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Barlow, Brookfield set to battle for Class L boys soccer title

By Dan Farrand Staff Writer

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At this point, it's hard to imagine anyone stopping the Joel Barlow boys soccer team from winning their first state championship since 2001.

But 12th-seeded Brookfield will look to do just that when the two South-West Conference foes battle for the Class L state title at 6:30 p.m. today at Pomperaug High School.

The Bobcats' task, however, will not be an easy one.

The seventh-seeded Falcons (16-2-3) have been near perfect the last month and a half, going 13-0-2 in their last 15 games, winning nine straight contests and claiming the South-West Conference crown in the process.

And to make matters worse for Brookfield, Barlow appears to have a little bit of luck on its side as well.

The Falcons, who last won the SWC and state title in 1998, reached the Class L final behind two miracle shots by senior midfielder Scott St. Cyr in the semifinals against Wethersfield.

With Barlow trailing 1-0, the senior captain headed home the game-tying score with just two seconds left in the second half and then won the game with an amazing shot from 20-yards out just under five minutes into overtime.

"I've never seen anything like that and I'm not sure I ever will again," Barlow coach Paul Winstanley said of St. Cyr's heroics. "What he and Dylan (Stone) have managed to do in the postseason is legendary."

The combination of Stone and St. Cyr has been the engine that has kept the Falcons running all season.

Stone has netted a team-high 14 goals this year and has handed out


13 assists, while St. Cyr has tallied 10 goals and an amazing 26 assists.

But the deepest impact the two senior captains have had on the Falcons has been as much off the field as on it.



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"We always knew these guys were game changers," Winstanley said. "But now they have accepted and embraced the leadership responsibilities that come with it. The change in the team has been dramatic."

It's a transformation that Brookfield can account for firsthand.

The Bobcats (14-6-0) were the last team to beat the Falcons

back on Oct. 2.

Brookfield beat a Barlow team that lacked an identity, one the Falcons seemed to find when the two teams met again in the quarterfinals of the SWC playoffs.

Barlow topped Brookfield 2-0 in the SWC playoffs and went on to beat Bethel and Newtown for the conference crown.

The Falcons have now out-scored their opponents 54-10 on the season, pitching 14 shutouts and topping their state tournament opponents by the combined score of 11-3.

"We have a cohesiveness and a chemistry there now that we lacked before," Winstanley said. "Once we found that is when we started to turn things around."

Brookfield, meanwhile, has lost four of its last five games after falling to the Falcons in the SWC tournament and seemed to be headed in the wrong direction at the worst time.

Somehow, the Bobcats have managed to make the world's fastest U-turn.

"We got back to having fun," Brookfield coach Jared Sheikh said about his team's revival. "We got back to doing what we do best, which is playing hard and with a lot of energy."

The Bobcats have also leaned heavily on their defensive core of John Smith, Mike Huttemann, Steve Rountos, Luke Niahros and goaltender Matt Bonn in the state tournament.

The defense, which has helped Brookfield out-score its adversaries 46-22 this year, has been the cornerstone for the Bobcats this year, with three seniors (Smith, Huttemann and Rountos) on the back line.

The defensive unit has combined to deliver three shutouts in the state playoffs and Brookfield's offense, led by Mike Shaker, Brian Grisell and A.J. Stueck, has out-scored its postseason opponents 8-1.

And Brookfield has proven it is just the team to disrupt Barlow's apparent date with destiny.

The Bobcats have already eliminated two-time defending champion New Canaan and top-seeded Bethel, which finished the regular season undefeated.

The only other team to beat Bethel this year was Barlow in the SWC semifinals.

"We certainly won't be underestimating Brookfield," Winstanley said. "We know how good they are. This is going to be a classic dogfight, one that comes right down to the end."

NOTES: Luck is again on Barlow's side as the Falcons will have three starters returning to the lineup for the state championship game. Sophomore forward/midfielder Dan Goldman is expected to play after recovering from a concussion, and senior forward Alex Van Steinburgh and senior sweeper Taylor Armstrong will both be back after serving one-game suspensions for yellow cards they received in the quarterfinals.

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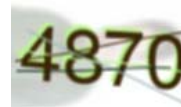
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