

South Boys' High School Season Rewind

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Top 10

1. St. Andrews (Fla.), 23-2
 2. Lambert (Ga.), 18-0
 3. Lake Highland (Fla.), 20-3
 4. Milton (Ga.), 14-3
 5. Highland Park (Texas), 12-7
 6. St. Mark's (Texas), 17-4
 7. Dallas Jesuit (Texas), 16-2
 8. Ponte Vedra (Fla.), 17-3
 9. Jupiter (Fla.), 20-3
 10. Louisville Trinity (Ky.), 12-2
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Spotlight On...

This is not a Cinderella Story. This is not even an underdog story.

No, this is story about a group of players who came together as a team when everybody had them written off and said their window had closed. This is a story about Highland Park (Texas), the team that won its sixth state championship with gritty defense and pure heart.

"This journey was very different than any of the previous ones," Highland Park coach Derek Thomson said. "Each team is unique. Each team is special. But this was probably one of the most rewarding seasons just based on how far the team came."

Entering the postseason, the Scots were 7-7 and coming off losses to Southlake (Texas) and Coppell (Texas). Those defeats made it an off year for a team that was accustomed to being the top dog in the state.

"We actually needed someone else to win for us to even get into the Dallas playoffs," Thomson said. "Uncharacteristic of our team, we kind of beat ourselves in a couple of those games. We were fortunate we did get our second opportunity. One of the things I said to the kids is that you don't get many second chances in life, so I hope you make the most of this opportunity. And I had no idea they were going to do what they did."

What they did was cap off an improbable run to the state championship.

The North District's No. 6 seed, the Scots knocked off four teams that had defeated them in the regular season. Highland Park beat No. 4 Episcopal Dallas, No. 2 The Woodlands (Texas), No. 1 Dallas Jesuit (Texas) and finally, No. 3 St. Mark's (Texas). Talk about running the gauntlet.

On May 6 the Scots shocked St. Mark's, 5-4, in the THSLL Division I state title game. Just more than one month earlier, Highland Park was on the wrong side of a 10-7 loss to St. Mark's. But the Scots found the perfect payback by winning it all.

Senior captain Daniel Wenz who finished an outstanding season and career by registering two goals and two assists to lead all scorers in the game. Wenz earned Overall MVP honors.

"He's our season in a bottle. It's where ability meets opportunity. He worked his tail off," Thomson said. "He knows everything he did in the last 12 months was worth it, whether it was giving up some of his spring break, or giving up going to his senior prom. All the things I did when people weren't watching. He set the tone more than any other player on our team in the last three weeks.

Wenz wasn't alone, however. Senior attackman Wills Manley, who was awarded Offensive MVP, tallied two goals and one assist in the championship game, while senior Nico Cancemi also contributed a goal.

Highland Park was in control early, finding the back of the net twice in the opening seconds. Wenz scored first with on a set-up from Wills. Then after a blocked shot, Cancemi scored off a rebound giving Highland Park an early 2-0 lead.

After a St. Mark's extra-man goal, Manley responded on a feed from Wenz. But St. mark's brought it within one at halftime, with the score at 3-2.

Highland Park was determined to pull away in the third quarter. Wenz shiftily made his way through the Lions' defense to bury an unassisted goal, and then he found Manley for Highland Park's final goal.

The Scots then withstood a 17-shot fourth quarter by St. Mark's, which was only able to find the back of the net twice.

"We won with heart and team," Thomson said. "Sure, talent has a heck of a lot to do with results on the field, but the other 50 percent is team work, how hard you work, how hard you prepare and leadership. That's what we were lacking in the regular season."

It wasn't lacking in the postseason. As a result, Highland Park won its fourth Division I state title in the last five years.

Some would call that a dynasty.
