



The Best Thing I Saw at State: The Loneliest 24 Feet in Sports

Pope John Paul II Goalkeeper Lillian Juneau makes the game winning save in sudden death PKs to win State Championship

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



Hammond, LA — Inside Strawberry Stadium, with a championship hanging in the balance and an entire season reduced to a single kick, Pope John Paul II goalkeeper Lillian Juneau stood alone in the loneliest 24 feet in sports, a 24-foot line stretched between two posts and beneath a crossbar.



With the fate of Pope John Paul's season in her hands, Juneau came up clutch when it mattered most, using those same hands to secure the game-winning save that sent the Jaguars into celebration and delivered the Division IV LHSAA Girls Soccer State Championship on Wednesday night.

But nothing about this championship came easily.



The Division IV title stretched beyond regulation. Beyond overtime. Beyond the first five rounds of penalty kicks. What began as a match became an emotional test of endurance, the kind that mirrors an entire season.

Newman forced overtime with a stoppage-time goal that silenced one sideline and ignited the other. Momentum flipped in an instant. Overtime passed without resolution. The initial five rounds of penalties solved nothing. Each attempt tightened the pressure. Each strike carried the weight of months of preparation.

State championships are rarely decided by sudden-death penalty kicks. Seasons are not typically distilled to a single guess, a single reaction, a single dive.

But this one was.

Before my time working beyond the game, I spent ten years playing soccer in Louisiana as a goalkeeper. The pressure Juneau experienced is something I understand intimately.

Growing up in that position, you learn quickly that people remember one thing about a soccer match: the goals. Your job is to prevent them. It is a responsibility that carries isolation. When a striker misses, they get another chance. When a defender slips, there is help behind them. When a goalkeeper guesses wrong, it is final.



In a shootout, goalkeepers are expected to fail. The shooter stands twelve yards away with a wide net in front of them. The advantage is mathematical. Success is often described as guessing correctly. Failure is assumed.

And yet, they stand there anyway.

Juneau did so while playing through pain. The match had taken a physical toll. Diving saves earlier in the game left her sore. Her legs were heavy from repeated extensions. Every push-off sent a reminder through her body. In moments like that, there is only one choice, fight through the pain and find a way.

Still, the responsibility did not shift.

The Jaguars' season had been a rollercoaster long before that final kick. Their head coach had given birth just days earlier, balancing new motherhood with the pursuit of a championship. The emotional weight of loss lingered as well, with the passing of her father, a legendary soccer coach whose impact on the sport shaped countless lives. Championship week carried layers of meaning that extended far beyond tactics.

This team had navigated joy, grief, exhaustion, and expectation. The final reflected it perfectly.

When the decisive kick in sudden death left the shooter's foot, Strawberry Stadium fell silent. Pope John Paul II had converted its attempt moments earlier, meaning a save would end it.

Juneau dove right, hands reaching, body fully extended in complete commitment. In that instant, there was only instinct meeting preparation.

The ball met her hands.

And just like that, the season was secured.

The countless hours in training, diving, getting up, and doing it again, all of it led to that moment. Goalkeeper training is relentless and often thankless. But on Wednesday night, Lillian Juneau saw exactly how that work pays off.

The Jaguars erupted from midfield. Teammates flooded the penalty area. The loneliness of the position dissolved into collective joy. The same 24 feet that moments earlier felt isolating became the center of a celebration that will be remembered for years.

Juneau was later named the match's Most Outstanding Player. The award recognized her performance. The trophy validated the journey.

But the best thing I saw at state was not the hardware.

It was the understanding of what it means to play the loneliest position on the field and embrace it anyway. To accept that you may be blamed more than celebrated. To prepare for mind games, to stare down pressure, to train yourself to react when the odds suggest you should not succeed.



To stand separated from the action for most of the night, only to have everything depend on you in the final seconds, and to welcome that responsibility.

High school sports are different. The emotions are raw. The friendships are genuine. The passion is pure. Moments that feel impossible become unforgettable. There is nothing quite like it.

This story was different for me because I could relate. I never reached that stage or that moment, but I understood the weight Juneau carried between those posts. I could feel what she was experiencing, and that connection made it special.

That is what made Lillian Juneau's championship-winning save The Best Thing I Saw at State.

In the loneliest 24 feet in sports, one save held it all.



Author's Note: In my role as the Director of Communications, I have the unique privilege of attending nearly all sanctioned LHSAA State Championship events. Although the schedule is demanding, I have the privilege of seeing student-athletes from all walks of life, united by two things: their participation in Louisiana high school sports and their pursuit of a state championship. In my first year in this role, I've gained a deeper appreciation for high school athletics and for all the dedication that goes into making each season and event possible. Although my current role involves less writing than my previous positions, it has given me the opportunity to return to something I've always loved. While much of my work now focuses on press releases and public statements, I also have the chance to reconnect with my passion for feature writing, this time highlighting what I consider the purest form of sport: high school athletics. The goal is to highlight the best thing I saw at each state championship and share the unknown stories behind these events, capturing memorable moments for student-athletes, coaches, administrators, officials, and fans.