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LAMORINDA SPORTS

After 451 days, Saint Mary's men's soccer makes a successful return to the pitch



SMC junior midfielder Sebastian Schacht

Photo Tod Fierner

By Jon Kingdon

Coming off the two best seasons in Saint Mary's history (16-2 and 18-0-2), there was a 451-day hiatus between games for the men's soccer team due to the coronavirus. If nothing else, it gave head coach Adam Cooper the opportunity to appreciate the true dominance of those teams. "I don't know if I can put it into words," Cooper said. "If you look at the history of men's college soccer, what we have done in the last two years was unthinkable for most people. It's really a tribute to all our players, administration, staff, and everyone that was involved in what we were able to do. To go undefeated one year and only lose two games in two years is almost unprecedented in men's college soccer. When you look back and try and put

it into perspective, little old Saint Mary's pulling something off like this was incredible."

Despite having lost six all-league players to graduation, with a roster comprised of 14 freshmen and only three seniors, the Gaels so far have not missed a beat shutting out Pacific (1-0) and Santa Clara (2-0).

It's the intangible qualities of the team that has stood out so far. "We have great character on this team," said Cooper. "I'm super proud of them. We did not have much of an opportunity to train and do a lot of team bonding experiences, so it's just been all out on the field, as much as possible. We only had one returning starter (Sebastian Schacht) for our opening game from our last game against Santa Barbara in the

NCAA playoffs. Everybody is competitive and wants to win but you can just see they were just like kids in a candy store, they were just so excited to play. The players have been great and the character on the team is fantastic."

Last year's graduating seniors scored 35 of the team's 46 goals, so rebuilding the offense should have been a real concern for Cooper, but that has not been the case. "I don't think that we have a singular top scorer like we did last year with Anders Engbertsen (16 goals), but we have several guys that can step up and create for us," Cooper said. "Sebastian is one of the best middle fielders in the country and his leadership is incredible. (Freshman) Cade Cowan is more of an attacking player but we can drop him back to midfield. He had a terrific debut for us and is going to play a big role for us. Luke Andrews is a creator and scorer. Phillippe Van Der Lof will contribute a lot of assists; David Bog will also contribute, and freshman Andrew Rotter earned a penalty kick in the opener and his future is incredible." Cooper was not the only one to recognize Rotter's play as he was just named the WCC Offensive Player of the Week.

With the loss of all-league defender, James Person, due to an injury, the defense is also relying on several new players with only one returning starter, Valentine Kurz. Sophomore Boyd Curry got a lot of experience last year and has taken on a leadership role this year. In the opening game, Saint Mary's started two freshmen on defense, Louis Sterobo and Christian Engmann, and both were standouts, showing great potential with two other freshman, Andre Hoglin and Timothy Stephens, also seeing playing time. Like Rotter,

Sterobo's play was also honored by the WCC, being named the Defensive Player of the Week.

Last year, all-everything goalie Remi Prieur, only gave up 0.8 goals per game. Senior Nicholas Lapinid has taken over and has not missed a beat, stopping all shots on goal so far. "Nick is very athletic and will make some incredible saves," Cooper said. "He is quick with his reflexes and has phenomenal feet which is what sets him apart."

There is great depth behind Lapinid. Freshman goalie Kash Oladapo played half the game against Santa Clara, giving up no goals and being credited with two saves. "Kash is our first backup and is really pushing the envelope and has a bright future," Cooper said. "With Zack Littman and Jackson Buck, it's the best group of goalies that we have ever had."

Cooper has not been phased by having 15 new players on the roster: "They just need more time to grow and get that experience. The direction for the freshmen by Sebastian, James (Person) and the older guys has been great. Talent wise, our new players are well equipped. They're just young. They'll get their experience, but it's just been harder with all of the restrictions in the fall."

Playing in the winter has not been an issue for the team. "Our first conference game will be at Portland which will be our coldest game this year since we don't have to go to Gonzaga," said Cooper. Typically, when we have gone to Portland in the past, it's usually been raining anyways but it's going to be a lot colder than it would have been in the fall so I'm sure that will factor in. Even our field, in the opening game, still had some wet spots from our rain."

Every team in the nation has had to adjust their plans due to the coronavirus. There have been many protocols to be addressed, training restrictions through the fall and limiting how the players live and interact, even avoiding team meals. Due to the limited number of games played this season, the players are going to get a free year of eligibility so for a lot of these freshmen, it's the opportunity to play nine games without using up any of their eligibility, which should bode well for the future.

Cooper feels this team compares favorably with the 2016 team that went on to such great success these past two seasons. "This team is very similar with a lot of freshmen whose future is incredibly bright," Cooper said. "They have everything that it takes for them to be a special group. There's just a lot of learning that needs to be done. Still, at the end of the day, everybody must earn their playing time whether they're a freshman or a senior. They're pushing, battling, and competing every day."

The West Coast Conference picked Saint Mary's to finish second behind Loyola Marymount, which they play in the last game of the season. Having lost so many top players and with so many new players on the roster, it's possible that the Gaels are being underrated, with Schacht being the only Gael chosen to the preseason WCC all-league team.

"We might surprise some people because they may think we're not going to be as good as we were," Cooper said, "but in fact, we are a good team that just needs some experience."

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