

# Brkich comes up big

By JASON PETERS

Free Press staff writer

Shoot low and to the corners. For Boston Pizza United, that was supposed to be the secret to scoring on Ivan Brkich.

Somebody must have let the PG Croatia keeper in on the low down strategy.

Brkich, all 6'7" of him, was the biggest reason Croatia downed Boston Pizza 1-0 Saturday afternoon to win the playoff title in Division One of the North Cariboo Senior Soccer League. With his team up by that score and five minutes to play, Brkich flat-out robbed Boston's Martin Power by going flat out. Power struck a rocket out of traffic that was destined for -- you guessed it -- the bottom right corner of the net. Brkich, however, dove for the ball, hands outstretched, and tipped it harmlessly wide. When that effort went for naught, so did Boston Pizza's best chance to send the game into extra time.

"It (the ball) was lost somewhere around the 18 (yard line) and he gave it a quick shot," says Brkich, describing the play. "It was just a reaction save."

Power, meanwhile, knew exactly how close he came to deadlocking the game with his perfectly-placed blast. "That one was a heart-breaker," he says. "He's got that tremendous reach. We were supposed to hit it hard and low to the corners and I thought that one was going there."



**P.G. Croatia goalscorer Jon Lafontaine was thwarted on this attempt by Boston Pizza keeper Dave Andrew.**

JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

For Croatia, which got its lone goal in the 72nd minute when Jon Lafontaine converted a short pass in front from Tien Mueller, the playoff championship capped off a near-perfect season. Croatia also won the regular season crown with a 14-2-2 record and earned the Rec Cup title by defeating Honda/Citizen 3-1. Nick Vukovic, Croatia coach, says his team has been "winners all the way" and also found himself marveling at Brkich's game-saving stop in the playoff clincher.

"Nobody can believe he can make save like that," Vukovic says. "Look at how quickly he dove on that ball to make that save. He's 6'7" so that's something else."

Early in the game, Brkich had also denied Boston Pizza's Daryl McEwen on a penalty kick. For Boston Pizza, meanwhile, the loss was disappointing especially considering it had controlled much of the first half of play. Boston, which finished second in the regular season with a 7-6-5 record, gave Croatia all it could handle in what was a physical and hotly contested game.

"I thought we outplayed them for the majority," says Boston Pizza coach Daren Sears. "It was just an unfortunate incident when they scored and we were unlucky not to get the equalizer. He (Brkich) made a great save on the penalty. He was fortunate to go the right way and of course he made a great stop late in the game too."

For Croatia, the playoff championship was its second-straight in the NCSL.

• In the Division Two final, Steamers downed DB Law 1-0 Saturday afternoon on the strength of Mark MacKenzie's marker 15 minutes into the first half. The big forward took a perfect cross from Tony Stancatti and managed to nudge it behind DB Law keeper Paul Sievwright.

"I put my foot on it and the goalie was right there but it had enough to get through him," he says.

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