. “We are a very confident and focused team right now. I am proud of our guys with the way that they have turned this season into a positive one.”

“I know that they will prepare themselves for the battle of their soccer careers. They want to win this...bad!”

The challenge is enormous and the stakes are high, which is what state soccer is all about. Abu Bestawros is the Bears top scorer at 17 goals, and several other players are between four and nine goals so EB has balance.

“We are built around a strong defense and a couple of waves of attackers,” McKibbin said. “We use as many as six players in our attacking spots.”

That will present a challenge for a Steinert defensive unit that has been playing outstanding since moving CJ Harvell back to sweeper while pushing a rejuvenated Derek Shearer up to spark some ball movement.

“Our defense has been solid the last several games,” Jacobs said. “Hopefully we will continue to shut down the other teams offensive threats. I have total confidence that if we play as one we will get the job done. A major difference in our outcomes lately, is that we are playing with more continuity and each teammate is helping one another.”

“We know Steinert is loaded with hard working seniors and we know Steinert teams always play great defense,” McKibbin said. “We will have our work cut out for us. They have already beaten two good GMC teams on their way to this game, so we're expecting a great match, to say the least.”

Jacobs calls East Brunswick “The Princeton of the CVC, only with more firepower.”

“They play in a competitive conference, just like us,” the coach added. “They were knocked out in the first round last year and obviously learned from that experience.”

“Playing in a conference with competitive teams helps prepare both teams for a sectional final. We went through many ups and downs in our regular season. The losses are what helped us improve and grow as a team. I don't recommend that route, but that was our regular season. We are a different team now.”

The Spartans run is setting them up as a possible team of destiny. When asked if those kind of teams are more dangerous than a second-seed with a good record, McKibbin said it doesn't really matter at this point.

“Every team is scary when it comes to the state tournament,” the coach said. “If you take any team lightly, then your season could be over. The state tournament is about playing with passion, focus and playing as a team. You can throw all the rankings and seedings out the door at this point.”

Steinert has done just that.

And set up a fascinating final in the process.

