Meramec Men’s Soccer Strengthens Attack For Title Run

By Sports Info. Director Bob Frischmann

Despite just five returning players, the last thing on the minds of the STLCC - Meramec men’s soccer team is rebuilding. The thinking mode is winning, and winning now as the season opens Sunday (Aug. 24) with a 1:00 home contest against Lincoln. Fueling that thought process is a pre-season national ranking of fourteenth, and a recent strong showing in a 0-0 tie during a scrimmage with NCAA Division II UMSL.

“We connected and controlled the ball better,” said sophomore forward Ian Porta (Marquette). “Our play in the middle was better, we just wanted it a little bit more and it was a great all-around team effort. I was impressed for the first scrimmage game.”

Also impressed was returning midfielder Scott Gyllenborg (Lindbergh). He felt the scoreless draw came as a shock to UMSL, who normally rolls by Meramec in the pre-season scrimmage with their older, more experienced players.

“We played composed, we didn’t panic,” said Gyllenborg. “We had a tactical discussion before the game and I think we followed that game plan very well which shows maturity from everyone. We shut down a division two team.”

Featuring a mix of freshmen right out of the prep ranks and transfer players with a year of seasoning, this Meramec squad is seeking its first Region XVI title since 2000 when it went on to finish seventh at the NJCAA National Tournament. The team hopes for an improvement from last year’s regional title game when it was upended 2-1 in double overtime against Jefferson College.

“I think it’s given us a taste of how close we were to really going the distance,” said Gyllenborg, “and once you get that taste of almost being there you just want to go further. Even the guys who didn’t play last year came in with a real attitude that every single player wants to go all the way this year.”

Among the highly touted recruits are defenders Eric Schmidt (Oakville), a transfer from SIU-E, and Marc Bowron, a native of Scotland. Also in the backfield is Drake University transfer Matt Schildz (DeSmet), Britton Gibbs (Eureka), and Taylor Landon (Marquette). But it’s the offense that has fourth year head coach Brian Smugala excited.

“We have more numbers in the attack now,” said Smugala. “We’ve got a little more depth in our forward position. And one thing we have that we haven’t had in a while is significant size - we’ve got at least nine players being over six foot two.”

On the attack will be Porta, who tallied six goals and seven assists in ‘07, Post-Dispatch All-Metro forward Justin Billmeyer (Gibault), Steve McMahon (Lafayette), Steve McMahone (Lafayette), Almin Sabotic (Mehlville), and Eldin Kandacetovic (Mehlville).

Other returning sophomores are midfielders Matt Mantia (Webster Groves), Steve Carenza (Marquette), and Ryan Saunchegraw (Kennedy).

In the nets will be freshman goalies Clayton Uptain (Cape Central) and Chris Eason (Lindbergh). They’re already eying the team record of 13 shutouts set in the national championship season of 1972 and equaled in 2005. “Meramec soccer’s always been built upon our defense and that will continue to be strong,” said Smugala.