

THE TABLET

SPORTS

Cristo Rey Brooklyn Soccer Wins School's 1st City Title

November 27, 2019

By Jim Mancari



The 2019 CHSAA 'B' boys' varsity soccer champion Cristo Rey Brooklyn H.S. Panthers (Photo courtesy Cristo Rey Brooklyn H.S.)

FLATBUSH — Seven years ago, the Cristo Rey Brooklyn H.S., Flatbush, co-ed soccer team played its games on a roof.

In fact, the only thing preventing the ball from descending down to street level was a mesh net around the roof's perimeter.

The newly formed Panthers squad was playing in a 7-on-7 charter school league, because the school was not yet able to field both boys' and girls' teams to play in the CHSAA.

Well, for Cristo Rey Brooklyn, times have certainly changed.

On Nov. 9, at Fordham University, the Panthers boys' varsity soccer team won the CHSAA 'B' city championship with a 2-1 victory over a talented squad from Moore Catholic H.S., Staten Island. The victory marked the first sports city championship in Cristo Rey Brooklyn's nearly 11-year history.

"We had a very solid group of kids," said Matt Kenny, the team's head coach and the school's athletic director. "They worked hard, stayed humble, and they were committed. I am very proud of them, and their parents are very proud of them."

Kenny vividly remembers those early days of the program up on the roof. Each year, the team continued to improve to the point where he had a good feeling going into this season. The 24-man roster had lots of potential, he said, and right from the start, they proved to be a special group.

"This team was hungry," said junior center midfielder Marchel Saint-Juste. "Ever since preseason, we were fighting. Everybody was serious. Up until the end, everyone was fighting. We played with passion. We kept fighting and never gave up."

Typically, championship teams experience some sort of defining moment throughout the regular season that proves to the players that they have what it takes to make a deep postseason run. For Cristo Rey

Brooklyn, that defining moment was actually a series of defining moments within the first few games of the season. After a Tuesday home victory over LaSalle Academy, Manhattan, the Panthers had back-to-back tough road games scheduled for the Thursday and Friday of that week. On the Thursday, the team battled to a 4-3 win over Moore Catholic.

Down 2-0 at halftime in the Friday game at Sacred Heart H.S., Yonkers, N.Y., the Panthers rallied to score three goals in the second half to steal the victory — an incredibly rare feat in soccer. They rose to the challenge and carried that momentum throughout the rest of the season.

An 8-3-2 regular season record earned Cristo Rey Brooklyn the No. 2 seed in the Class 'B' South Division behind Cathedral Prep and Seminary, Elmhurst, heading into the playoffs. The team defeated All Hallows H.S., the Bronx, 3-0 in the quarterfinals to set up a rematch with Sacred Heart in the semis.

After an exciting back-and-forth contest, the Panthers emerged with a 2-1 win to clinch a spot in the finals, where they beat Moore Catholic and made school history.

“It’s an amazing honor,” said Jesus Cano, a junior center midfielder. “I came to this school freshman year and we had a lot of talent, but I never thought we’d be able to make it as far as we did. I thought maybe senior year we’d be able to get close.

“It’s an honor to be a part of the team that won, and I’m proud that I did it with this group of students in the school.”

Now that they have tasted the feeling of being city champions, the journey continues as the Panthers look to defend its historic title next year.

It’s surely safe to say that Cristo Rey Brooklyn has gone through the “roof” on this seven-year path to greatness.

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