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Saint Mary's men's soccer on the cusp of success

By Jon Kingdon



Christian Engmann Photo SMC Athletics/Tod Fierner

With a record of 40-4-3 over the last three seasons, the Saint Mary's soccer team has not lost a beat winning three of their first five games this season. With the players on last year's team not being credited with last year's abbreviated season (6-2-1), the current roster of 30 is larger than normal.

"It is a bigger number than we usually have and it's a little harder to manage," head coach Adam Cooper admitted. "We had a big class graduate in 2019 and we lost a lot of guys last year, so we brought in a lot of players the past two seasons which does bode well for the future." In fact, there are 21 freshmen and sophomores on the Gaels' roster.

Though protocols are reduced now to wearing masks when indoors, the team was still handicapped by the restrictions caused by the virus in limiting their ability to fully evaluate the high school players that were on their recruiting list. "We were not allowed to recruit off campus for over a year," Cooper said. "Our evaluations were based mostly on video though we knew some of them from recruiting before we were shut down and also relied on recommendations from people that we knew."

Despite being limited to film evaluations, Cooper is pleased with the quality of the players on and off the field: "We've been spot on, character wise. They're great kids and they work hard. They do what they need to do, and they do what you ask of them."

Though it is still more difficult to get foreign players into the country, the Gaels' roster has nine players from overseas (Germany-3, New Zealand-2, Denmark-1, The Netherlands-1, Sweden-1, Australia-1).

So far, the strength of the team has been on defense and led by the goalies, senior Nicholas Lapinid and sophomore goalie Kash Oladapo. In the two games that Oladapo started, he was nine for nine on save opportunities, shutting out Nevada-Las Vegas and Dixie State and was named the Bay Area Alarm Player of the Week. Lapinid, who also had a shutout against California, has done a good job organizing the defenders and keeping them in check.

Lining up in front of the goalies has been a solid core of five defenders, senior James Person, junior Boyd Curry (2nd team all WCC) and sophomores, Christian Engmann (All WCC), Louis Sterobo, who led the team in assists last year and Timothy Stephens. "They're all pretty solid," Cooper stated. "They complement each other really well and they're all good one-on-one defenders."

The Saint Mary's offense, on the other hand, is a work in progress. Seniors Sebastian Schacht and David Brog are leading a large group of underclassmen that are seeing a lot of playing time. Freshman forward Jack Vestberg is leading the team with two goals along with other freshman, Riley Lynch (1 goal), Gael Quintero, Noah Bohane and sophomores Cade Cowan, Tyler Harden and Andrew Rotter (all-WCC last season) have all seen a substantial amount of playing time. Senior Phillippe Van der Lof (1 goal) has just returned after missing the first two games and junior midfielder Valentin Kurz, who was honorable mention all-WCC last season, has yet to dress for a game and his return is anxiously awaited.

"We're still coming together," Cooper said. "We've got some explosiveness. With so many talented freshmen, it's a matter of determining what's the best mix of the players and in getting them used to college soccer. It's a matter of trial and error right now. We just have to clean up the little things. In our loss to Cal Poly SLO, when we were leading 1-0, we got lazy and if we can address those areas, we'll be good."

What does this team need to do to match the success of the 2018 and 2019 teams? "We're pretty solid but we still need some consistency overall from our starting group and that includes figuring out the depth in our first 11," Cooper said. "They have to believe more in themselves. Our young guys have to get the grit you need to pull out and win those tight games. That's the only thing that we're lacking right now, the kind of ruthlessness that you need to finish off teams and win in college."

The schedule for Saint Mary's was also a victim of the coronavirus. Normally the Gaels would travel out of the West Coast and bring in top opponents from around the country. "During the coronavirus, everybody pretty much tore up their schedules for this year," Cooper said. "This season, everything is regional for us and that's true for just about all of the other colleges in the country. Hopefully, next year we'll venture out a

little bit and bring some out of region teams in. Due to financial concerns, we've tried to limit our overnight trips. However, our alumni have been huge, and it has allowed us to have a good experience for all of our student athletes."

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