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Saint Mary's soccer starts season strong

By Jon Kingdon



SMC Gaels junior forward Jaylen Crim, center, takes a shot. Photo Tod Fierner

In beginning his fourth season as the head coach of the Saint Mary's College women's soccer team, Travis Clarke feels the Gaels are beginning to turn the corner in becoming a successful team. Following a 7-11-1 season, Saint Mary's has begun the season by winning four of their seven games.

Early in the season, the Gaels went back to Vermont to compete against the University of Vermont and the University of Maine, coming away with two victories. Clarke saw many benefits for the team in making such a long trip: "It was a good opportunity for team bonding and allowed us to play teams with a different style of play. Back East, they play a more physical and direct game. Vermont had a left sided center kid that could hit the ball 50 yards beyond our back line. That is something we don't see out here. Not to mention that Vermont was very beautiful."

When Clarke was first hired in 2015, it was late in the recruiting season and he lost out on a number of players. "At that point, there were a number of recruits that decommitted which left us with a small recruiting class which is one reason why we only have two seniors on our roster this season," says Clarke. "Each year we have worked hard to get impactful players for our team and it is now starting to show."

After beginning the season with two losses, the Gaels have won four of their last five games. Clarke has a special feeling for this team: "Our team is very hard working. We are more athletic than we have been in the past. We just have to figure out how to win the close games. We are 2-2 in overtime games and we could conceivably be 6-1. We are a young team with lots of freshmen and sophomores that are still developing as the season goes on."

One of the first aims for the team this season was to replace Hannah Diaz who graduated last year to play professional soccer and was by far the team's leading scorer last season.

The Gaels only averaged 0.89 goals per game last season, while this season, the Gaels are averaging 1.29 goals per game. "We have to find a way to get the second goal in our games," Clarke says. "It just has to do with executing. We have had the scoring opportunities but we have to do better finishing off plays and continue to generate more chances to score. I'd like us to get up to at least 1.7 goals per game."

Two junior forwards, Jaylen Crim and Jordyn Cunningham, are both on a pace to exceed the numbers Diaz put up last season.

Crim who had two goals and one assist last season already has two goals and three assists after only seven games this season. "Jaylen is very athletic and has the ability to get behind the opposing team's defenses," says Clarke. "She was named the most valuable player in TD Classic in Vermont early this season."

Crim attributes the improvement to the entire team: "Our team is better this year as a whole. A lot of our players have stepped up this year. We are doing a better job in finding the open man and connecting more passes this year. I did a lot of extra work on my own and worked on developing new shots and my overall game."

Cunningham, who was the sixth leading scorer last season with one goal and one assist already has three goals and one assist this season. Clarke appreciates Cunningham skills: "Jordyn has very good height and is very technical. We got her used to turning and facing the goal this year and she has been an effective scorer."

Cunningham has been more assertive on the field: "I am more confident this year. My coaches and teammates have been a great help for me. Since we are such a young team, all of the upper classmen have been leaders."

Defensively, Clarke's goal is to see his team only give up one goal a game. Last season, the team gave up an average of 1.79 goals per game. This year the number is down to 1.57 goals per game. Much of the credit goes to sophomore goalie Maleah Milner, who won the starting position late last season. According to Clarke, "Maleah only gave up two goals in the spring. We have made some mistakes all over the field that have led to some goals that were not her fault. We have only one bad game against Fullerton (losing 5-1) we have only given up six goals in the other six games. Mahleah has been very consistent. She is very

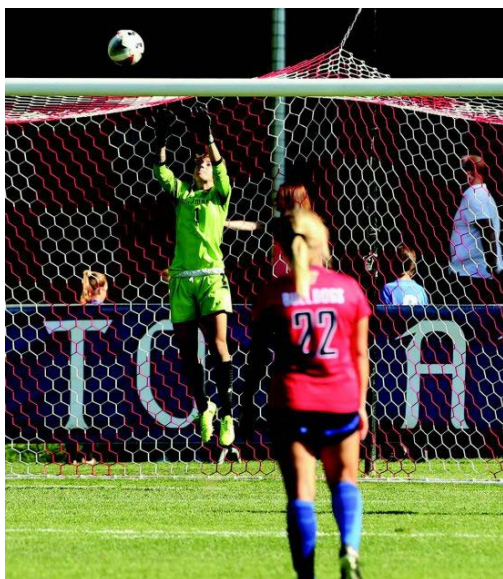
athletic and cerebral. She thinks the game and has a high soccer IQ. Mahleah is quick and nimble and makes great reaction saves. She can develop into an elite college goalie."

Milner who has not given up a goal in her last two games has been growing as a key player on the team: "As a freshman last year, I was more concerned with proving that I belonged. This year, I am working on taking on more of a leadership role. This year we have a new mindset. We learn from a game like the loss to Fullerton and we move forward. The team has bought into the vision Coach Clarke has for the team."

Clarke has a leadership group of five players: Crim, Kelsey Hill, Annyssa Dominguez, Anna Parker and Jasmine Edwards. Each of the players has an area of responsibility, according to Clarke. "Kelsey is so competitive that she handles the on-the-field issues, seniors Dominguez and Edwards deal with the day-to-day stuff and all captain-related issues, Parker is in charge of the locker room and meeting with individual players and Crim handles off the field community service projects."

Four of the 10 freshmen have seen significant playing time - defender Haley Prentice, forward Kaytlin Brinkman, midfielder Cady Hittenmiller and defender/midfielder Amaya Tomlinson. It is not an easy adjustment for freshmen to step onto a college varsity, Clarke says. "There is a big adjustment for the players to compete on this level. They are competing against players that at this point have more size, power and speed. As our freshmen continue to mature and put in the work in the weight room, they will certainly be able to compete on a far more level plane."

"This team will continue to learn, grow and develop as the season progresses," concludes Clarke. "At this point, win, lose or tie, our goal is to get 2 to 5 percent better each game in every area of the game. The coaches use their video editing equipment to break down every play and the players wear heart rate monitors in both practice and in games. The bottom line is that we want to compete for championships and as our players get more experience, we expect that to happen."



SMC sophomore goalie Maleah Milner Photo Tod Fierner

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