

Women's Soccer Loaded for 2007

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MORGANTOWN--Even though a ball hasn't been officially kicked yet this fall, it's already been a year of firsts for the West Virginia Mountaineers in women's soccer; the team hosts the BIG EAST semifinals and final for the first time this fall, and were picked to defend their American Division title by the conference coaches, the first time that honor has been bestowed on Coach Nikki Izzo-Brown's charges.

WVU hopes to add at least a few more to that list, such as a first-ever BIG EAST Tournament title, and home turf is an ideal place.

"It's such an advantage; you have the home crowd, the home field; you want it more, you're going to fight," said junior midfielder Greer Barnes, a second-team all-BIG EAST selection last year.

"I think it's a huge motivation," Izzo-Brown said. "It's an awesome time for our community and our university to have a facility that can host it."

Also on the wish list is a trip to the Elite Eight.

"That's the next step. My freshman year [2003], we went to the Sweet 16, and that was the first time for us in the NCAA getting that far...now the next step is the Elite Eight, and hopefully from there, a Final Four appearance," said redshirt senior defender Natalie Cocchi.

Cocchi anchors a veteran group of defenders; all four starters (Cocchi, Krystle Kallman, Robin Rushton, and Carolyn Blank) return from 2006.

"It's good to have that kind of seniority, because there's a lot of people that have been in that situation before, but we also have a lot of really talented players coming in that are mixing it up at practice and may even take some of those starting spots," said Kallman.

Those incoming players are highlighted by Megan Mischler, a Soccer Buzz Top 75 recruit, and Cassandra Deitrick, tabbed as a Top 150 recruit by the publication. Izzo-Brown also singled out Ashtin Larkin as a player that could contribute right away.

The position of divisional favorite is a new one for this team.

"We were picked number one, and that means we have a bulls-eye on our chest; everyone's going to come after us," Cocchi said.

"It's no different than last year; we know that regardless of our ranking and regardless of how we're perceived by our opponents, we know that we're going to go out there and play the best we can. Even if we're first or last, we still have to prove everything," said senior forward Kim Bonilla, who had nine goals and 12 assists in 2006 and ranks in the top ten in school history in both categories.

Bonilla will likely partner with junior Deana Everett up front; Everett, a pre-season All-BIG EAST selection, is already sixth all-time at WVU in goals scored with 22, the most ever scored by a Mountaineer entering their junior season. Senior Kiley Harris provides experience and speed and is also very much in the mix to start.

Joining Barnes in the midfield will likely be junior Amanda Cicchini, one of 46 players named to the watch list for the Hermann Trophy awarded to the national player of the year, as well as senior Ashley Banks, who missed seven matches with a knee injury last year.

Juniors Lisa DuCote, Kelsey Fowler, and Michelle Molinari also saw time in midfield, as did Harris.

A new face will be in goal with the graduation of Lana Bannerman, who set records at WVU for minutes, goals against average, and shutouts. Redshirt sophomore Mallory Beck looks to be the favorite, with freshman Kerri Butler, who played with DuCote and Banks at club level this summer, also in form.

“It's going to be an exciting position to watch; we have two to three candidates that we think are very strong,” Izzo-Brown said.

“Mallory has been working her tail off. She's been doing awesome, and I expect great things from her,” said Bonilla.

The team employed a 4-4-2 formation last year, but could try some new things in 2007.

“We're looking at different formations with the talent we have on the team,” Bonilla said.

The Mountaineers are ranked as high as 18th in the various pre-season polls, which is familiar territory.

“Just about every year, we've been between #15 and #25,” said Cocchi. “I'd rather be an underdog; it gets us a little angry.”

WVU will play Kentucky and James Madison in exhibitions on August 18 and 25, respectively. The matches, both at 1 p.m., are free and open to the public.

The Mountaineers begin regular season play August 31, hosting Bowling Green at 7 p.m.