



Girls soccer coach of the year: Crean Lutheran's Stephen Jennings

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Stephen Jennings' first season at Crean Lutheran didn't get off to the smoothest start.

Jennings was the third coach for the Saints' senior class, and the team opened the season by losing its first three games and compiling a 3-5 record in its nonleague games.

"It took a while for them to buy into me," Jennings said. "I'll be honest, walking through the halls in the beginning they wouldn't even say hi to me because they were so nervous."

Once Crean Lutheran hit league play, Jennings' work to bring the group together paid off.

The Saints went undefeated in the Academy League, won the program's first playoff game, advanced to the CIF-SS title game for the first time and earned their first CIF Southern California Regional berth.

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 - [All-County girls soccer: First team](#)
 - [Girls soccer coach of the year: Crean Lutheran's Stephen Jennings](#)
 - [All-County girls soccer: Second and Third teams](#)
- [All-CIF girls soccer teams](#)

For galvanizing the team and leading the Saints to new heights, Jennings has been selected as the Register's Orange County girls soccer coach of the year.

"I want to thank the Crean administration," Jennings said. "Coming here, they really have supported me 100 percent. When I feel I get that support, you really feel like you can do more. That's definitely given me the groundwork to (build the program)."

When Jennings arrived at Crean Lutheran, he had to go about setting a new standard for the program and getting the entire group on the same page.

"I wanted to bring consistency," Jennings said. "I wanted to bring a level of commitment first. They needed to consider this as something they're going to invest their time in and have confidence and pride in. I wanted to create a culture that was conducive to that."

Jennings was on campus every day and setting up his training sessions in the morning. He got the group together by organizing weight room sessions and having every player wear the same training clothes.

The second thing on Jennings' list was to get Michigan-bound goalkeeper **Hillary Beall** back onto the Crean Lutheran team. Beall came to Crean as a sophomore but sat out her junior season because of the travel and

time commitments for the United States U-19 team.

“When I came to school and saw and heard that this girl was here, “ Jennings said, “my first thought was, ‘OK, there’s no way a girl this good is not going to be playing for me.’ (Over the season) to see a change in her go from not really caring too much about playing for her high school to being, literally, the most committed and dedicated person in our program (was awesome).”

With the group set, Beall in tow and a hard preseason out of the way, it was the Academy League that turned things on for the Saints.

Crean Lutheran opened with a 2-1 win at Sage Hill, a team the seniors had never beaten. The next week, Beall posted an 18-save performance as Crean battled to a scoreless draw against St. Margaret’s.

“That was huge for the confidence in the seniors especially,” Jennings said. “That was kind of the turning point for me.”

The Saints went undefeated (10-0-2) in league and kept that momentum through their first playoff game, a scoreless penalty-kick victory over Hillcrest of Riverside. In that game, Beall made two shootout saves and scored the winner.

“The level of commitment in practice and focus was different,” Jennings said. “I noticed a change for sure after that first round. I noticed a change in the seniors. I noticed that they realized they wanted it.”

Crean lost to Viewpoint of Calabasas, 2-0, in the CIF-SS Division 5 title game and lost its regional opener, but the base was planted to make the Saints a longtime contender.

“I tell these girls all the time, success is great and winning is great, but there’s got to be something more to your program,” Jennings said. “If winning’s your only goal, where do you go once you win?”

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