

1990 finals was no cakewalk

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The most dominant season in Canton Invaders history didn't end in decisive fashion. A golden goal was needed for them to strike gold in the 1990 American Indoor Soccer Association championship series.

Rudy Pikuzinski's goal at 4:42 in overtime of Game 4 lifted Canton to a 13-11 victory over the Dayton Dynamo and a 3-1 win in the best-of-five series. It was appropriate the goal that won the Invaders' fifth and final title came off the foot of their three-time league MVP in his final game with the team.

"For me, when someone retires or changes (teams) like this, it's the best way to go out," said Joe Pavlek, who won his third championship with the Invaders that season. "You finish, you're done, and it's over."

As explosive as the Invaders were in winning 36 of 40 regular season games, they were challenged by the underdog Dynamo in the finals.

Dayton evened the series with an 8-7 win in Game 2 at home. Former Invader Fahmi El-Shami scored the winning goal on a shootout with 52 seconds left after Canton's Oscar Pisano was whistled for a tripping penalty.

The tripping call was one of 10 penalties whistled against the Invaders. Pisano and forward Steve Frick were ejected. Tempers remained heated afterward.

"Arena personnel had to restrain several Canton players from referees Terry Campbell and Steve Olsen," former Canton Repository sports writer Bob Young wrote.

The ejections of Pisano and Frick did not have long-term consequences. The AISA waived mandatory one-game suspensions for player ejections before the playoffs started.

Still, it was a brand new series. Dayton was the underdog playing with house money. Canton was the heavy favorite aiming of a three-peat.

With everything to lose, the Invaders could not let the Game 2 loss affect their psyche.

"I felt really bad on the bus ride home," Pikuzinski said. "I was one, maybe two yards in front of the goal. I got a ball, and it would be harder to miss it than it would be to make it. It went over the crossbar out of bounds.

"I had to buckle down for the next game. I let my teammates on the bus know that I let them down and was sorry."

Any thought that the loss in Dayton would derail Canton's title hopes quickly disappeared in Game 3 at Memorial Civic Center.

The Invaders set an AISA playoff record for three fastest goals over a 1:15 span in the first quarter. Gino DiFlorio scored twice. Pikuzinski tallied the other goal.

Canton stretched the lead to 8-0 at the 3:43 mark and was never threatened. Randy Pikuzinski scored a 3-point goal and had a team-high five points to lead the Invaders to a 21-8 win over the Dynamo and a 2-1 lead in the series. DiFlorio, Frick, Rudy Pikuzinski and Marcelo Carrera each added four points.

Game 4 at the Civic Center the next night was a different story. The Invaders and Dynamo went into overtime tied at 11-11. Just under five minutes into the extra period, Rudy Pikuzinski scored off a Mike DiNunzio assist to clinch Canton's most memorable championship.

"I remember that (Steve Frick) got the ball, and he slid it across the halfway line to the Dayton side of the bench," Pikuzinski said. "Mike sent it in the corner. It came off the top glass, I hit it in midair, it went in the net and out like a flash and the game was over. I'll never forget that. My son calls it the golden goal."

Pikuzinski won his fourth title with the Invaders. He went on to play with the Cleveland Crunch in the Major Indoor Soccer League the following season.

"That goal gave me the hat trick for the game, but I'd rather pass the ball than score the goal," Pikuzinski said. "That's what was great about all the guys. They knew they had a role. Some guys who barely played, I would tell them, 'You're as big a part of the team as me. The way you battle at practice, you make us not want to lose. You play hard, we're going to try to play even harder."

"That's what made us successful."

The Invaders' historic season felt complete. No team in league history matched their 36-win total. Their five championships also stood as a record until the league disbanded in 2001.

"The feeling was great," former Invaders midfielder Marcelo Carrera said. "We wanted to make a statement that we were one of the best teams ever to play the indoor game."

After the Invaders dominated the regular season and overcame challenges in the finals, few people would argue against it.

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