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Acalanes Girls Continue Hunt for Elusive NCS Title

By Emily Dugdale



Callie Ericksen (19) moved from offense to defense this winter because of injuries. "She's a true two-way player," according to coach Evan Sassano.



Regan McQuain and twin sister Kyle have played big roles in the Lady Dons' success this winter.

"You have a target on your back," head coach Evan Sassano told his huddled players before last Wednesday's soccer match against Las Lomas.

The Lady Dons (8-2-2) are having another strong season. However, they hit a rough patch last week. On Wednesday, the Lady Dons were felled 3-1 by Las Lomas – their first regular-season loss in two years – and then suffered another loss Friday night to Dublin 2-1.

"On both ends it was sloppy," Sassano said after the Las Lomas match. "We're a lot better on the attack than we showed tonight."

Despite the heart-wrenching losses, Acalanes still finds themselves near the top of the DFAL standings. The team must win their final two league matches to have a chance at a winning consecutive league titles. It's a tall order, but Sassano isn't fazed.

"When I first started coaching at Acalanes, it was definitely a rebuilding time," Sassano said. "Last season and this season we definitely turned things around and were able to set clear goals for ourselves," he said.

Deep in his third year coaching the Lady Dons, Sassano has seen his fair share of ups and downs. He credits a team culture of constant improvement, "getting serious," and a strong senior class that mentored younger players as key components to the team's winning efforts this year.

Their success is also noteworthy for the way they have shouldered a handful of key losses. Top defender Lexi Silva was out most of the season due to an ankle injury sustained in their first game, leaving team captain and senior midfielder Regan McQuain the lone senior starter for the early season play.

Kyle McQuain – Regan's twin sister – later stepped up from the reserves as a fill-in for starting goalie Sophia Giordano, who broke her hand during an early season match against Dublin. She's turned out to be a key component in the team's winning record, boasting 41 season saves. (Sassano expects both Silva and Giordano back for NCS.)

"She's playing great," Sassano said of his newest goalie. "She's saved balls that could have easily

been goals in every single game."

But injuries were not the only obstacles to Acalanes' lineup. A handful of seasoned Lamorinda Soccer Club (LMSC) players from all three local high schools decided to forgo the high school soccer season this year, leaving key positions vacant. Sassano counted five of his best players from Acalanes alone.

Instead of falling apart at a diminishing lineup, Sassano's team took a different approach – treating the change as a chance to start something new. "Let's do something that's never been done here before," are words frequently heard on the Acalanes pitch.

The Lady Dons don't rely on a single player to score – their lineup is impressively deep. In their first game of the season, a 4-1 win over College Park, each of the team's goals was scored and assisted by a different girl.

"Players believe in trying to start something here," Sassano said.

On a team where underclassmen are also encouraged to stand out and step up, Acalanes witnessed some incredible talent rise through their ranks this season. "Sasha Sadoff and

Keirra Krawec in particular are two younger players who have already had a strong impact," Sassano said. Sadoff, a freshman, currently leads the Lady Dons in goals (8), despite often appearing as a super-sub.

Seniors McQuain, Silva and Callie Ericksen have been especially instrumental in "taking players under their wings," Sassano said.

"That's a culture we try to bring out – allowing the younger players to be a big part of the team," Sassano said.

It's also a group with years of joint playing time. Several key members of the team – including McQuain, Ericksen, and Sadoff – have spent time together with LMSC, though Sassano pointed out this coincidence isn't necessarily a calculated part of their success.

"They have good chemistry together," Sassano agreed. "But one of the things we try and get the point across is when you're playing high school you have to keep yourself open to new relationships and be willing to work with players you've never played with before."

With just a handful of games

left in the regular season, the team is moving onward from their recent losses to Las Lomas and Dublin.

"Every player on the field needs to come out with a leading mentality," Ericksen said. "We need to come back strong from this."

Despite the recent speed bumps, the Lady Dons remain strong contenders for the NCS title, a prize that has eluded Acalanes for years. Local rivals Miramonte (5-5-4) and Campolindo (6-9-3) have won eight championships in the last 15 years, with the Mats taking home the most recent title. This year, however, both have middling records.

Last year, the Lady Dons won the DFAL title on the back of a perfect regular season, but ultimately lost to the Mats in sudden death in the NCS semifinals.

"We've shown that we can compete with everyone and this is definitely a good year for us," Sassano said. "We're taking it one game at a time, trying to get better, and hopefully we'll continue to improve the way that we are playing."

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