

2004 Outlook

Now that the VMI women's soccer program has a year of varsity competition under its belt, the Keydets are learning...

What a Difference a Year Makes

A year older and a year wiser has made the VMI women's soccer team a more savvy squad. In its second year of varsity status and its inaugural Division I season, the VMI women's soccer program feels like it has shaken off some of its first year growing pains and is ready to enter the Big South Conference in 2004.

Head coach Julie Davis is very excited that six of the starters from last season (five of which were freshmen) are returning for the Keydets in 2004. Not only do the sophomores have a year of experience under their belts, they no longer have to deal with the rigors of VMI's freshman orientation system, while trying to put a brand new soccer program on the field.

Coach Davis has put together a group of five freshmen that she feels will make the program stronger and more competitive in 2004.

Last year's most valuable player was undoubtedly Colleen Redmond. With 13 goals and 27 points in 15 games, Redmond led the Keydets in scoring on her way to being named second team all-state and to being named to the *Soccer Buzz* First Team for First-Year Programs. This year, she returns to lead the offense again.

"Redmond's confidence has grown immensely and she can't wait to get the season started," Davis said. "Her game has matured greatly. She is more composed, patient and competitive in a way that will set the tone for this team."

Freshman Alexa Bernas will be Redmond's compliment as the other forward. Bernas was an offensive midfielder at Atlee H.S. in Mechanicsville where she earned academic all-district and second team all-metro honors, and scored 24 goals in her senior season. Bernas will contribute her ability to be an affective playmaker and a creative goal scorer. Davis characterizes Bernas as "an intelligent player, who knows how to read the game efficiently and get herself into scoring situations."

In the midfield, sophomore Raevon Pulliam added some scoring punch in 2003 with four points. Davis expects her contribution to grow in 2004 as an attacking midfielder. "She has become very good at possessing the ball and helps dictate the speed of play," Davis commented.

The defensive midfield will once again be anchored by sophomores Vanessa Berrios and Karen Bill. Berrios will be the central defensive midfielder and will be counted on for her excellent field vision and ability to serve accurate long balls. Defensively, Berrios does a great job at shutting down offensive attacks and will be expected to step up to the challenge again.

Bill demonstrated tremendous leadership ability during 2003 and has been named one of the captains for 2004. This year Bill will be given more freedom to show her offensive skills (two goals, two assists last season). "Karen is a terrific vocal leader on the field," said Davis. "Her experience last year and her maturity this year will have a positive influence on the field this season."

Freshman Gia Bichara will solidify the trio with a fresh, new look to the central midfield. Bichara lettered four years as a defender at Great Bridge H.S. in Chesapeake and was named first team all-district as a junior. "Gia is a pure defender. She is a fearless and tenacious defender that every team wants when protecting the goal."

The outside midfielders will draw their experience from sophomore Hatley Clifford. "Hatley has a dominant presence in the midfield," said Davis. "She works very hard and contributes a relentless work-ethic and an incredibly positive attitude."

Freshman Erin Squires will join Hatley as an outside midfielder. Squires played with Bernas at Atlee H.S. She was named second team all-district as a senior and was named the team's most improved player. At VMI she will be counted on as a one-on-one defender. "Erin is a tough and determined defender. She does an excellent job involving her teammates in possessing the ball and getting forward," said Davis. "The college soccer environment will help draw out her potential."



Karen Bill

In the back positions, tri-captain and senior Kathy Aldrich will provide a strong presence in the defense. The four-year member of the program (two years as a club team member) will be counted on for her leadership defensively. "Kathy's leadership on and off the field is invaluable."

Defensively, the Keydets will rely on another experienced player and the team's only other senior. Veteran defender Jessica Stewart is also a tri-captain and what her coach describes as "the ultimate leader." "She's a great one-on-one defender who has a winning mentality and the strong determination to bring this program success during her senior season," said Davis. "Kathy and Jessica have done a phenomenal job guiding this program into varsity status and making history here at VMI as the first women's NCAA team program."

Competing for an outside back position will be between junior Joselyn Wall and freshman Molly Newton. Wall played on the team in its club status. Davis will start the member of this pair that excels the most in training.

Anchoring the back positions will be freshman Jessica Rheinlander. Davis is looking for her to excel in the collegiate environment since she will be the team's No. 1 goalkeeper. Rheinlander played four years at Forest Park H.S. in Manassas and garnered second team all-district honors in her final two seasons. "She has an ambitious personality and tremendous drive to succeed," said Davis. "We believe that she will surprise many people as a freshman goalkeeper."

VMI also welcomes a new addition to the coaching staff in assistant coach Summer Covington, who was the assistant at Virginia Commonwealth University for two seasons. Covington's energizing attitude complements Davis enthusiasm, which provides for a well-rounded staff of experience and ambition.

One of the major challenges last year with nine freshmen starting came in the fact that the squad became fatigued in the final 25 minutes of the match. "Now that there will be fewer players in the rat line, we're excited to see the true potential of this squad and how this team will play for 90 minutes," said Davis.

The 2003 team certainly created excitement throughout the Institute and the college soccer world. With the additions made to the 2004 squad and the experience gained by the freshmen in 2003, there is no doubt that this fall will prove to mark the history books of VMI and the Big South Conference.

The Big South

On July 1, 2003, nine of VMI's varsity sports transferred conferences from the Southern Conference (of which VMI had been a member of since 1924) to the Big South Conference.

This fall, VMI became the ninth school in the conference to sponsor women's soccer. As part of the team's inaugural season of 2003, the Keydets were provisional members of the Big South, and were not able to compete for the conference championship or league honors. However, this year the Keydets will be full-fledged members of the Big South, and will be eligible for both the postseason tournament and honors.

Other sports at VMI affiliated with the Big South include baseball, men's basketball, football, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's indoor and outdoor track and field and men's soccer.

Big South members that boast women's soccer programs include Birmingham-Southern College, Charleston Southern University, Coastal Carolina University, Liberty University, Radford University, High Point University, University of North Carolina-Asheville and Winthrop University.

The Big South women's soccer conference was established in 1993, crowning Campbell University as its first champion. Since then, seven different schools have won the championship, including the 2003 champion, High Point. Liberty and University of North Carolina Greensboro have both won two titles a piece.



Vanessa Berrios

