

## Nov. 6 JoJo's Tavern/Fish4Scores.com Athlete of the Week

### Steinert boys' soccer team going up, up up thanks to the play of Downs

By Rich Fisher

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**Nov. 6:** There are a lot of reasons why Steinert High's boys' soccer team has reached the Central Jersey Group IV Tournament semifinals as a 14<sup>th</sup> seed.

Better chemistry, opportunistic scoring, a few breaks, yadda yadda yadda.

But the rule of thumb in all tournaments that require someone to stand between a framed net, is that the person standing there come up big in the biggest games.

Spartan senior goalkeeper Devon Downs has done just that, making nine saves in a 2-1 win over third-seeded Monroe and 12 more in a 1-0 victory over sixth-seeded South Brunswick.

For his efforts, Downs is the *JoJo's Tavern/Fish4Scores.com Athlete of the Week* for the week ending Nov. 5.

"He's been unbelievable between the pipes the last couple of games," coach Todd Jacobs said. "And it's not like he's getting all easy shots. He's making some big time saves. A left footed guy from South Brunswick got some rips on him and he came up with some huge saves, turning him away both times.

"In the second half South Brunswick had the wind at its back and these guys were getting shots off and he was like a brick wall back there. It was muddy and slick and he'd hold on and punch it away and give (sweeper) CJ Harvell and the other backs a chance to clear the ball. He's been playing very good, hopefully he's got some more big games left in him."

The next test comes on Tuesday, when the Spartans host 15<sup>th</sup> seeded Rancocas Valley. And while Hamiltonians will decide a mayor that day, Downs will elect to continue his revived play with his normal approach.

"I feel like I have been more focused on just playing my best no matter who we're playing," he said. "I try not to look at the tournament as 'states.' I just look at it as if it's a normal game because every game I treat the same – try my hardest and leave my heart out on the field just as coach Jacobs and coach (Mike "Voice of the Spartans") Hastings say to. The past three games I think everyone has done that and we're going to continue to do it."

While Downs was solid during the regular season, he has lifted his level of play in the states. In the final game before the tournament, Downs played the field in an MCT consolation game win over Robbinsville so Nolan Kopec could get his chance in goal.

Both Jacobs and the keeper felt that helped Downs.

"He got a chance to take the game in," Jacobs said. "I don't know if that was a little refreshing for him in terms of he got to see the game and also play a little. After that game he went back to doing what he's doing better than ever."

"I think coach is right," Downs said. "I got to play in the field and figure out what we needed more work on and I got to see the game from another perspective, which always helps."

One of the keys to Steinert's turn-around has been a personnel re-alignment that moved Derek Shearer from sweeper to midfield to provide more offense, while dropping Harvell to sweeper. As the goalie, it is Downs' job to maintain order in the back amidst the shuffling.

"When coach made that move it wasn't hard to adapt because I have played with both of them for numerous years," he said. "I feel that it was a good decision to move Derek to midfield because he does a good job moving the ball around and it was just as smart to put CJ at sweeper because he reads plays well."

And while the defense has been outstanding, it is still up to Downs to make sure any mistakes don't come back to haunt Steinert. He has done it so well, that Jacobs is drawing comparisons to one of the Spartans greatest goalies.

"He has reminded me a little bit of Tommy DeStefano," said Jacobs of his former star, who went on to play for North Carolina State. "Tommy used to win games for us in goal. It might sound odd, but that ball you saw heading for the back of the net got saved all of a sudden by Tommy. That's what Devon Downs has done the last few games."

Downs was certainly happy to accept that comparison.

"Tommy trained me a couple of times in the beginning of the season and I have a lot of respect for him, because he knows what he is doing technically," Downs said. "To me, that's a compliment and it means a good deal to me."

Just as Downs has meant a good – make that great – deal to Steinert during this exhilarating ride.