

Meet You In The Middle

By Pete LaFleur

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If you are watching the Notre Dame women's soccer team for the first time tonight and are wondering where the outside midfielders are, there's a simple answer to your confusion.

There are none.

That's because the Irish are completing their second season of playing with a unique 4-3-3 formation, with the most unusual aspect featuring all three midfielders playing in primarily a central-based role.

"When I came to Notre Dame, it was evident we had several quality central midfielders but were lacking the flank midfielders needed for a traditional 3-4-3," said second-year Irish head coach Randy Waldrum, who borrowed the current concept—with some tweaking—from the strategy utilized by the U.S. women's national team during the 1999 World Cup.

Waldrum also used a similar central-based approach during his coaching days at Baylor while Notre Dame's NCAA quarterfinal opponent, Santa Clara, also has used a similar formation.

"This system allows those players to perform at their highest level. None of them has flat-out speed to play on the flank but they have great distribution and vision, are very sound technically and have an excellent tactical understanding."

Three-time All-American Anne Makinen—widely considered the frontrunner for national player-of-the-year honors—fills more of an offensive role in the Irish midfield, looking to either create her own opportunities or funnel the ball to Notre Dame's group of potent forwards.

Junior Mia Sarkesian and sophomore Ashley Dryer complete the unique formation, which takes on a fluid appearance that often resembles an acute triangle or a snaking line. The two "recessed midfielders" provide support for Makinen's world-class playmaking while also shouldering a key defensive role in the center of the field.

Freshman midfielder Randi Scheller—who has been used in the attacking and defensive roles—adds midfielder depth and has sparked the Irish offense, appearing in all 24 games (five starts) while ranking as the team's fifth-leading scorer (6G-7A).

An important by-product of Notre Dame's midfield formation is its impact on the two outside backs—typically a combination of junior Lindsey Jones, speedy sophomore Vanessa Pruzinsky and senior Monica Gonzalez—who regularly push down the flanks in the Irish attack or pinch forward to mark an onrushing outside midfielder.

"The system puts a lot of pressure on the outside backs and we can't win the midfield battle without strong ef-

forts from them," observes Sarkesian, whose final college choice came down to Notre Dame and Harvard. "Luckily, we've got some great players back there who are so good at coming up on the flanks."

Makinen—on the verge of becoming just the sixth Division I women's soccer player ever to reach 60 career goals and 60 assists—has adjusted to the new midfield formation in addition to easing into a new offensive philosophy, which stresses an offensive push that is akin to hockey's forecheck.

The Irish also have looked for Makinen to become more of a selfish player in creating her own scoring chances ... and she has benefitted from the steady support behind her.

"My role is to create offense but Mia and Ashley do all the dirty work and having them behind me allows me to push forward and create," says Makinen, whose 14 goals and 15 assists (43 points) have surpassed her '99 total (38). "The big thing for both of them has been getting confidence—that's a big part of your development as a player. Mia and Ashley both have improved with their overall distribution and realizing that they have more time on the ball than they thought before, and that all comes back to playing with more confidence."

All three admit the new alignment took some getting used to, even for Dryer—whose entire college career has been played in the 4-3-3.

"I played on the wing in high school and didn't think I'd play much during my freshman year," said Dryer, whose two career goals and 15 points are well behind her totals (76G-47A, 199 points) at West High School in Salt Lake City. "It's nice

to go forward when you get the chance but I love the role that I'm playing now for this team."

Even with limited offensive chances, Dryer and Sarkesian (72G-36A as a prep) have picked up some crucial points. In the 3-1 NCAA second-round win over Michigan, Dryer shook off a bruised ankle and sparked Notre Dame in the second half by assisting on the game-winner before capping the scoring with her own goal.

Sarkesian, meanwhile, has shown a penchant for scoring in big games (including the lone goal in a 1999 NCAA third-round win over Stanford) and five of her last six goals have held up as game-winners (she has 5G-3A this season).

A big part of Dryer and Sarkesian's game is success at winning balls in the air, an area of major improvement for Sarkesian since the end of the 1999 season but a skill owned by Dryer for as long as she can remember.

"I've always played against taller players, so I've had to learn the best way to win balls in the air," says the 5-4 Dryer, who easily ranks as one of Notre Dame's top players in the air. "Winning the head balls basically comes down to timing and it's something I've always tried to focus on."

When Notre Dame ultimately looks back on its 2000 season, the Irish can attribute much of their dominating scoring (75-8) and shot (564-150) advantages to the special 4-3-3 formation that has operated at a high level of efficiency for most of the season.

"The midfield sets the tone for any game and our first priority is to be organized defensively and minimize giveaways. That makes it easier for us to attack and make runs," says Sarkesian, who credits the preseason games in Brazil with planting the seeds for the lineup's growing cohesiveness. "It's so important to play as a unit and it's great playing as a midfielder in this formation because you have so much support around you. We've developed a good feel for how each other plays and Ashley and I have a rhythm where one of us hangs back while the other goes forward.

"People always are surprised when they see our formation for the first time. But it's the perfect system for this team."



Sophomore Ashley Dryer (left), senior Anne Makinen (above) and junior Mia Sarkesian (right) form Notre Dame's unique trio of central-based midfielders that has helped the Irish dominate possession and scoring chances during the 2000 season, with Notre Dame owning a 75-8 scoring edge and a 564-150 shot margin (average of 24-6 per game).

