

Towns County Sports

Towns County's Leader In Sports

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Soccer: Lady Indians' Coach Livingston reflects on runner-up season

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Last week, Towns County Lady Indians soccer coach Clay Livingston and the *Towns County Herald* looked back on his program's 2023 State runner-up campaign.

Among the topics discussed were the title game, the 2023 regular season, Region 8-A, the GHSA and the outpouring of support from the school and community.

TCH: Going into the final game, you were coming off three road trips with a penalty-kick shootout in the previous round. Meanwhile, Aquinas had three blowouts at home and likely rested the starters each game. How much of an impact was fatigue, particularly in overtime?

CL: The last three years, especially the last two, we've come out of the toughest area in the state. Our top three teams have all made the final four the last two years, with two going on to play for a State championship. If the GHSA would use the power rankings system like they used in the past, and actually seed the brackets, [it would balance out the tournament]. These schools [in south Georgia] are getting better, but they don't play enough tough competition. I'm proud of what we have accomplished, but it's almost unfair to [these girls] not to get to host a couple of rounds because we're one of the four best teams, year in and year out. It isn't about me, but it's just frustrating for the kids.

TCH: I've thought about that myself. At a minimum, they could play the final two rounds at a neutral site to cut down on travel.

CL: Yeah, I agree, but I just want to celebrate these girls and not make it about me or anything else. Last year,



The 2023 Towns County Lady Indians. Assistant coach Kaila Reece is not pictured.

after we lost in the final four, I got after our girls a little bit in the locker room. They were upset, but I told them, we have to invest more in the offseason. Short of having our girls play club ball, which isn't really something we can do because of our isolation and girls like Laura Mauldin that play three sports. But [at the end of the 2023 season], all I could do is help them understand what they have accomplished. They were hurt [by the loss]. It hurt badly to get that close. We thought we scored the game-winning goal and they didn't give it to us. I've seen the film and I've seen stills, it was close. I wasn't the one down there making the call, but it looked like it could have been in. And when you come that close and lose, it's devastating. So I told them, what they did this year is nothing short of a miracle.

TCH: Entering the title game, you guys hadn't lost

since March 17. What was the turning point back in mid-March? Was it getting the basketball players back or something more subtle?

CL: Yeah, getting those girls back from basketball was huge. But it still took a little time to see where they all fit. Then we had an injury at sweeper, so we were forced to move people around. But playing our best ball at the end of the year is something we pride ourselves on. These teams with all the club players come out of the gates playing well, but we work hard to be on top of our game by the end of the year.

TCH: Do you think playing those teams again in the playoffs, like LOA and Aquinas, gave you guys the advantage by forcing them to beat you twice? Did you want to play them again or would you have rather played a less-familiar opponent in the final two games?

CL: That's an interesting question. This year, we only played the region teams once because of the travel, and I know it's hard to beat a good team twice.

Last year, Social Circle beat us 8-0 the first game, then barely escaped the second time. So yeah, I thought about it. I knew that if we get to where we wanted to be, we were going to have to run across those teams again. I think having already lost at their place might have given us the upper hand in the rematch, just because it's so hard to beat a good team twice in the same season. But I think the GHSA could help us out and shorten the seasons a bit to cut out on some of that overlap. Whenever they do reclassifications, that's something that needs to be talked about.

TCH: Have they ever explained the logic of why they moved the start of soccer practice into January and why

you're playing games the first week of February?

CL: Something about not wanting the state title games coinciding with graduation. But they didn't move baseball up.

TCH: And golf State championships aren't until May 22.

CL: That's silly. North Carolina doesn't start [early], and I know South Carolina starts about three or four weeks later than we do. So there is precedent about how to avoid the overlap. The coaches here at Towns County all get along great, but what happens at other schools is, you have coaches telling kids not to play other sports because it will hurt their chances of playing college ball. Instead of playing the sports they want to play, the kids are being forced to make tough choices. To me, that's not right.

TCH: Is there anyone you want to mention or add anything about the season?

