

Soccer teams hungry for success

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Del Norte High School might not be known as a soccer powerhouse, but both of this year's teams are taking steps to change that perception.

It's not going to happen overnight, but the boys and girls programs appear to be trending in the right direction as they head into league play.

The boys team is junior heavy and will likely not peak for another year, but they have been competitive through the early going.

And they have done so despite losing their top striker to a season-ending injury right before their season opener.

The girls team, meanwhile, took a huge step forward last year with a young roster of mostly freshmen, and with those players now a year more experienced the Warriors will be hoping to take the next step.

In 2022, after losing seven of their opening eight games, the young Warriors went on an eight-game unbeaten run and finished in a tie for second in the Little 4, before beating Fort Bragg 1-0 for the program's first-ever North Coast Section playoff win.

Head coach Cyndi Hansen, now in her third year with the team and second as head coach, has injected new life into the program.

"We're excited for this year," Hansen said. "We hope to make it (to the NCS playoffs) again and maybe win one more game. We're happy we made it (last year), but we want more. We're hungry to progress forward."

The squad still features a lot of youth, although Hansen has a nice mix of three seniors, five juniors, five sophomores and five freshmen.

The team's defense is anchored by center backs and team captains Channey Schaad and Aurora Mitchell, who have been setting the tone early in the season.

Schaad is a senior and a returning team captain, while Mitchell is a sophomore who "just knows soccer," according to her coach, who added that they both play well together and have good chemistry.

The Del Norte girls team plays in the Little 4 in soccer, along with St. Bernard's, Ferndale and South Fork.

The Del Norte boys, meanwhile, suffered a big loss before the season even began, when last year's leading scorer, Mario Ledezma, suffered a season-ending injury.

Filling his sizable cleats won't be easy, but head coach David Sanyaolu is hoping his roster can step up to the challenge.

"It's a very unfortunate loss," the coach said. "I'm hoping all the boys unify and we can deliver the league title for him."

The Warriors have played a number of tight games early in the season, including three one-goal losses, two of them to league favorite Fortuna.

So they've shown they can go toe-to-toe with some of the best teams in the area.

They recently opened league play with a 1-0 loss at Fortuna and followed that with a 2-1 win at home to McKinleyville just three days later.

Senior goalkeeper Isidro Montanez gives the team a boost this fall after returning from a season-long injury last year.

Montanez is one of two team captains, along with junior midfielder Brandt Pennington, who also is expected to play a key role.

And the head coach is more than happy with the attitude and effort he's seeing from all of his players.

"What I like is they've got good team spirit," Sanyaolu said of the roster. "And just the fact they yearn for success. They have the hunger to be successful. They listen and learn."

Like the girls teams, the boys are eyeing more NCS success this year.

Sanyaolu led the program to an NCS championship game in 2018, but they have lost in the opening round of the playoffs each year since then.

Getting a playoff win this year, according to the coach, is one of their main objectives.

The Warriors compete in a seven-team H-DNL in boys soccer, along with Arcata, Eureka, Fortuna, McKinleyville, South Fork and St. Bernard's.