

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2011 – by Mike Weilamann (Open Mike)

## Blue Streaks Cage 'Cats For First HWS Title

The road through Sussex County, albeit a long one, was the route to a long-awaited championship for the Warren Hills field hockey program.

Behind a lethal combination of precision passing and lightning-quick speed, the Blue Streaks struck for a pair of early goals that set the tone for a 3-1 victory over High Point in a battle between two No. 1 seeds in the Hunterdon-Warren-Sussex championship on Saturday at Vernon Township High School.

Warren Hills (17-1) claimed its first tri-county championship after falling, 1-0, to Voorhees in the 2010 title game. In fact, no team in the Warren County school's history had won a county championship on the field. The 2009 Streaks shared the title with Newton because the final was never played due to scheduling conflicts.

"We were always so close, yet so far," said veteran coach Laurie Kerr, whose teams settled for second place in five previous county championship games. "To win it outright with no question marks is a great feeling and the kids are ecstatic. It's really exciting."

In this tournament, Warren Hills faced and beat three Sussex County teams (Newton, 5-0, in the quarterfinals, Wallkill Valley, 8-1, in the semifinals and High Point in the final) to earn the trophy.

"We worked hard for it during the summer and during the season," said outstanding senior midfielder Whitney Kowski, who was in the running for MVP honors that went to teammate Lindsey Schott. "We earned it."

High Point (15-1), playing in its first-ever county final, was overwhelmed early and found itself trailing for the first time all season after Warren Hills knocked in two goals before the first nine minutes ticked off the clock. The Wildcats responded with a much better second half, including a goal by senior forward Nikki Hull that capped the scoring with 9:14 to play, but the early damage proved too much to overcome.

"This was a big reality check," said senior back Bea Cannavale, who made an outstanding save to rob Schott of a sure second-half goal. "We thought it was a big honor to get to the final. We're going to see teams like [Warren Hills] all through the [state] playoffs, so it was good to know we could keep in the game [in the second half]."

Warren Hills, which plays in a very tough Skyland Conference, thought it had a big advantage in strength of competition.

"I think they have a great team, but I think we have a better team," Kowski said. "I think we happen to play a better schedule."

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Schott and Kowski teamed up for the icing goal with 9:32 left in the second half, just seconds after Schott's blast that was saved by Cannavale. Off a corner, Kowski sent a hard shot toward the cage that Schott was able to redirect in for her team-leading 22nd goal, leaving her four shy of matching Kate Alleger (26 in 1996) for the Streaks' single-season mark.

It gave Warren Hills a commanding 3-0 lead and room to breath after High Point seemed to be gaining some momentum. All three of the team's goals came off penalty corners.

"We worked all summer on corners," said Schott, the program's career goals (67), assists (42) and points leader (176) who is attracting attention from several Division I schools. "It was nice after a two-hour bus ride to get a couple [early goals]. We came out with intensity and we knew that if we played like that we'd come out champions."

Despite the loss, veteran coach Bev Keur was happy her team got the chance to play one of the state's top teams in advance of the upcoming state playoffs. Keur was also pleased with her team's second-half effort.

"Guts and determination, and we talked about a matter of pride [at halftime]," said Keur, now 2-4 all-time against Warren Hills teams. "[Warren Hills] is a good team with beautiful passing and they connect really well. I'm proud of the way we played. We wanted to know that we can play with this team and I think we showed that."

Kowski opened the scoring when junior midfielder Niki Miller set her up nicely on the game's first corner 1:54 into the contest. Sophomore Nikki Schott made it a 2-0 lead, after collecting a pass from her sister, Lindsey, and knocking the ball down, and in, on the left post with 21:32 left before the half.

"Scoring twice in the first nine minutes definitely gave us momentum and calmed the nerves," Kerr said. "The kids said they weren't nervous, but it was a big game. Lindsey came up big on our corners and had some nice shots. That was a blast [that Cannavale saved] and that young lady made a great save. When [Lindsey] is playing with confidence the whole team plays well."

As they did against Wallkill Valley, in which six different players scored, the Streaks mixed it up on the offensive end with three different goal scorers in the title game.

"I score a lot of goals, but our team has a lot of scorers," Lindsey Schott said. "It's a whole team."

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Also credit a staunch Warren Hills defense, led by seniors Jamie Miller, Caitlin Clark and Jen Hylkema, along with freshman Amanda Crampton, for keeping High Point at bay for most of the game. That group particularly kept Hull and junior Darby Smith (19 goals) in check, which stymied a Wildcats offense averaging 4.5 goals per game.

Hull marched the ball right down the field after Warren Hills' third goal and finished off the drive with her 15th goal of the season to get High Point on the board. Otherwise, it was a total shutdown effort by the Streaks.

"[High Point's] strength is their offense and we have a very strong defense," Kerr said. "I didn't even give them a scouting report. I knew who they're top scorers were, but I wanted my team to stay loose and play. High Point is real aggressive and a strong team. But [my team] wanted that championship so bad that they weren't going to let down."

Warren Hills (17-1)	2	1	-- 3
High Point (15-1)	0	1	-- 1

### Scoring

First half -- WH, Whitney Kowski, 7th, (Niki Miller), 28:06; WH, Nikki Schott, 7th, (Lindsey Schott), 21:32.

Second half -- WH, L. Schott, 22nd, (Kowski), 9:32; HP, Nikki Hull, 15th, 9:14.

Shots -- Warren Hills 17; High Point 8.

Saves -- Katie Wintersteen 6, Jen Hylkema 1 (defensive) (WH); Kelsey Stoll 12, Bea Cannavale 1 (defensive), Shannon Havens 1 (defensive) (HP).

Penalty corners -- Warren Hills 16; High Point 7.