

ESG — Open Soccer

Men's squad seeking to reclaim golden touch; injuries hamper women's team's all-new roster

by JASON NADOLINSKI
Reporter

If the Western Region's open men's soccer team is able to find its way back to gold-medal status this weekend at the 31st annual Empire State Games in Binghamton, it will be able to give a big thanks to the University at Buffalo's program.

Eight of the 16 players on the roster are either current or former Bulls, and Western coach David Hesch is also the coach at the University at Buffalo. That kind of familiarity can only be a positive in a tournament format like the one employed at the Games.

"Even though some of the guys are new to the Empire team, they know each other in some way," said assistant coach Jim Hesch, an Amherst resident. "Even though they haven't really played together too much, they're looking better each time they practice."

Western finished with the bronze medal last summer after claiming the gold medal the previous two years. Jim Hesch, the head coach at Canisius College, feels that Western may have rested a little too much on its laurels last summer, but he's confident Western will be much more focused on the task at hand this time around.

"Last year was a bit of a down year for us and we were a little disappointed with the bronze," Jim Hesch said. "There was a little bit of complacency going on,

having won the gold medal the previous two years. I think we expected it again without having to put in the hard work. So, now, we're picking the right players who have the right mentality we need to get back to the gold-medal game and win."

Leading the way among the returning athletes is Getzville resident Lee Catchpole, who is part of the UB contingent. Catchpole had five goals and an assist last summer, including all three markers in a shutout win over Long Island. Other team members with UB connections include returnees David Chojnowski (Rochester), Mbwana Johnson (Buffalo), Dan Stevens (Buffalo) and Matt Stuczynski (Grand Island), along with newcomers Jordan Brouk (Pittsfield), Rob Taylor (Amherst) and Richard Wilson (Clarence).

Canisius College also has a couple of players on the roster in Chris Carpenter (Lockport) and J.J. Hughes (Clarence). Both players are making their open-team debuts, as are Eric Brodfuehrer (Tonawanda) and Lynton Pompey (Amherst).

"I'm thinking this will be like a little preview for Canisius," said Hughes, who played for the scholastic team last summer. "I think there's going to be a lot more skilled players, but I think I should be able to do good too."

Western's players are approaching this year's Games with a renewed focus, preferring not to rest on its past successes but seizing the day and playing like

it's backed into a corner.

"We've been trying to emphasize that every day counts," Jim Hesch said. "We had one day off last year and we didn't get to the gold medal. We can't count on tomorrow."

The women's team, meanwhile, doesn't have the luxury of having half of its players back from last summer's squad. In fact, first-year coach Jeff Rickan is starting from square one with a completely new roster.

As if that wasn't a big enough

challenge for a short-term tournament like this, Rickan learned late last week that three of his players — including Lancaster native Brittany Heist — were injured while playing for their various travel teams, leaving their status for the Games, except for Heist, up in the air. Heist, who plays at Boston University, won't risk further injury and the chance of jeopardizing her collegiate career.

"We've been decimated by injuries, but I don't think it will take

us out of contention for a medal," Rickan said. "All of the girls are focused athletes. There's no quit on this team. We will have to play more of a defensive-minded kind of game, though. We'll have to pick our spots when to attack."

As of last weekend, Rickan's roster was down to just 10 players and he had yet to get a determination as to how — or even if — he could replenish his roster. Williamsville native Natalie Hohnacki (Lehigh University), Ken-

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veterans returning to the team after a bit of an absence. Another Rutgers product, Honsberger — who was actually supposed to play last year but couldn't after starting a new job — brings size and power to Western's lineup.

"Our team is very competitive, and in the time leading up to the Games, we're going to be getting at it pretty good," Honsberger said. "We're all very good individual players, but it is a team sport. We're just a very competitive team, and part of that is because Cal takes the guys who are playing the best at the time, which makes you work harder. It makes you really want to win."

"With the addition of Eric, that's a big plus," Wickens said. "He was with us the last time we won gold."

Rounding out this year's roster are Hamburg's Jonathan Meyer, Eden's Joseph Norton, Fairport's Guido Cristofori, Spencerport's Robert Jackson, and Rochester's Nate Matthews.

"If it wasn't for the way this tournament is run, that anyone could win, this team could possibly not lose a game," Wickens said. "On the other side of it, we should be back in the gold medal game. We're a very fundamentally sound team; it's going to take a very talented team to beat us."

With all the talent on the squad, Wickens' biggest challenge will be keeping his players healthy and fresh so that it can hopefully be in contention for the gold. But, again, with the versatility of the players on the squad, Wickens isn't too concerned about having a roster capable of handling the challenges that lie ahead in Binghamton.

"We've just got to keep everyone healthy, which is part of the reason we'll be changing the lineups frequently," Wickens said. "We're going to give everyone breaks so that when the playoffs come, when it's time to go, all 10 guys will still be able to contribute. Our advantage will be the other teams' disadvantage because this group will be absolutely rested and fresh, whereas some teams will have to play their key guys all the time to make it work for them."

"Everyone's got their hammer, their big guns, so if we take care of the basics, we know we've got the offensive weapons to hang with anybody," Murtha said.

"We've got two of the best setters at the tournament; I don't even know if I could say one's better than the other, that's how good they are," Honsberger said. "We're using a tri-middle offense, which is something I've never played before, but it should free me up as a hitter to hit around their block better. I think that system's going to help us beat some of the teams that aren't expecting it."

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