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Salt Ratz end their roller-coaster year with title

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DRAPER — It would be a massive understatement to say that the Utah Salt Ratz's season has been a roller-roaster ride. The team's second year in the Men's Premier Soccer League was filled with lots of drama, both on and off the field. So it should come as a surprise to no one that Utah's championship rematch with Arizona was also filled with twists, turns and a whole lot of the same theater that typified its season.

In the end, Utah managed to erase a one-goal deficit twice en route to a 4-2 win over Arizona Saturday in the MPSL Championship match. Playing in front of a season-high crowd at the Juan Diego soccer field, Kyle Christensen scored twice to pace the Salt Ratz. The victory avenged Utah's 2-1 overtime loss to the Sahuaros in last year's title match.

"You can't explain how it feels to have a team come together," Utah coach Mike Hickman Sr. said. "This is a phenomenal feeling."

The Salt Ratz fell behind 1-0 after just five minutes of play. After Utah goalkeeper Larkin Noble hauled down Luiz Araujo inside the 18-yard box, Arizona's Manoel Coelho converted from the penalty spot to give the Sahuaros an initial 1-0 lead.

Led by Christensen, Utah created several good scoring chances in the first half. In the 33rd minute, Christensen equalized on a side volley from just outside the six-yard box.

After falling behind again early in the second half, Adam Acosta's goal leveled the score at 2-2. KC Nordfor's beautiful through-ball found the feet of Acosta, who rifled his shot past Arizona 'keeper Mark Wilson.

"It was a perfect ball," Acosta said. "I was lucky that I was on my horse. I hit it as hard as I could."

With the score knotted at 2-2 and with the championship on the line, Christensen managed to find himself front-and-center again.

In the 77th minute Christensen finished off a perfect give-and-go with Acosta. From 22 yards off the line, Utah's young forward left Wilson with no chance, burying his shot past Arizona's 'keeper to give Utah its championship.

"That's what you dream about," Christensen said about scoring the championship-winning goal. "That's why you play the game."

Christian Bowers confirmed Utah's win with another goal in the 85th minute. Led by Mike Hickman Jr., Utah's defense didn't allow another Arizona goal.

"He surprised me," Hickman Sr. said of his son. "He made a few mistakes, but he was a stud back there. He shut them down."

Struggling to finance the team because of health problems, Utah owner Ralph Hansen spent almost a week last month considering whether he should give up on the season entirely. The team survived, but the Salt Ratz lost coach Bob Martin in the process.

In the middle of all that, the team was struggling on the field and looked certain to miss out on the MPSL playoffs. After Hickman Sr. lost in his debut at Las Vegas, the team won nine straight league

matches to end the season.

Afterward, Hickman Sr. wasn't in any rush to take credit for his team's turnaround, instead deferring to his players.

"I just tweaked a few things," he said. "There was more continuity in the the lineup. The biggest factor is that they wanted to have fun."

For now, the future of the Salt Ratz remains up in the air. Hansen, the team's owner, told the Deseret Morning News that he won't be making a decision on his franchise until late November. Several factors, including Salt Lake's new MLS team, will play a role in that decision.

While Arizona coach Petar Draksin said it was "sad" that Utah might not be a part of the MPSL, Hickman Sr. is hopeful that the team can exist next season.

"I hope it can (continue)," he said. "There's no other place where these kids can get this type of experience."

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