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Continued success for Saint Mary's men's soccer

By Jon Kingdon



Louis Sterobo Photos Tod Fierner

As Adam Cooper approached his 18th season as the Saint Mary's head soccer coach, it was only natural for him to look back with great satisfaction at the team's accomplishments. Prior to his arrival, from 1978 until 2005, the soccer team had a winning percentage of 36.1% and in league play finished as high as third twice and fourth four times.

During Cooper's tenure, the team has had a winning percentage of

58% and has finished first three times, second three times, third three times and fourth five times in league play. He has been named West Coast Conference Coach of the Year four times and the team has finished in the top half of the league in 14 of the last 15 years.

"To be honest with you, I don't even know how to describe it myself," Cooper said. "It's been a great ride and pretty crazy how long it's been. When I first got here, we weren't close to being fully funded with scholarships like all of the other schools in our conference. Once we were able to add scholarships and hire full-time assistant coaches, we were able to get caught up."

Cooper attributes his growth and evolution over that period in one word: experience. "Experience goes a long way as a player and as a coach which has allowed me to adapt, change and continue to grow," Cooper said. "Every day I try to learn something whether it's on my own or from the guys. You have to constantly evolve, particularly at a school like Saint Mary's. We can't be doing things just one way and we've changed and grown in all aspects. There was a lot of trial and error – and a lot of error."

This year's team is balanced with experience and youth with a roster of 15 juniors and seniors and 18 freshmen and sophomores.

"This is a fun team that is full of characters which I love," Cooper said. "They are a very close-knit group which has a lot of talent and leadership. They're still learning how to win games in some ways because we're still a relatively young team. We had a stretch of three games in seven days and they did well with it."

Cooper has used 26 players at various points this season, including seven freshmen. "Our players have had a lot of wear and tear, so it's been good that we are only playing one game a week now which gives us a little bit more rest and more preparation for the games," Cooper said. "Early in the season when it was two to three

games a week, it was just rest, recover and play a game, recover, and play another game. Our freshman class as a whole is fantastic. A number of them have already stepped up and even those that haven't played yet have been learning and have a bright future with us."

The offense has been led by juniors Riley Lynch (4 goals, 4 assists), Wade Muttitt (3 goals, 2 assists), Storm Schmidt Hollensted and senior Tyler Hardin (3 goals, 2 assists) with a total of 16 goals and 22 assists.

"Riley has done a good job of putting the ball in the spots for guys to score but we just haven't scored on some of them. But he's definitely finding ways to contribute," Cooper said. "Wade, Tyler, and Storm have all been stepping up."

The Gaels have had eight different players score goals. "It's nice when you don't have to rely on one person to score all the goals and we've been able to spread them out a little bit, so our opponents don't just focus on one player. I'd still like to see a little bit more consistency from our attacking group and for us to just find that consistency as a whole."

With a record of 5-4-2, the Gaels have only given up 16 goals, but Cooper is looking for more: "At the end day, we have to do a better job of keeping the ball out of the net and do a better job of getting shutouts, grinding out some more 1-0 victories."

The leading defenders have been seniors Louis Sterobo, Timothy Stephens, and sophomores Luke Lawrence and Bastian Toelhoej. "Louis is our captain and has been a terrific leader on and off the field," Cooper said. "They've all been solid and have really done a good job of locking down the back."

Assistant Coach, former all-American Gael goalie Remi Prieur is very pleased with the play of junior goalie Jack Landreth. "Jack is leading the conference in shutouts and is in the top three in the majority of the statistical leaderboards and has been very consistent," Prieur said. "He is a smart player that moves around the goal easily. When he's dialed in and focused, he will make some spectacular saves. He communicates with everyone, making sure they are in the right position in set pieces and other areas."

Cooper is still looking for improvement from the team. "We still have to do a better job of defending set pieces. We can move the ball very well but there are too many times where we're just relying on one person to make something happen and we can move the ball a little bit more clinically than what we do right now."

With nine players from Europe and two from Canada, there is a great deal of heterogeneity on the team. "It's a tremendous positive," Cooper said. "There are times when we can't understand what some of our Europeans are saying. Actually, I think that's one of the most enjoyable parts of our team, with all of the different cultures, backgrounds and styles of play, still, everything comes together on and off the field."



Riley Lynch Photos Tod Fierner

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