

Stanford women's soccer team chases College Cup

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Even at an institution where excellence is part of the DNA, the Stanford University women's soccer team is on an extraordinary run having reached its fourth consecutive College Cup, starting Friday in Kennesaw, Ga.

The Cardinal advanced to soccer's version of the Final Four by completing its third straight unbeaten season, a feat that parallels the great University of North Carolina teams with Mia Hamm in the early 1990s. But top-ranked Stanford needs to do something it never has done to gain status as one of college soccer's greatest programs.

It must win a national championship.

Stanford has come close, losing 1-0 in the final game the past two years.

"For me," coach Paul Ratcliffe said, "instead of getting to the finish line and collapsing, I want to run straight through the finish line."

On Friday, No. 1 Stanford, with a 23-0-1 record, plays Florida State University (18-6-1) at 2 p.m. on ESPNU. The winner will play for the championship at 10 a.m. Sunday against either Duke University or Wake Forest University, who meet in the other semifinal Friday.

Stanford has the most impressive résumé among the four, but there were serious doubts about the Cardinal's ability to replace 2010 national player of the year Christen Press, especially after losing Courtney Verloo to a season-ending knee injury three days before the first game. Verloo, an All-American last year, was expected to emerge as Stanford's new standout,

following in the footsteps of Press and the 2009 national player of the year, Kelley O'Hara.

Yet the team kept winning -- even after briefly losing three other key starters to injuries.

"This team has surprised a lot of people," Ratcliffe said.

Perhaps it has even amazed the coach who in August wondered how the Cardinal would score goals. Now he knows they come from many directions. Six players have scored at least five goals this season.

None have done more than Lindsay Taylor, the Los Altos native who has a team-leading 20 goals. Her Bay Area youth club teammate Teresa Noyola, of Palo Alto, is second with eight goals and has 14 assists, the third-highest total in the nation.

The local pair are part of a senior class that has set a head-spinning standard by never losing a home game -- they went 53-0-1 -- and by losing only one regular-season game in four years, a 1-0 road loss to No. 3 UCLA on Oct. 31, 2008.

"The people on this team are like sisters," senior Kristy Zurmuhlen said. "We just care about each other so much. As much as we do for ourselves, we want it more for each other. I think that's the difference."

Changes began when Ratcliffe and assistant Jay Cooney took over in 2003. Their first assignment was to rebuild a program after the departure of coach Andy Nelson, who left when three players alleged that he pushed them to the ground during a practice.



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Nine years ago "we were selling education very hard because the soccer wasn't there yet," Cooney recalled of early recruiting efforts.

But the coaches had an uncanny ability to develop players by putting them in new positions. One of their greatest success stories is Ali Riley, a goal-scoring forward who was moved to defense. Since then she has become the Women's Professional Soccer League's rookie of the year and a member of New Zealand's Olympic and World Cup teams.

The growth of Stanford players can be told in other ways. Junior defender Alina Garciamendez and Noyola played for Mexico in the Women's World Cup in the summer.

Such moves to soccer's biggest stage have helped make Stanford an attractive alternative to North Carolina, once the pipeline to the national team and pro leagues.

"Before, some were like, 'I just want to play soccer; I don't want to study that much,' " said Noyola, a drum-playing, math and computational science major. "Andrew Luck has changed that in football and hopefully we've been able to do that also."

With the Women's Professional Soccer league on shaky footing, players realize they can't bank their lives on playing soccer. "So why wouldn't you choose education over anything else," Cooney said.

One of the country's most promising players did. High school senior Laura Liedle, of San Diego, was planning to attend North Carolina because of the Tar Heels' legacy and 20 NCAA titles. But she ultimately chose Stanford, she said this week, because "I realized that I am interested in my academics."

The combination of athletics and academics also appealed to sophomore Natalie Griffin, of Pleasanton.

"I've always been kind of a bookworm," she said. "I never considered Carolina. I really wanted a place that had both. This is the perfect place."

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Glory years

Stanford has been among women's college soccer's elite teams.

2011: 23-0-1

2010: 23-1-2 (Lost final to Notre Dame)

2009: 25-1-0 (Lost final to North Carolina)

2008: 22-2-1 (Lost semifinal to Notre Dame)

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