

Crown the 'Cats West Region champs!

Freshmen finish it for Sutton's squad

By Luke Reid, Sports Information Director

LOS ANGELES – Under the pressure of such a monumental moment, one might expect a true freshman in Brianna Furner's position to get buried. She did. Furner wound up buried at the bottom of a dogpile unlike any other in the history of Chico State women's soccer. Furner saved four penalty kicks to lead the Wildcats to their first ever West Region title with a 4-3 shootout victory against Cal State L.A. Friday afternoon in Los Angeles.

Fellow true freshman Alyx Williams netted the clinching penalty kick and the team raced from the sidelines to pile on Furner, their freshman phenom.

Furner admitted that, at times, her collegiate soccer experience has felt like "too much to handle." But she was referring to preseason workouts. Since making it through those, and some early season hiccups, Furner has evolved to play much more like a seasoned veteran. Friday's scoreless deadlock through 90 minutes of regulation and two 10-minute overtime periods marked her ninth shutout of the season and fifth in the last eight matches.

"I basically broke down a couple weeks before the season and didn't know if I could handle college soccer," admitted Furner, still teary-eyed well after the win. "But I called my sister and she encouraged me to stay mentally strong and told me she believed in me."

Furner's teammates encouraged her in a similar way during Friday's dramatic penalty kicks.

"My teammates were confident in me and that gave me confidence," said Furner. "I just didn't want the season to end for those girls. I told myself that if I didn't stop the next one, our season might end. I guess I just rose to the occasion."

The entire team did, just as it has throughout this amazing NCAA Championship Tournament run. Seeded No. 5 in the West, the Wildcats have now knocked off No. 4 Cal State Stanislaus, No. 1 UC San Diego, and No. 2 Cal State L.A. The latest two wins have come on their opponents' home field.

Next up is South Central Region Champion Abilene Christian, now 20-1-1 after beating Dallas Baptist 2-1 in overtime in Friday's other regional final match on the campus of Cal State L.A. Chico State and Abilene Christian, both nicknamed the Wildcats, will square off at 2 p.m. Sunday in NCAA Championship Tournament Quarterfinal action with a spot in the Final Four on the line.

The Wildcats certainly believe they can get there.

“This is just a special group,” said Wildcats Head Coach Kim Sutton. “They have supreme confidence in themselves and each other. Blake (Lopes) and Molly (Downtown) are out there coaching the team on the field and giving everyone confidence. And those two are playing outstanding right now. They’re just that special thing you need.”

Downtown drilled a must-have penalty kick after the Golden Eagles had gone up 3-2 with their sixth kicker. She’s now 3-for-3 on PKs in NCAA Championship Tournament action during her illustrious career.

After both teams missed wide on their next attempts, Furner flicked away the next Cal State L.A. try, setting the stage for Williams to win it. Williams seemed to see the goalkeeper commit and then blasted it home in the opposite direction. It was the savvy of a senior in the foot of a freshman.

“Molly came over and put both hands on my shoulders before the kick and told me she was confident in me. Having an older team captain do that was huge,” said Williams. “I was pretty confident, and with Bri(anna) stepping up so big for us over and over, I knew I needed to make it because we couldn’t ask for any more from her.”

The match was nothing like the shootout that decided it. Furner and her counterpart, Cal State L.A. goalkeeper Jessie Walworth, make three saves apiece as the teams played to a scoreless draw.

Cal State L.A. dominated the first half, earning a 9-4 advantage in shots. But the Wildcats weathered the storm.

“That felt like as much pressure as we’ve faced in a half this season,” said Furner. “To get through that half scoreless was huge.”

Each team registered seven shots in a much more evenly played second half and overtime. But neither mustered a truly dangerous scoring threat thanks to stifling defense and strong positional goalkeeping.

“Bri just made it look kind of easy today, just catching things and being in the right spot,” said Sutton. “She’s had other moments this season where maybe it wasn’t her best day. But she fought back. I think that’s part of the reason this team loves her so much.”

Friday, she didn’t just fight back for herself. She did it for her teammates, who struggled during the shootout, connecting on just four of eight attempts.

Carly Singer had no such trouble, sticking her try into the back of the net to answer Justine Telle’s make for Cal State L.A. that started the shootout. But the next two Wildcats missed. Furner saved one of the next two Golden Eagle efforts to keep her team close. But trailing 2-1 with just two tries each remaining, Furner was faced with her biggest challenge of the night. She rose to meet it, both literally and figuratively by

making what was undoubtedly the best save of the day. Furner dove high to her left to tick the ball off the post and out, keeping the Wildcats within striking distance. Deni Jo Berger took advantage, juking the goalkeeper and depositing the ball into the open half of the net to even things up.

The next two kickers each missed, ending the first five tries at 2-apiece and setting the stage for Downtain, Williams and Furner to come through.

“I couldn’t be prouder of the kids who stepped up to do it again and the kids who got it done,” said Sutton, referring to her team’s shootout wins against Cal State Stanislaus and Cal State L.A. in a seven-day stretch. “And you have to love a goalkeeper who makes four saves. Unbelievable. That is honestly the reason we won.”