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FEATURED

NAU advances to Big Sky Conference Championship, stomp out Montana's season

Nathan Ecker

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NAU soccer **defeated** the University of Montana in a semifinal matchup on Friday, 1-0, to **advance** to the Big Sky Conference Championship for the second year in a row.

Senior forward Allison Veloz knocked in the game's **lone goal** in the 21st minute. A short pass in the box from senior midfielder Maddie Shafer drew Veloz toward goal, putting her in position to slide under the Grizzlies' goalkeeper and tap the ball into the back of the net. Her leg acted as a billiards cue, striking the ball at the right angle to push it past the falling keeper.

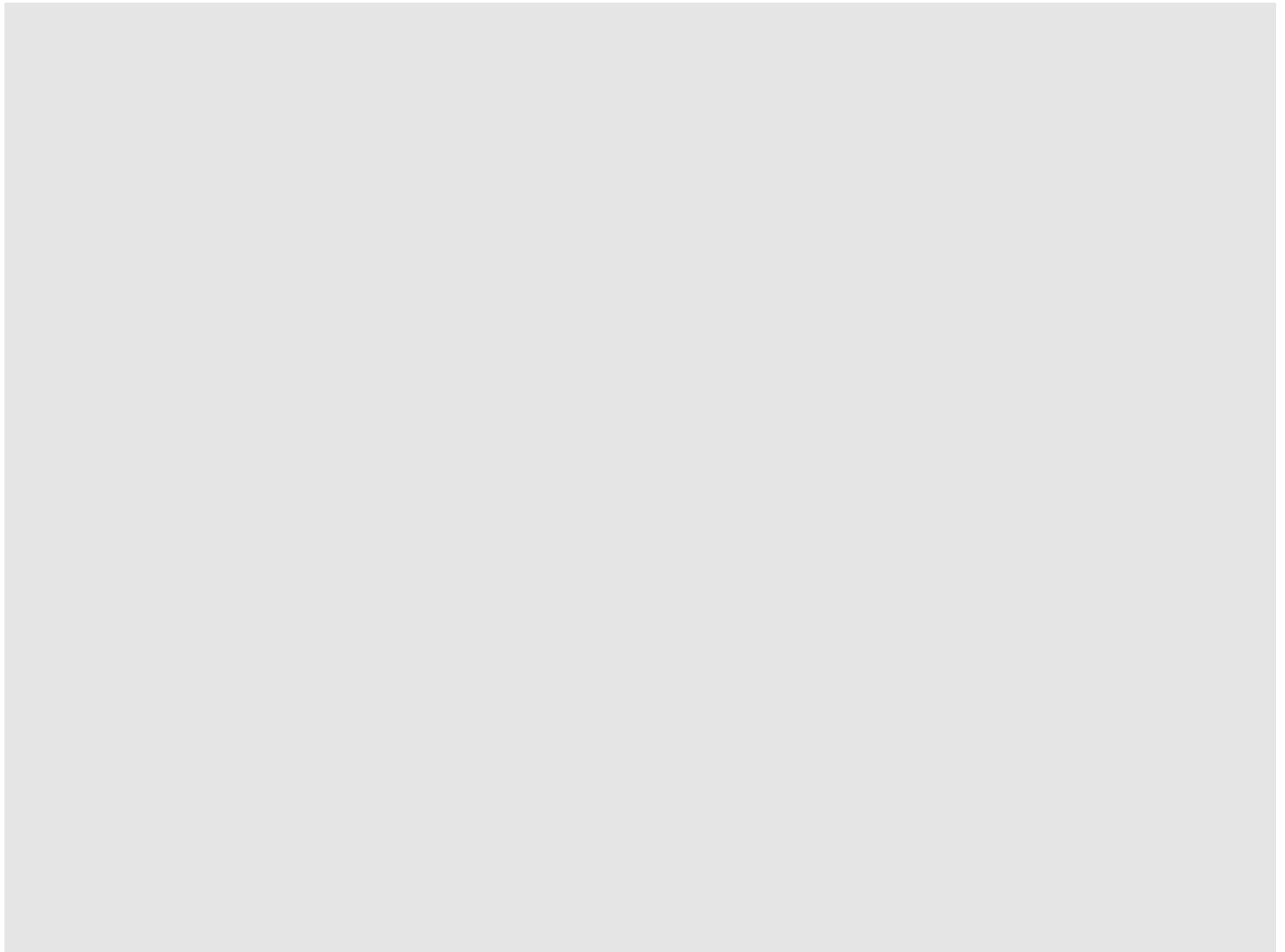
The Lumberjacks entered the game with a vengeance after **falling 2-1** to the Grizzlies at home on Oct. 12. Confidence was high after defeating Sacramento State University — another team NAU had lost to during the regular season — and they found themselves in a matchup they were looking forward to.

“We came in excited to get this game back,” Veloz said. “We were actually really happy that we could play Montana again, and the fact that we were so confident and ready to go made all the difference.”

Redemption was the name of the game as the Lumberjacks came out aggressive on both sides of the ball.

They challenged Montana in the box, keeping the Grizzlies away from threatening opportunities until halfway through the first half. Montana forwards were falling like dominoes in attempts to get a shot past junior goalkeeper Trinity Corcoran, but clean tackles ensured no momentum would be going Montana's way.

NAU wasted no time pushing the ball upfield with aggressive runs at goal. The quick-footed Lumberjacks had two potential opportunities in the first five minutes of play. Ultimately, however, they could not break through.



Junior midfielder Joey Lujan (8) drives the ball down Max Spilsbury Field as she tries to keep it away from Montana's midfielder during their Big Sky Conference game, Nov. 3.

