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Lady Gaels off to Hot Start Under New Head Coach

By Spencer Silva



No. 21 Kiana Quarles puts the Gaels up 1-0 against Colorado State.

Photos Spencer Silva

A new era of Saint Mary's women's soccer is underway. New Head Coach Travis Clarke was plucked away from Cal State San Bernardino (CSSB) this year and tasked with revamping a Gaels program that's struggled for relevance in one of the countries' toughest soccer conferences, the West Coast Conference (WCC).

So far, so good. With a pair of 1-0 wins over Colorado State (CSU) and the University of Nevada Reno (UNR) this weekend, the Gaels improved to 5-0-1 on the season, their best start since 2010 when they began 6-0-0.

The personnel hasn't changed much, save for the addition of Kiana Quarles, who Clarke brought over with him from CSSB, but the philosophy has: with him, Clarke has brought a reverence for defensive soccer; the girls have bought in. In fact, the team has allowed just one goal in six matches.

Clarke wasn't always a defense-first coach. In fact, at the University of Hawaii (Hilo), he

employed an attack-first scheme. When he arrived in San Bernardino, he realized that with limited financial resources, he had to bring in a "certain type of player" – i.e., defensive players. The Coyotes experienced unprecedented success under Clarke, so he's sticking with the philosophy, despite greater resources.

"We're a team that's built on defending," he said. "If we get a lead ... we're able to hold and not really give up too many good looks."

Junior goalkeeper Julia McDonald deferred credit for the collection of clean sheets she's accruing to a strong back line, headlined by senior backs Casi Lynch and Anne Whipple. "Our back line is way stronger this year." She added, "All the effort in the offseason, getting to know each other, it's showing up on the field."

On Friday, against Colorado State, newcomer Kiana Quarles scored her second goal of the season in the 34th minute. The team

had several other chances, but even after a flurry of CSU players were sent forward, the Gaels held firm for the shutout.

The scoring play transpired

just as they planned it. "We work the ball from the back line, to the center forward, the center forward drops it back to the mids, and then the mids send it forward to someone on a through," Quarles explained. "We've been practicing that!"

The transition from DII soccer – at San Bernardino – to Saint Mary's has been mostly seamless for Quarles, though she's noticed a superior pace and physicality in her new competition. Coach Clarke thinks she fits right in: "I've always known Kiana was a very elite player. To see her thriving in this environment is fantastic."

The team still has a long way to go before it's ready for the WCC play – their first conference match is against Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles on Oct. 2. If they're going to be successful in a tough, to put it mildly, conference, they're going to need to figure out how to put balls in the back of the net. While they are

confident teams won't "run it up on them," they also realize there will be fewer scoring opportunities against better opponents.

Sophomore Hannah Diaz and junior Samantha Dion were two of the team's leading scorers in 2014 – Diaz scored four goals and Dion led the team with nine. So far, not much has changed. Diaz scored the game-winning goal against UNR Sunday, 37 seconds into overtime and Dion, who earned second-team All-WCC honors as a sophomore, was named WCC Player of the Week on Aug. 31 after scoring two game-winning goals the week prior. Both players have three goals on the season. Along with Quarles, they're expected to do the bulk of the scoring.

The Gaels finished ninth in the WCC last season, but it seems like the winning formula might be in place. "If we keep getting the shutouts, the goals will come," McDonald said.



No. 10 Hannah Diaz unleashes a free kick.

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