

Soccer team eyes final four



John C. Livas • THE BATTALION
Texas A&M junior midfielder Amanda Burke dribbles past University of Houston defender Sarah Fisher (left) during an exhibition Friday night at the Aggie Soccer Complex. The Aggies beat the Cougars 5-0.

By Troy Miller
THE BATTALION

Since 1993, Texas A&M head soccer coach G. Guerrieri has orchestrated a meteoric rise from obscurity to knocking on the doorstep of supremacy. In the first decade of Aggie soccer, the Aggies won 171 games, two regular season Big 12 Championships and two Big 12 Tournament Championships. The Aggies have made the NCAA Championship Tournament field in each of the past eight seasons, reaching the Sweet Sixteen four consecutive times and the Elite Eight in each of the past two tournaments.

The Aggies hope to begin their second decade by breaking into the Final Four for the first time in school history.

"My goals are always the same," Guerrieri said. "My goal is to win the national championship, nothing short of it."

National excellence is something Aggie fans have come to expect from Guerrieri's squad and in 2003, expectations are high. Those expectations could be hard on the young and inexperienced team A&M will field in 2003. Only one senior, midfielder Kristen Strutz, returns to the defending Big 12 champs.

The loss of Linsey Woodard and Heather Ragsdale, the team's two leading scorers in 2002, Jessica Martin and Mexican national team member Martha Moore forced the Aggies to rely on inexperienced sophomores and freshmen.

"Linsey was a great player and she did a lot for us," said Emma Smith, who paired with Woodard at forward. "But we have a lot of good players coming in."

Easing the concerns is an incoming freshman class that ranks among the best in the country. Immediate impact freshmen Katherine "Kat" Krambeier and Linda Pierson, plus a plethora of other underclassmen figure to more than make up for the losses.

Guerrieri's knack for accelerating the growth of young players will help as well.

Look no further than sophomore goalkeeper and 2002 Big 12 Newcomer of the Year Kati Jo

Spisak for proof.

Spisak faced the firing squad in 2002 by earning the starting nod in net and then immediately facing four top 20 teams in her first five matches.

"Melanie Wilson is the best goalkeeper we've had, but I think Kati Jo has even more potential," Guerrieri said. "Kati Jo's potential is without any barriers. It's fun for me to work with such talented players."

After a 2-3 start and eight goals allowed, Spisak worked with Guerrieri before and after team practices to improve her decision making and style in goal. Spisak rebounded, allowing just 14 goals in her next 18 starts, leading the Aggies to a 17-0-1 record and the longest unbeaten streak in school history.

"Anywhere you go, defense wins championships," Spisak said. "If you have a big goose egg (on the scoreboard), then the forwards and everybody else just

have to do their jobs."

The 2003 crop of newcomers looks to be thrown to the wolves much like Spisak was in 2002. The Aggies face national powers SMU and North Carolina within the first three weeks of the season, but without having to stray from College Station except for their match with the Tar Heels, which is just down the road in Spring, Texas.

Awaiting the opposition is Krambeier and returning forward Emma Smith up front in Guerrieri's 4-4-2 formation. Both provide skill, talent and breakaway speed, a lethal combination for forwards.

"With Kat Krambeier and Smith, we have both barrels loaded," Guerrieri said. "We will have one of the fastest and scariest front lines in the country."

Even in a year in which Guerrieri must fuse young, raw talent with only a handful of hardened veterans, a target will be firmly placed on A&M by opponents.

"We're one of the most successful teams in this part of the world," Guerrieri said. "Players come here knowing those high expectations. It proves to be a great motivating factor for them."

The Aggies begin their 2003 campaign Friday against TCU at 7:30 p.m. at the Aggie Soccer

Dallas Shipp contributed to this report

Texas A&M Aggies vs. TCU Horned Frogs

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Aggie Soccer Complex

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NEWS IN BRIEF

USA announces World Cup roster

Brandi Chastain, Briana Scurry and Mia Hamm, three stars of the 1999 championship team, were selected Tuesday to the U.S. squad for this year's Women's World Cup.

Coach April Heinrichs also chose World Cup veterans Kristine Lilly, Julie Foudy and Joy Fawcett for the team that will begin defense of its title Sept. 21 in Washington.

Heinrichs picked 12 players from the 1999 squad that beat China in a penalty kick shootout to win the championship before a sold out Rose Bowl. Chastain put home the winning kick after Scurry made a critical save in the shootout.

Playing in their third World Cup will be Chastain, whose shirt-removal celebration of her winning goal four years ago ranks among the most memorable in sports; Tiffeny Milbrett and Tiffany Roberts. Other members of the 1999 squad chosen by Heinrichs were Shannon MacMillan, Cindy Parlow, Christie Pearce and Kate Sobrero.

Eight players will make their debuts in a World Cup: Shannon Boxx, Kylie Bivens, Angela Hucles, Siri Mullinix, Cat Reddick, Danielle Slaton, Aly Wagner and Abby Wambach.

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