

Dubious Header Nets League Title

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Taylor Francel (Surf) headed in a controversial game-winner for **Granite Hills** in its 1-0 win over **Helix** on Wednesday to give the Eagles the Grossmont South League title. The dubious goal came in the 71st minute. The ref didn't make any friends on the Helix team when he ruled the ball a goal after Helix defended the ball away.

The X's and O's were that Francel connected off a free kick that held corner kick-like appeal. Francel did her job by piercing the goal, but the ball was still in the air when Helix defended it out. Then the play was ruled a goal.

If Granite Hills would have lost, they would have shared the league title with **Steele Canyon**; the victory makes the Eagles the sole owners of the crown.

Helix coach **Leslie Gray** understands the rivalry as well as anyone. She still remembers Granite Hills' nothing-but-long-balls style from her playing days. These days, Granite Hills coach **Elio Bello** implements a much prettier style, but tensions remain high.

The soccer community -- large in number, but small in degrees of separation -- also includes Helix assistant coach **Rachel Bunch**. She played up the hill at **Christian HS**. Now a teacher at Helix, she and Gray were handed damage-control duties.



Ariel Howie and Taylor Wright were key on Wednesday.

Helix made headlines for all the wrong reasons last year after Coach **Garry Wilcox** was ousted after being accused of an improper relationship with a student. Gray and Bunch have helped clean up shop.

First on the agenda was gaining the respect of the girls. Gray didn't have much coaching experience, but what she lacked on her resume she made up with endurance.

Off the field, Gray has a 5-month-old, which is challenging by any means, but the baby boy helped bond the team. She brings him to practice, and he helped her build a relationship with the girls. They related to her on a human level, rather than just as a new coach. The girls found solace in the fact they can talk to Gray about off-the-field life that she can identify with as a fellow female.

On the field, the first-year coach is ready to lead the girls to an imminent playoff appearance. Helix is confident a playoff seeding will come its way after dominating its Div. II matchups.

The Highlanders lost just twice in their division, both of which were against league opponents. The losses to Steele Canyon and **Valhalla** were both by a 1-0 margin. The Valhalla game resembled Wednesday's match against Granite Hills. The game-winner was described as "questionable to say the least."

The Highlanders will put the losses behind them. Gray has a plan to keep the girls on-target heading into the postseason. She will remind her team that Granite Hills is Div. I for a reason.

Regardless, Gray knows there is only one way to win.

"We need to put the ball in the net -- that's the bottom line," Gray said. "We need to get back to playing our game and put the ball on the ground. That's where we are strongest. We aren't the tallest and strongest in the air, but if we can get the ball down and move the ball outside we can do well. We need to score some goals."

Granite Hills has fulfilled its scoring requests all season. The girls are primed for a playoff appearance, but they might be without one of their top scorers. **Lauren Kale** injured her knee in Wednesday's match and is unlikely to return this season. Helix's **Brittini Acosta** also went down for the count and left the venue with ice on her face.

There were several injuries this season that had Bello scratching his head trying to make the adjustments and put the right player in the right spot. His strategies paid off. The Eagles endured just one loss, which was to No. 2 ranked **Westview**.

Bello, a second-year coach at Granite Hills, has brought home as many league titles.

His team outshot its visitors in its final regular season game, 16-6. The Eagles earned many opportunities at the goal but were either off target or felt the defensive brunt of **Kelsey Gunion**, **Courtney Shutts** and **Annette Acosta**. The trio was a big reason why Granite Hills was only able to slip in one goal.

On the other end, Eagles keeper **Brooke Gandy** registered the shutout. Lending everything they had to the cause were Francel, **Ariel Howie** and **Amber Brancato**.

The Highlanders made valiant efforts to get past the back line. **Kathleen Brawley**, **Krista Haakma** and **Taylor Wright** gave Helix its best chance to get on the board, but Helix couldn't bypass the efforts of players like **Nitza Mendosa**. She was a workhorse and created space and options for her team and herself.



Helix HS listens close.



Granite Hills takes the field.



Go Seniors!