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Challenging season for Lamorinda girls soccer

By Jon Kingdon



Katrina Lee (Acalanes) Photo Gint Federas

The 2017-18 season for Lamorinda girls soccer teams has proven to be a bit of a challenge for each of the schools. Interspersed with some very positive games and efforts by each of the teams, the combined record for Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte as of this printing is 19-32-3.

With another young team, Campolindo head coach Ernesto Silva knew that his team was going to have to mature as the year has gone on: "The girls have a great attitude. They do not give up. We are a fighting team with the right spirit. We are a young team that is full of potential and it is going to take time to develop." Silva has proved prescient as the Cougars have won their last four games to bring their record to 9-7.

The underclassmen have been led by the senior captains and midfielders Molly Ikeya and Azalea Kim who have played a key role in keeping the team focused on their goals. "They are the voices inside the field," Silva says.

With eight shutouts this season, the defense has proven to be the strength of the team. Defenders Devon Ortman and Nicole Huebner have been very protective of the team's goal. "They have both been solid and have kept us in a lot of games," Silva says.

Campolindo has a unique situation in goal with sophomore Mallory Lewis and Senior Ashley Mulakaluri splitting time in the net.

Each of the girls brings a unique quality and talent to the game, according to Silva. "Mallory is very technical. She has great leaping and coverage skills. She knows how to play quick from the back. She has good height and presence in the goal. Ashley is extremely quick. She has great reflexes and is scrappy and tenacious."

Silva is most appreciative on how well his two goalies assist each other: "Mallory and Ashley both work very well together in their training sessions. They like each other and yet are very competitive. They have a great relationship and work hard in practice to earn their minutes.

A young team generally is one that needs to learn to be patient with the ball and Silva is working hard to develop this skill with his team. "We can be too reactionary and we need to be more proactive and aware on the field when we have the ball. We need to get ahead of our opponents and be comfortable with the ball when it comes to us."

Silva's main goal at this point in the season is to keep the team's eye on the prize: making the NCS playoffs. "We have had strong games," he says. "We want to build momentum in the second half of the season and I want to motivate my players to play complete games."

With 10 seniors and juniors and 18 sophomores and freshmen on the Miramonte team, head coach Barry McQuain knew that his team was going to have some difficult matchups. Combining the youth on the team along with some unexpected injuries and illnesses, the 7-11-1 Matadors have had to play shorthanded in several games. An early season Tri-Valley Tournament against upper level competition set Miramonte back early going 0-3-1 in those games. McQuain still sees the positives in his team: "We played the bigger schools well though you don't see it in the record. We are doing well in league play and we are coming together as a team and you can see it in the scores and on the field as the season has progressed."

Senior co-captains Lauren Van Stralen and Kendall Roberts, both of whom have been battling through injuries have proven invaluable to McQuain in keeping the team focused and maintaining a positive attitude: "We have let the girls take responsibility for their actions, formations and performance on the field. They have been organizing the team and bringing it together. They bring their ideas to me and my assistant, Joe McMahon. The girls are having fun. Everyone is getting along very well.

Early in the season, the Matadors were having major issues with their offense but have of late begun to address this area. According to McQuain, "Since the holidays, we have increased our intensity and that has become our strength. When the whistle blows, we are not letting up and are playing as hard as we can. We learned that when we score, we win. We have shifted to more of an offensive game plan."

Junior striker Taylor Walthall has been the team's leading scorer. "Taylor is very explosive," says McQuain. "She can kick the ball deep with either foot. When she is playing an aggressive game, it sets the tone for the team. She is able to surprise our opponents with her speed and can change the game quickly."

Miramonte's strategy is to emphasize the middle of the field. Sophomore midfielder, Olivia Grillo has been a force on both offense and defense with her ability to see the field and find the open man.

Junior defender Anna Le-Nguyen has been consistent all season according to McQuain: "Anna has been solid every game. She rarely loses the ball. She is very fast and has the ability to find the open player."

Sophomore Mikayla Smith (2.25 goals against) and senior Olivia Goodman (1.38 goals against) have been splitting time in the goal consistent in the goal. "Olivia has made a lot of saves," says McQuain. "She has super quick reflexes. She is quiet and humble and gets the job done."

Having won four of their last six games, Mc Quain is approaching the end of the season with optimism. "We have a shot to win the league and making the NCS and (those are) our two goals. There are no teams in the league that we can't beat. Teams may be overlooking us due to our overall record and that will be a mistake on their part. The girls are optimistic and looking forward to going through the league."

In what has proven to be a difficult season record-wise (3-12-2) for Acalanes, first year head coach, Sasha Chalak, has brought a refreshing attitude to the team. "We have found the positives in our season" says Chalak. "The good is that it is testing the character of the players and the mindset the players have when they go into a match."

They are learning how to deal with adversity and that is important."

The Dons are a very young team with 10 seniors and juniors and 13 sophomores and freshmen, which has proven to be a challenge for Chalak. "It's been a learning experience for the group. Our goal is to maintain a positive attitude and continue to fight until the end, regardless of the outcome. I want the players to focus on their own personal fight and realize that the opponent is none other than themselves and to focus on their actual efforts."

Chalak has come to appreciate the quality of the leadership that the captains have come to provide the underclassmen: seniors defender Katrina Lee, goalie Sophia Giordano and junior defender Malika Haji.

Giordano, who will be playing at Emerson College next season, holds the team together, according to Chalak. "Sophia has a great ability to process the game. She is a real leader in the back third of the field has been a real force in the goal for us."

Midfielder Emily Smith, who will be playing at American University next year, has also earned accolades from Chalak. "Emily has a marvelous ability to manipulate the ball and a great ability to receive the ball with pressure on her back without losing control. At game speed to still have the finesse to the ball is really difficult and Emily has done it phenomenally well. She has been as good as any player we have played against."

Forward Kierra Krawec, who will be playing for Michigan next year, has been a real force on offense, working particularly effectively with Smith. According to Chalak, "Emily and Keira have a great chemistry and play very well together. Keira has a great ability to move and make specific runs into space. Her high level of intelligence and the ability to navigate about the field makes her deadly in the final third of the field."

Freshman center defender Samantha Hansen has provided Chalak with a lot of optimism for the future. "Samantha has adapted to the high speed of play and never leaves the field. She has done a good job in controlling our back line and in playing against older players."

As the season begins to wind down, Chalak wants his players to stay mentally strong: "I'm looking for the players to find a higher level of motivation to finish the season strong. The test is to see if we can get a collective team effort and will their way to victory. Not getting discouraged and finding the motivation to win is a transferrable skill that can be used in life in general."



Emily Smith (Acalanes) Photo Gint Federas

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