Invasive play around the ball continued through the first half until Veloz notched her goal in the 21st minute.

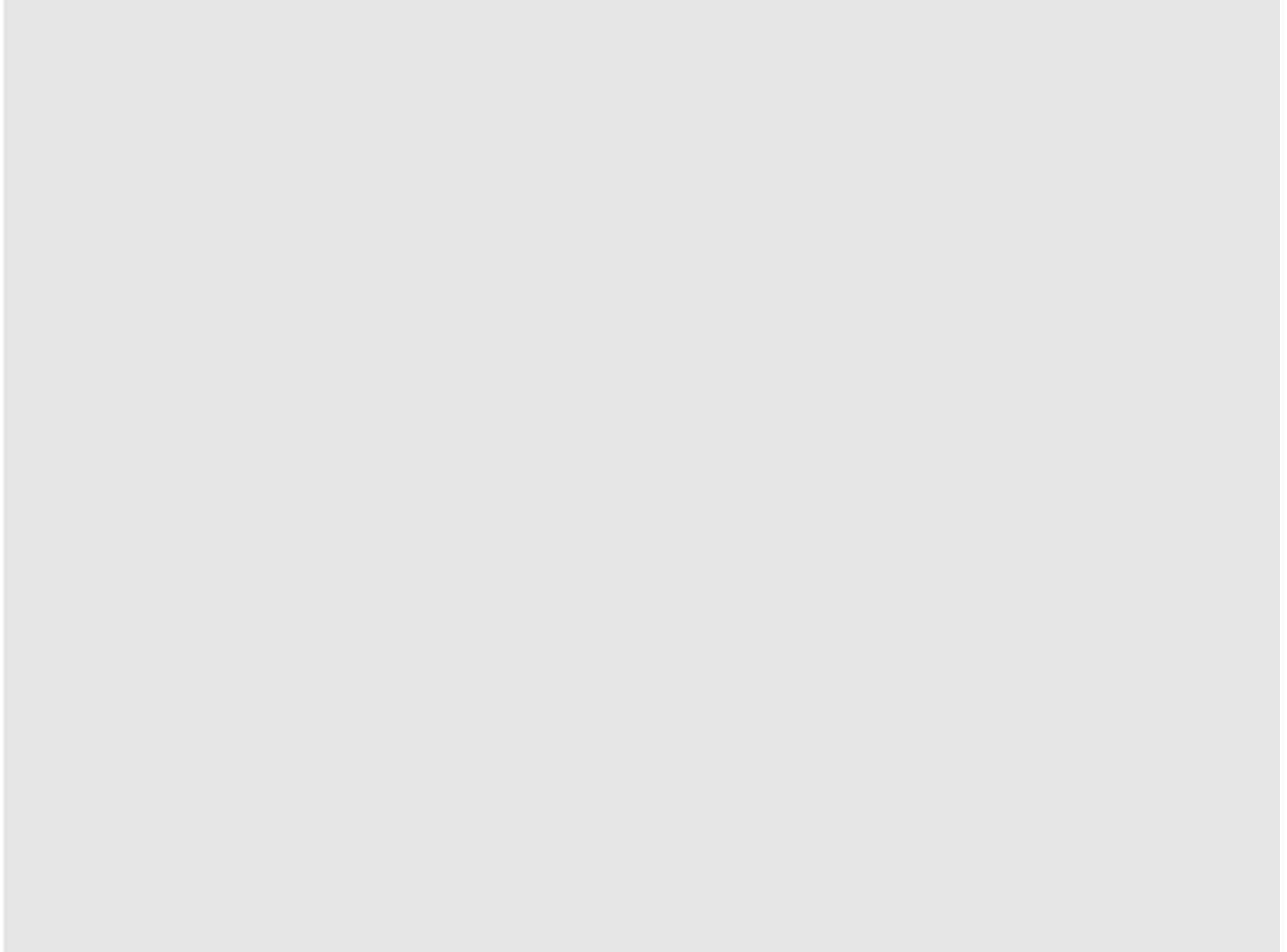
Montana seemed intent on evening the score; however, they were met with stout defense from the Lumberjacks' back line. The Grizzlies attempted 25 shots, compared to NAU's 10, though only 12 made their way toward Corcoran. The others were either off-kilter or met by the feet of Lumberjack defenders, who continuously pushed the ball back into midfield.

Corcoran recorded a season-high 11 saves, one of which required a full-extension dive toward the right post to keep Montana scoreless at the beginning of the second half.

NAU kept a high-energy approach throughout the match, keeping Montana forwards in front of the defense and attacking the ball with ferocity. It was an approach that echoed the position the Lumberjacks were in as the lower seed on home turf.

Not often is a team asked to sit on the opposite bench and play as the road team in their stadium, but it provided the team with extra motivation.

“That does kind of rub us the wrong way,” Veloz said. “Since we are the lower seed, let’s fight and show people we deserve to be at the top.”



Senior forward Allison Veloz (18) defends the ball from Montana’s defender on Max Spilsbury Field during their Big Sky Conference game, Nov. 3.

Now, the Lumberjacks are on the verge of winning their second consecutive Big Sky Conference title — a feat done once in school history by the **2008 and 2009 teams**. What stands in NAU’s way is the No. 2-seeded University of Idaho Vandals, a team that beat the Lumberjacks 1-0 in the **last game** of the season on Oct. 22.

The Lumberjacks also seek to win their first conference championship in Flagstaff. They played host in 2010 but lost to Sacramento State **1-0** in the title game.

The Big Sky Conference Championship game will kick off at 1 p.m. on Sunday at Lumberjack Stadium.

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