

Special Section

BASKETBALL SOCCER ROCKERS


 THE SUN
SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE

HARDWOOD SUPERHEROES

Southwestern's women's soccer team filled in as the basketball team and took beating after beating to save the program

BY EMILY INGCO

Southwestern College's women's basketball team battled Mira Costa College in a season finale that was a nailbiter – but only for people who habitually bite their nails.

The Lady Jaguars absorbed another shellacking, 99-24, to finish a winless season.

For the packed house at the Jaguar Gym, that was not the issue. They came to honor the noble losers

who will go down in Southwestern College history as champions.

Decked in good-guy white, the cagers were actually Southwestern's talented soccer team in disguise. When illness, injury and crummy grades wiped out a rebuilding women's basketball team, forfeits rained down like Hurricane Hilary and the season was on the verge of cancellation. Too often at Southwestern College a cancelled season precedes a cancelled program. Golf, wrestling, men's tennis and men's



Photo By Yanelli Z. Robles / Staff

WINLESS WINNERS, CHERISHED CHAMPIONS—Iliana Villegas looks to whip a bounce pass to Gialli Francisco during the women's basketball home finale. A packed house showed its respect for the women's soccer players who bailed out the basketball program. The Lady Jaguars were 0-12 but will be celebrated as one of Southwestern's greatest teams ever.

volleyball are already consigned to the sports graveyard. Women's basketball seemed to be in hospice.

In dribbled the soccer team to the rescue, swapping cleats for sneakers and fancy footwork for dexterous handiwork.

Well, sort of ...

The Lady Jaguars tossed more bricks than Local 4 of the Bricklayers and Craftworkers Union laboring on the Chula Vista bayfront project. At halftime they literally had more fouls (five) than baskets. Set shots looked like shot puts, many did not even draw net.

None of that mattered to the SRO crowd on the south bank of Southwestern's cavernous gym. A moral victory was already in hand and the game itself was a raucous lovefest.

Unlike a typical high stakes season finale, the Lady Jags were crowned as champions at halftime with real crowns.

And sashes.

And roses.

Giddy players looked like a row of shoestring homecoming queens replete with shimmering tiaras framing their sweaty foreheads.

College president Dr. Mark Sanchez stood at center court to praise the team for "its outstanding courage."

"These ladies saved our basketball season," he said. "Thank you for what you did. You are all champions."

Then, to the fans' delight, an exciting second half of basketball. The Jaguars started to chip away at Mira Costa's 48-10 lead.

Alyssa Pulido drained a 3-pointer, which rattled the rim and bleachers, if not their Mira Costa opponents. Gialli Francisco, a first team All-PCAC striker in soccer, struck again with another trey. She skipped back to play defense like a giddy third grader.

Southwestern's 6-0 run against the dazed Spartans in barely a minute was more points than their other entire game against Mira Costa.

"They're gonna shoot their way back into the game!" shouted an exuberant fan as he leapt to his feet.

Though that was hyperbole born of a burst of unbridled enthusiasm, the thought crept in that with practice this athletic, nimble team of elite soccer players might actually be able to master the hardwood. Southwestern's players were faster and better conditioned than the Mira Costans, and several times dribbled past the taller, more experienced Spartans. Jag players, with Messi-esque bursts of speed, consistently worked their way into open shots – but consistently put up wounded ducks that seldom were in any danger of actually going in the basket.

Never was heard a discouraging word. Whether it was the swish of the net or the silent flight of a ball falling three feet short, the women hustled back with smiles on their faces and pep in their step. Captain Francisco would have it no other way.

Fans generated a pair of organic goals for the team that spread through the stands like a fire in a dry palm tree. Score 20 points and hold Mira Costa to less than 100.

Modest, perhaps, but consider previous games:

Palomar 110 – Southwestern 0

Grossmont 119 – South-



“These ladies saved our basketball season. Thank you for what you did. You are all champions.”

DR. MARK SANCHEZ
SC President

Photo By Camila A. Gonzalez / Staff

VERTICALLY CHALLENGED—Lady Jaguars guard Iliana Villegas, at 5' 8", was one of the tallest on her team, but "petite" compared to towering Mira Costa players who had the rebounding advantage.



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films



Photo By Yanelli Z. Robles / Staff



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films



Photo By Yanelli Z. Robles / Staff

FORTY MINUTES OF HUSTLE—Regardless of what happened on the court, the Lady Jags were a blur of hustle and constantly smiling. (center photo) Isis Garcia (30) celebrates a 3-point shot by Gialli Francisco (10). The All-Conference captain of the women's soccer team, Francisco recruited 12 of her soccer teammates to join her in saving the basketball season.



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films



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Photo By Yanelli Z. Robles / Staff



Photo Courtesy of Zuzuroki Films

A PERFECT 0-12 SEASON—Southwestern's soccer players are champions on the pitch and heroines on the hardwood. Their selfless decision to save the basketball season and keep the program alive has made them rock stars in the San Diego County news media and role models for young women in the South Bay.

western 8
San Diego City 125 – Southwestern 12
and, in their previous matchup,
Mira Costa 112 – Southwestern 4

The Lady Jags cooled off in the garish light of reality, but the passionate crowd roared like a jumbo jet rumbling down the runway. Point number 17 came with 5:37 left in the fourth quarter. A free throw with 4:05 on the clock ran the tally to 18.

“Twenty! Twenty! Twenty!” chanted the crowd as it stomped like an off-tempo rendition of “We Will Rock You,” minus Freddie Mercury.

At 2:15 nirvana.

Guard Rylie Ewert rattled in a 3-pointer as the fans leapt to their feet as one. Strangers hugged and Johnny Jaguar hopped around like an onyx cat on a hot tin roof. 21 points! A barrier breached!

With just 35 seconds remaining Isis Garcia launched a line drive from the arc that skimmed the rim and dropped through for three more to run the score to 99-24. Garcia spun like a top with both fists punching the frenzied air of the arena. She and the other four on the floor raced back for defense and set up a petite picket fence around the Mira Costa arc in an effort to keep the score under 100.

The Spartans never got off a shot. Mira Costa won by 75 points, but it felt like Southwestern College had just won the NCAA basketball tournament or the soccer World Cup. Parents, boyfriends and little sisters rushed onto the court to embrace their glistening loved ones. *Abuelos, tios y profe's* held up posters with players' names and photos.

Basketball coach Janet Eleazar was busy doing a TV interview, but soccer coach Carolina Soto stood on the court near the bleachers with a Cheshire grin.

“After the soccer season the players wanted to stay together,” she said. “Gialli, the captain, approached the basketball coach about using soccer players. The next thing they knew, 12 players had signed up.”

Soto gazed across the polylingual chaos of the basketball court.

“They look like they just won the conference!” she said. “They look so happy.”

Winning is something Soto and her players know how to do on the pitch. Southwestern College won the 2022 Pacific Coast Athletic Conference Championship and narrowly missed repeating in 2023.

“I think we can win conference in '24,” she said, then a pause. “In soccer, at least. Not sure about basketball!”

Half an hour after the final buzzer few had left the joyous gym. President Sanchez did a TV interview as Steven Sanchez sang “I found love.”

Until the end of time the record books will show the 2023-24 Southwestern College Lady Jaguars basketball going 0-12, dead last in the PCAC. That is what it is.

Until the last granddaughter of the last surviving player disappears from this world, the memory of the selfless souls who took beating after beating to save the program will inspire young women and warm hearts. Basketball is ephemeral, heroes are eternal.