

Published September 4th, 2019

## Optimism abounds for Saint Mary's soccer

By Jon Kingdon



Jakub Svehlik Photo Tod Fierner

After the finest season ever for the Saint Mary's men's soccer team, finishing the season with a near perfect 18-0-2 record, making it to the third round of the NCAA tournament and finishing ninth in the coaches poll, a cynic might ask head coach Adam Cooper, "So what have you done for us lately?"

Despite only losing two players to graduation, (Stephen Dougherty and Tobias Clauss), Cooper does not feel the pressure of coming off an undefeated year and entering the season as the country's 11th ranked team: "Pressure is what you make of it and how you treat it. Certainly expectations are high. As coaches, we're pretty demanding on ourselves and our players are demanding on themselves. Our focus is not to repeat what we did last year. The focus is to take it one game at a time. We definitely have a bullseye on our backs but it's a good spot to be in and we want to embrace it."

Along with the team accolades, there has been a great deal of individual recognition for the Gael players. Four seniors have been named to the MAC Hermann Trophy Watch list: Forward Jake Rudel, Goalie Remi Prieur, Forward Anders Engebretsen and Midfielder Jakub Svehlik. The Hermann Trophy is awarded to the top men's and women's Division I soccer player each year. Kentucky and New Hampshire are the only schools with as many as three candidates listed.

Despite having most of his players returning this season, Cooper is not looking back: "We are a new team with a new schedule and a new focus. We are coming back with a lot of fire power. Everyone is fit and needs to stay healthy."

With eight seniors and six juniors, eight sophomores and five freshmen, it's very much a veteran team. There are two upperclassmen that did not play on last year's team - forward Dayekh Younes, a transfer from Bradley University, and junior midfielder Jack Mortensen, who missed last season due to an injury. Younes was named Second Team All-Missouri Valley Conference twice and United Soccer Coaches All-Region as a sophomore. "Dayekh has the Division I experience and it makes the transition to our program that much easier," said Cooper. "He's used to the pace and physicality of the game and should have an immediate impact."

There is no substitute for experience and Cooper appreciates what the team is bringing in that area: "It's huge to have an experienced team and the leadership is crucial and those guys bring it, making my job a lot easier. They do a good job of managing each other and holding themselves accountable. When the grind is tough and in the crucial moments, you look for those players that have played a lot."

Associate head coach Chris Brown has returned to Saint Mary's, having previously coached with the Gaels from 2011 to 2016. Brown's primary responsibility will be working with the goalies. So how can he improve on Prieur's performance from last year, where he only gave up .39 goals per game with 14 shutouts and being named third team All-American? "I want to keep Remi focused on this year, keeping him humble and hungry," Brown said. "We have really good backup goalies behind him (Nicholas Lapind, Jacob Bauer, Zack Littman) that are pushing him every day. Remi is well rounded but we're working on his using both feet more and improving his decision making while the ball is in the air. I'm confident he will have a great year."

The Gaels' defense certainly contributed to Prieur's success last season, only allowing 65 of 172 shots on goal. "Not having a lot of shots on goal has a lot to do with our backline," said Brown. "It's helps to have experienced backs and for the goal keeper and the backline to be familiar with each other is huge."

Baggio Husidic is a first time coach that has 10 years of professional playing experience, eight in Major League Soccer and two years in Sweden. With nine of the top 10 scorers returning from last year's team, Husidic does not look for a lot of changes: "My playing experience will allow me to relate to them and I look to improve their play in any way that I can. No matter how much experience you have or don't have, you can always learn something new."

Cooper is not opposed to playing freshmen. Last season defender James Person and midfielder Sebastin Schacht both started all season and midfielder Phillippe Van Der Lof was 10th on the team in scoring with seven starts. There are five freshmen on this year's roster and Cooper does not rule out any of them playing this season: "All of our freshmen have come in fit and hungry and are pushing for playing time. Their job is to try and replace any of the starters. Hopefully they will make my job more difficult."

Saint Mary's dominated in all statistics except one. The Gaels had 334 fouls to their opponents 249 fouls and Cooper is looking to address that area: "We drew more penalties because we weren't patient and disciplined in our one-on-one defending. We were fouling when we didn't need to foul."

With so many returners on offense, the Gaels hope to match last season's performance, outshooting their opponents 140 times. "We were explosive last season and hope to do the same this season. We took a lot of risks going forward," said Cooper. "You can't score if you don't shoot the ball."

Besides playing a number of Top 25 opponents, Saint Mary's scheduled a game versus Northern Illinois University on Oct. 25 in DeKalb, Illinois. Saint Mary's only has seven conference games and their conference starts later than other conferences so Cooper was looking for a game in the Midwest. Cooper sees this game as an opportunity to prepare the team for the anticipated playoffs: "We are treating the Northern Illinois game like an NCAA playoff game. To travel to Illinois and then come home and play another game is good preparation for us."

Cooper knows how difficult a playoff schedule can be: "In the 2011 playoffs, we had to bus down south to play Bakersfield (1-0) and then bused down to play UC Irvine (2-1) and then flew back east to play Brown (3-2) and finally we flew back to Chapel Hill to play the University of North Carolina (0-2)."

Coming into his 14th season at Saint Mary's, Cooper will continue to do what has made his team so successful: "We may manage a little differently but we will coach the same. With Remi, Jakub, Jake, Anders and Jeremiah Michael, we have leaders by example in what they do. They do all the work and it trickles down to everybody. The players know what the expectations and standards are for our program."



Jake Rudel Photo Tod Fierner



Remi Prieur Photo Tod Fierner

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