



77 PARKS

NE PREP ZONE: OMAHA & LINCOLN

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SELECT A SPORT: GIRLS SOCCER

Class A		Class B	
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SOCCER

Culture shift helps Eagles finally qualify for Nebraska state soccer tournament just a short walk from school

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By Gene Schinzel / World-Herald staff writer

The NSAA recommends that qualifying teams for the state soccer tournament have their buses drop players off at the north side of Morrison Stadium.

Omaha Central won't need a bus to get to Morrison. The Eagles' biggest decision may be whether to drive or walk to the state site.

"It's a block and a half away from our school. We can see the soccer tournament being played from the classrooms," Central boys coach Peter Pham said.

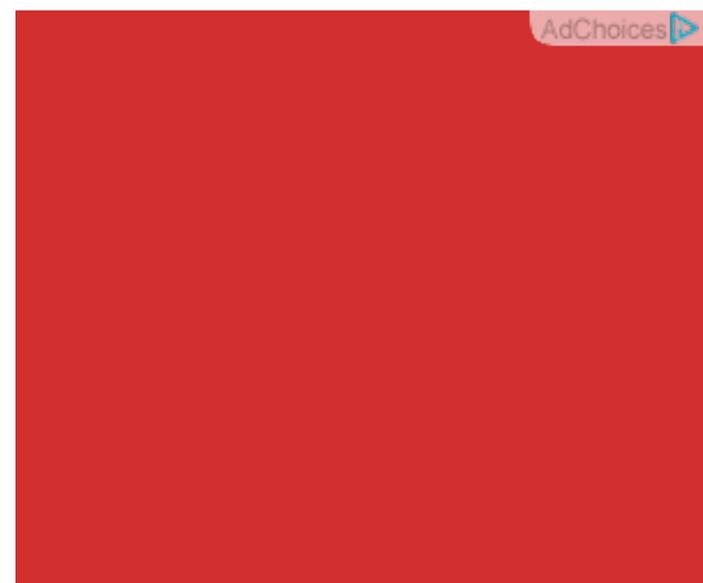
The Eagles know the way to Morrison, and now they finally are



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

The Omaha Central boys soccer team is making its first state appearance in 19 years. The starters: Back row from left, goalie Cole Heimuli, Michael Galeski, Cole Horner and William Garibo. Middle row, Bryan Dimayuga, leading scorer Derek Smith, Jackson Ferris, Rafael Perez and Vicente Olivar. Front row, Victor Hugo and Stevie Siy.

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TEAM TRACKER »

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getting the chance to play a state tournament there. Central will make its first state appearance since 1997 when it faces Creighton Prep at 1 p.m. Thursday in the Class A quarterfinals.

“It’s a neat experience. I know they’re excited. The school’s excited,” Pham said. “The day we won (districts), I got a ton of texts from alumni. It’s kind of a big deal. Our kids have never been in this situation before.”

The Omaha Central boys once were regulars at state, qualifying seven times between 1988 and 1997 and winning their only title in 1992. But then the Eagles experienced a state-tournament drought. In Pham’s first five years as coach, the Eagles never won a game in districts before qualifying last week.

“It’s been a long process, a full six-year process,” Pham said. “It’s a cultural thing. You’ve got to get the kids to believe. You’ve got to make sure the kids are all on the same page. This year, it turned out everything went in that direction.”

Pham said his team last year may have had more talent, but it didn’t know how to win. The cohesiveness of this year’s team has helped the Eagles turn the corner.

Central has 13 seniors on its roster. And while only five play regularly, “they’re kind of the backbone of the team,” Pham said. “They’ve been there through the bad times and obviously through the good times now.

“They all kind of know their role, which is awesome.”

Central (13-6) has a strong midfield and has been stingy defensively. The Eagles have allowed a total of 11 goals this season, with two-time defending Class B state champion Columbus Scotus being the only team to score two goals against them.

Central also has suffered 1-0 losses to state qualifiers Omaha Westside, Millard North and Omaha South (twice). Central’s win in the district final was a 1-0 shootout victory over North Platte, which received a wild card.

“We’ve been battle-tested,” Pham said. “Our schedule has been pretty tough this year, so we’ve gotten better. The scores haven’t indicated it, but as the year’s gone on, we’ve gotten better.”

Senior goalkeeper Cole Heimuli, who started as a sophomore but didn’t play last year, has helped solidify the defense. Other key players include senior Derek Smith, the team’s leading scorer, junior Jackson Ferris, sophomore Rafael Perez and Stevie Siy, a junior who plans to graduate in December and then play for UNO.

“Stevie doesn’t score goals, but he just controls the game,” Pham said. “He’s probably one of the better midfielders I’ve seen in a long time.”

Thursday will be Central’s only matchup this season with Creighton Prep, which has played in four of the past five Class A title matches. Even though Central is ending an 18-year state drought, Pham hopes his team treats Thursday’s quarterfinal as just another match and sees how far it can go.

“At the beginning of the year, our goal was state,” he said. “We had some tough losses during the year, but I reminded them our goal is to win state. It’s been in the back of their heads.”

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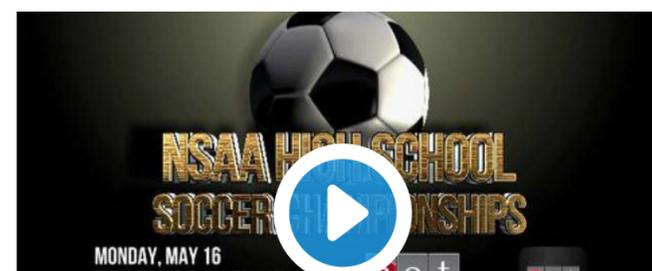


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