

University of Tampa and Embry-Riddle Face Off in Crucial Sunshine State Conference Women's Soccer Showdown.

By Anthony Piacenti Oct 9, 2023



Members of the UT Women's soccer team prepare for their game against Embry Riddle.

TAMPA, FL. – As fall sets in and the temperatures (hopefully) cool down, Florida's college campuses are abuzz with the unmistakable excitement that comes with the college soccer season. In a state known for its pristine beaches, thrilling theme parks, and swaying palm trees, the soccer fields are set to possibly be some of the hottest attractions this season. As the path is now set to the NCAA Division 2 National Championship in East Ridge, TN the schools in the Sunshine State hope to be on that journey north come December.

Two teams that hope to be on that bus north clashed this past weekend in what was set to be a crucial game for both programs seasons. The excitement was palpable as the University of Tampa's women's soccer team faced off against the Eagles of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Both programs came into this game with high expectations for very different reasons. The Spartans, known for their strong defense and tactical prowess, were looking to assert their dominance on their home turf. The Eagles, on the other hand, were determined to prove their mettle and secure a signature victory on the road.

By the Numbers

On the scorecard, Embry-Riddle approached this game with a scorching reputation. They proudly held the #5 national ranking, all thanks to their high-scoring offense, which had netted a remarkable 15 goals in their previous five matches. Riding on their relentless offensive prowess,

the Eagles had amassed a 6-0-3 overall record, including a stellar 3-0-1 record in the conference, securing a solid second place in the SSC standings. With their eyes set on the last few games of the season, they aimed to maintain their impressive goal-scoring momentum when facing the Spartans.

On the flip side, the Spartans have faced challenges in finding their offensive groove as of late. Following an impressive non-conference showing earlier this season, where they flaunted a flawless 4-0 record, amassing nine goals and securing four consecutive shutouts against their non-conference opponents, their performance took a downturn as conference play commenced. In their recent four conference encounters, they've faced difficulties in scoring goals, managing just one goal. This has led to a rather lackluster 0-1-3 record in conference play, placing them in ninth in the SSC standings. Nevertheless, the Spartans' defense remains a formidable force, conceding only a remarkable single goal in their eight games played this season. "...Anyone can win on any given day..." said Hailey McMahon, a junior midfielder for the Spartans. The Spartans' defensive unit aims to continue its dominance against the Eagles while also harboring the expectation that their offense will rediscover its knack for finding the back of the net.

First Half:

As the sun dipped below the cloud-covered sky and the floodlights illuminated the field, the anticipation for the game soared to new heights. Both teams fully grasped the significance of this crucial matchup, and their meticulous preparations were about to be put to the test under the stadium lights.

The Eagles exuded confidence as they stepped onto the field for their warm-ups. On the other side, the Spartans, donning pink jerseys in support of breast cancer awareness, had tweaked their warm-up routine to counter the potent offensive threat posed by the Eagles.

The referee's whistle blew as the Spartans got us underway. True to expectations, the Eagles came out firing, peppering the goal with shots in the first 15 minutes, keeping Spartans' goalkeeper Aidan Smith on her toes.

In the 17th minute, the deadlock was finally shattered when #8 Grace Foyer's shot found the inside of the post, despite Smith's valiant effort to keep it out. However, the Spartans responded swiftly, equalizing in the 18th minute. #15 Brooke Steigerwalt embarked on an impressive run and smashed the ball past the keeper from outside the goal box.

The Spartans injected an impressive dose of energy into the game, consistently keeping the Eagles "on the ropes" for much of the first half. Nonetheless, the Eagles' offense seemed undeterred by the Spartan vigor, maintaining control of the ball in Tampa's territory for a significant portion of the opening 45 minutes.

This ball control paid dividends for the Eagles as they broke the tie in the 34th minute. Some defensive miscommunication in the Spartan box while defending a corner kick allowed the ball to drop dangerously, ultimately leading to a poke-in goal by Eagles player #13 Sheahan.

The Eagles continued to assert their dominance on the field for the remainder of the half. As the first 45 minutes drew to a close, the referee's whistle sounded with the score at 2-1 in favor of the Eagles.

Second Half

The commencement of the second half saw both teams adopt a somewhat more measured approach compared to their initial intensity. The Eagles took the kick-off for the second half, seeking to pick up where they had left off. However, this time, the Spartans appeared better prepared to counter the Eagles' offensive onslaught. They managed to thwart the deep ball runs and crosses that had troubled them in the first half.

The Eagles, on the other hand, seemed fatigued, making numerous substitutions throughout the entire half in an attempt to match the Spartans' relentless counterattacks. Spartans' coach Erin Switalski commented, "We've had a week off... I think the stamina of our kids and the fitness level of our kids is good," and it certainly showed on the field. While the Spartans found themselves chasing the ball more than they'd have liked, they managed to withstand the constant pressure.

In the 61st minute, the Eagles extended their lead after #10 Berglind Thrastardottir created some space and fired a shot from the top of the box. However, this setback did not deter the Spartans, who quickly retaliated by slicing the lead in half. In the 64th minute, #3 Grace Fowler unleashed a sensational 25-yard strike, eluding two Embry-Riddle defenders after a scramble for the ball. The shot took a deflection off an Eagle defender, slipping past the keeper and reigniting their hopes.

Following Fowler's goal, momentum swiftly shifted in favor of the Spartans. They moved the ball effectively, forcing the Eagles to play catch-up for the first time in the game. Despite a late surge by the Spartans, it wasn't quite enough to secure a late equalizer. As the referee blew the full-time whistle, the scoreboard read 3-2 in favor of Embry-Riddle.

Post-Game

Coach Erin Switalski gathered all the players into a post-game huddle, and a mix of emotions was evident on their faces—some long faces, some flat. "We left a win on the table..." Switalski remarked, and the team collectively nodded in agreement. "...you have to earn the right to play them again," she added, referring to the possibility of meeting the Eagles once more in the conference playoffs early next month.

All in all, both teams displayed remarkable performance on the field, showcasing their skills at the collegiate level. The Eagles' offense maintained its formidable form, illustrating why they are a daunting challenge for any defense. Despite conceding goals, the Spartans' defense proved its mettle against one of the nation's top teams.

What's Next?

The Eagles still have six games left on their schedule, with five of them being interconference matchups. Their victory against Tampa solidified their grip on the second position in the standings.

Next up, they'll hit the road to face Nova Southeastern on Saturday in a showdown for the top spot in the SSC.

On the other hand, Tampa has seven games remaining, with five of them being crucial conference clashes. Despite their loss to the Eagles, they currently hold the ninth spot in the rankings. Their upcoming match takes them to West Palm Beach on Wednesday, where they'll face Palm Beach Atlantic, a team currently residing at the bottom of the standings and yet to secure a conference win. It's a game that Tampa expects to win, and if they aspire to make it to the conference playoffs in November, winning their remaining conference matches is imperative to contend for one of the six spots in the SSC playoffs.

As the season unfolds, only time will reveal the fate of the Lady Spartans. One thing, however, remains certain: if they can maintain the level of play they exhibited against Embry-Riddle, they have a strong chance of clinching a playoff berth and potentially earning a bid in the NCAA tournament.