

Barlow hands rival Bethel first defeat Falcons hand Wildcats first loss

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SOUTHBURY -- Bethel High boys soccer coach Tony Fernandes said all season long there was only one team capable of beating his squad.

And it was the Wildcats themselves.

Unfortunately for undefeated and top-seeded Bethel, it quite literally did just that Tuesday, falling to No. 5 Joel Barlow 1-0 after giving up an own goal with just 7:43 left in the South-West Conference semifinal contest at Pomperaug High School.

"We didn't bring our 'A' game," Fernandes said. "This wasn't our best game, we didn't play our best soccer, but I don't want to take anything away from Barlow. They played well, they covered a lot of ground and they played hard. A lot harder than we did."

Barlow (11-2-4) will play sixth-seeded Newtown, which beat No. 2 Pomperaug on Tuesday 2-1 in a penalty kick shootout, for the SWC championship on Thursday at Joel Barlow High School.

Bethel (16-1-0), meanwhile, will now have to wait a week before it begins its run as the No. 1 seed in the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference Class L state tournament.

It's a seed they earned with a perfect regular season, but on Tuesday it was Barlow who looked like an undefeated team.

The Falcons played poised, possessed the ball and limited Bethel's potent offense to just seven shots in the contest.

"It was a combination of the most heart we've ever played with and composure," Barlow senior captain Dylan Stone said when asked how the Falcons pulled off the upset. "We possessed, we held the ball, we didn't let them get any good chances and we created our chances, one of which finally went in."

Stone set up the Bethel own goal by firing a free-kick from 35 yards out right at teammate Scott St. Cyr and a group of Bethel defenders.

As the pack went up for the ball, Bethel senior defenseman Clay Hines headed it backwards into the lower right corner of the net.

"I have no clue how that went in," Stone said. "I just saw the net shake and I went nuts."

The goal put Barlow up 1-0 with just over seven minutes left and put Bethel behind, a situation the Wildcats had faced just once during the regular season.

Bethel, however, was held at bay for the remainder of the game, its only legit scoring chance coming off a Ben Eaton corner kick, which has headed high by Ryan Rose.

"You'd imagine that's what it would come to in a game like this," Barlow coach Paul Winstanley said of the own goal. "This was an absolute dog fight. Our defense won this game for us. It is more solidified now and we are making better decisions."

Barlow has now pitched nine shutouts on the season and is 7-0-2 in its last nine games.

"The young guys are really stepping up and filling their roles," Stone said. "Chris Ferullo is playing great in the back and Brian Kraekel and Sean Basak-Smith are playing great up front."

Cody Hickok is also continuing to provide the Falcons with excellent play in net. The junior made three saves Tuesday night en route to delivering his 34th career shutout, adding to his Barlow record.

But Tuesday's shutout may have been the most impressive of the season considering the Wildcats beat the Falcons 3-2 on Sept. 17, Bethel has out-scored its opponents 66-13 on the year and has four players (Donny Walsh, Liam McCormick, Mike Parenti and Rose) with nine goals or more.

"We are much more mature now," said Winstanley when asked the difference between the Barlow team that lost to Bethel and the one that won Tuesday. "We aren't making mistakes. We are young still, but we are much more mature and when you have guys like Stone and St. Cyr that's makes you a threat every night."

Now, after his team won games on back-to-back nights, Winstanley just doesn't want to stop playing.

"I think we have a bit of a Colorado Rockies streak going," Winstanley said. "We just need to keep playing."

Barlow will get their next game on Thursday at Joel Barlow High School against Newtown, a team the Falcons tied twice this season.

"We wanted Newtown," Stone said. "They are our rival and if we are going to win the title, we want to beat them to do it."

Bethel, meanwhile, will have to sit and watch someone else play for the title they fought all season to earn.

"It hurts a lot," Rose said. "But we didn't come to play. We just have to learn from this loss and get ready for states. I don't think motivation will be a problem after this experience."

And in Fernandes' eyes Bethel still has plenty be proud of.

"In my mind we are the SWC Champions," Fernandes said. "To do what these guys did in the regular season in this conference is incredible."

Barlow and Newtown might disagree as they will be the one's fighting for the championship banner on Thursday.

"We always expected to be (in the SWC championship game)," Stone said. "We are there, now we have to win it."

Joel Barlow (11-2-4) 0 1 "" 1

Bethel (16-1-0) 0 0 "" 0

SCORING: 1. JB, Own goal.

SHOTS: Barlow: 9; Bethel: 7.

SAVES: Cody Hickok (JB) 3; Chris Greeney (B) 1.

CORNER KICKS: Barlow: 3; Bethel: 1.