CL: We couldn't do anything without all the support we received. One thing I learned [working] at Cartersville was that your support has to start at the top. Dr. (Darren) Berrong has been phenomenal. So has Mr. (Roy) Perren, Mr. (Bryan) Thomason, Coach (Jim) Melton and all the parents. Coach (Jeff) Stowers does so much for us with the hotels, itinerary and pregame meals. There are so many people it's hard to name them all. My wife is a great coach's wife. The booster club does so much, and again, the parents are all unbelievable.

The biggest thing is these kids, especially the seniors. These are the three best years I've ever been a part of. I'm just a small part of all this. Coaches get too much credit when things go well, and too much blame when they don't go well. I'm just along for the ride trying to help these girls. My assistant coach, Kaila Reece, has been incredible. Not just for soccer, but being an example and having that female around when needed. I'm just a strength coach, I don't have the vocabulary to put the last three years into words.

But after each game, whenever I shake the opposing coach's hand, I always think about the look that I get. Most of the time, the look is, 'how did you just beat us?' But it's just these kids. I've never seen so much perseverance and fortitude week in and week out.

TCH: Anything you learned this year that will help you get over the hump and bring home a ring in 2024?

CL: We added some indoor 3-on-3 training in the offseason. I just want them to get the ball on their foot as much as possible. You're not going to have much success if you're picking up a ball in January and putting it down in May. We just have to keep working at it.

Baseball: ECI slugs its way past Towns County in Elite-Eight round

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Twin City - The Indians' postseason run came to a halt on Wednesday, May 10, following a pair of losses at fifth-ranked Emmanuel County Institute (ECI).

The Indians (22-13) trailed 5-3 in the opener before ECI put up a snowman over the final two frames of a 13-3 Towns County loss. The second game of the doubleheader ended in a 7-0 defeat, bringing the Indians' 2023 season to a close. ECI belted five home runs during the two-game sweep.

Indians 3, ECI 13 (GM 1) - Towns County got on two in the third to even the score at 2-2 before ECI (28-8) added one in the bottom half and two in the fourth. The Indians trimmed the deficit to 5-3 in the top of the fifth, but ECI pushed across seven in its half of the inning, then walked it off via the mercy rule with one in the sixth.

Senior Seth Gillis doubled, drove in a run and scored twice during a 1-for-3 game. Connor Chastain went 1 for 2 with a double, a walk and one RBI. Caleb Berrong plated another run while finishing 1 for 3; Layne Rouse walked and scored and Tanner Cunningham went 1 for 2.

A two-out double off Kade McConnell put ECI on the board in the first, and a leadoff homer made it 2-0 an inning later.

Rouse walked and Cunningham singled to start the



Connor Chastain went 1 for 2 with a double during game one at ECI. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

third, allowing Gillis' two-bagger and Berrong's base hit to even the score. But once again, ECI flexed its muscle with a one-out solo shot in the bottom half of the frame.

Two Bulldog singles made it 5-2 in the fourth until Gillis reached on an error, and Chastain doubled him home

with one away in the fifth.

It was all ECI the rest of the way, putting up seven runs in the fifth and another in the sixth.

McConnell couldn't escape the fifth frame, giving way to Braydon Barrett with one down in the inning. McConnell lasted 4 1/3, allowing 14 hits

and striking out three. Barrett worked an inning, issuing a walk, surrendering four hits and two earned runs.

ECI blasted three home runs in game one while its 2-3-4 hitters combined to go 10 for 12 with two homers and 9 RBIs.

Indians 0, ECI 7 (GM 2) - The Bulldogs scored one



Kade McConnell got the nod in game one. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

in the first and that was enough for starter Lawson Mercer, who fired a complete-game four-hitter without walking a batter.

Chastain ended the day 2 for 3; Zane Floyd and Dale Kirby each went 1 for 3.

ECI added three in the second, plus one apiece in the fourth, sixth and seventh in-

nings.

Floyd gave up seven hits over four innings, fanning three and yielding three earned runs and a pair of long balls in the start. Matthew Chastain entered to work three innings in relief, allowing three hits, three walks and two earned while notching two punch outs.