

Guerrieri sees '95 squad as best yet

□ A&M's head coach said the Aggies' depth will be a major strength.

By Philip Leone
THE BATTALION

If you spend five minutes discussing Texas A&M soccer with Head Coach G. Guerrieri, the man's enthusiasm about his team's upcoming season will knock you over. With 18 letter winners and 10 starters returning from last year's explosive 15-2-2 squad, there is no reason why Guerrieri should be anything but enthusiastic.

This season, the team and Guerrieri's goal to win the Southwest Conference title and earn a bid to the NCAA Tournament are definitely within reach.

"We have a much, much stronger team all the way around," said Guerrieri. "At this point, I think we're a better squad going into the season than we were at the end of last season. We're real solid at every position."

Last year, the Aggies competed in the South region that included nine-time defending NCAA champion North Carolina and national powerhouses Duke and North Carolina-Greensboro. Five teams from this region received bids when tournament time rolled around, but the sixth-ranked Aggies were left home in College Station despite only two season losses.

KOOP

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second straight year, the NCAA did not invite A&M to the championship tournament.

"As far as we got last year, and to not make it to the NCAA's, has really motivated us to try so much harder this year," Koop said. "We realize we are going to have to prove ourselves all over again. It's carried over to this year in that we know what it takes to get the job accomplished."

Koop accomplished her job last year by scoring 10 goals and

"Failing to make the tournament last year is something that we can use as motivation — something that will drive us forward," said Guerrieri. "We can draw on that experience to help us take on and overcome the challenges and the adversity that we'll face throughout this season."

However, this fall, the Aggies will compete in the Central Region, and have better postseason opportunities since the country has been divided into six regions instead of the customary four. Automatic bids to the NCAA Tournament will go to the top two teams from each of these divisions, while eight teams will receive at-large bids to round out the 24-team field.

The Aggie offensive attack will be led by lightning-quick forwards, Bryn Blalack and Kristin Koop, who were the leading scorers in '94 with 11 and 10 goals respectively. Blalack, a sophomore, had a tremendous season as a freshman, despite a knee injury early in the season, and is described by Guerrieri as "a tough girl who is a great one-on-one player."

Koop, a junior who made the team as a walk-on and earned a full scholarship, will serve as team captain for the 1994 season. Junior Yvette Okler, is also a seasoned player and will be another scoring threat at the forward position.

Other returning starters include junior midfielder, Jamie Cszizmadia, whom Coach Guerrieri sees as

a key to the team's success because of her playmaking skills in setting up Blalack, Koop, and Okler. Junior goalkeeper and two year letterman, Sunny McConnell, will be an experienced performer in the goal box.

With key front line players coming back, the Aggies should compete with the Southern Methodist Lady Mustangs for the SWC crown. Coach Guerrieri believes conference play will be beneficial for the Texas A&M soccer program.

"We look to take on challenges, and we saw conference affiliation as a challenge and something we could shoot for. We want to win anything we can get our hands on, and that's why Texas A&M was one of the schools leading the push for conference play before we move into the Big 12."



Tim Moog, THE BATTALION

A&M Head Soccer Coach G. Guerrieri gives pointers to two of his players during practice.

BLALACK

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position, but at the same time I was nervous about it because of my skills," Blalack said. "It's a totally different mental perspective."

Obviously not a believer in the "sophomore jinx" that often plagues athletes, Blalack is looking forward to another strong season as a forward.

"I've worked hard this summer and put in more work than I ever have," she said, "I've concentrated on a lot of my weaknesses."

Although the Aggies boasted a

15-2-2 record and finished sixth in the South Region last season, Blalack feels that this year's team will be better.

"This year, we've upped our ante," she said. "We have a much more difficult schedule this year, but I think we should do really well."

Blalack said her personal goals include performing her best so that the team will do well.

"I just want to play at my best every game and hope we can all play well and get a shot at the playoffs," she said.

With another season like 1994, the SWC Championship could be a reality for Blalack and her teammates.

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