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## Building on successes will be key for Gaels women's soccer

By Gerardo Recinos



Hannah Diaz Photos Tod Fierner

With the ebbs and flows of how the Saint Mary's College women's soccer team can sometimes perform on the pitch, patience will be a key virtue this season for the Gaels.

At times the team can put it all together, even with a side full of underclassmen. Of the team's five wins last season, four came against teams that were ranked in the top 50 in the country. That includes a 2-0 victory against a California side ranked 12th in the country at the time.

Their 1-0 loss to Washington State on Aug. 25 came after the Cougars converted a penalty in what coach Travis Clarke called a virtually evenly matched contest.

But the team came back and beat a solid Idaho team on the road only two days later.

In fact, that's something they've done five times dating back to last season: rebound after a Friday afternoon loss with a Sunday win.

"What that tells you is they're young and don't quite know how to mentally prepare themselves for a game on Friday," Clarke said. "But when they get pushed up against a wall, they know they have to recover and have a good performance after a bad performance on a Friday. They can do that."

It's all about continually getting better, in the eyes of Clarke - an obvious benchmark for a coach to set, but the second-year gaffer is eyeing an overhaul for the way the program works, and that is going to require some time, and many different puzzle pieces to put together.

Take senior forward Hannah Diaz. The team's leading scorer has accounted for most of the team's offense so far this season. However that's led to opponents accounting for her ability and marking her more aggressively.

Her role in the grand scheme of the rebuilding effort is to make a mark as a Gael, something she's been successful in doing so far. But she's also present as a beacon for the transition. The team's second leading scorer is Vanessa Gaitan, a freshman who has done a good job so far taking the load off Diaz's shoulders - a passing of the guard, if you will.

That emergence of a recently recruited player is part of what will make or break the rebuilding efforts to push the Gaels higher up the table in the WCC pecking order.

Currently underclassmen occupy many important positions on the pitch.

For example, redshirt sophomore goalkeeper Sarah Sawatzky has played a huge role in the immediate success of the program.

In a loss against Bakersfield, a mistake between the keeper and the back line allowed a late goal that hurt the young Gaels. Clarke was adamant to make sure the mistake made was something the keeper was never going to make again.

The margin for error has been razor-thin for the Gaels so far this season.

If a few things had gone their way in a match, Clarke fully believes the team could be 5-2, a solid mark considering the disastrous 1-5 start last season.

"I think our improvement from last year to this year is already showing, on the field, results and everything," Clarke said. "And we just want to build on that and move forward."



Vanessa Gaitan



Sarah Sawatzky

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