

Seniors Lead The Way For Irish

By Pete LaFleur

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The Notre Dame women's soccer program consistently has turned out stellar senior classes that have included some of the more well-known names in the history of college soccer.

Midfielder Cindy Daws and goalkeeper Jen Renola—both three-time All-Americans—were key members of the '95 national title team and earned national player-of-the-year awards as seniors in '96. The next year's senior class included three-time All-America defender Kate Sobrero (now a starter with the U.S. National Team) and four-time All-America midfielder Holly Manthel—whose 128 career assists are a seemingly unbreakable NCAA record—while the 1998 squad was led by senior forward Monica Gerardo (second all-time at ND with 73 goals and 190 points) and midfielder Shannon Boxx, the Irish record-holder for career games played (101).

Finally, the 1999 senior class included five starters and three All-Americans—forward Jenny Streiffer, defender Jen Grubb and 'keeper LaKeya Beene—plus all-time leading goalscorer Jenny Heft (80).

While the current senior class lacks the depth of accolades racked up by its predecessors, it's hard to argue with their leadership and consistency—factors that second-year head coach Randy Waldrum says are directly attributable to the team's success.

"When you think of next year and not having those players, it makes you realize how special they are," says Waldrum, whose 2000 squad amazingly could be the first Notre Dame team without multiple All-Americans since 1992.

"They have embraced the concept of the team more than any group of seniors I've been around in 19 years of coaching. They've set a high standard for work ethic and the way they carry themselves. We've won a lot of challenging games—some by one goal—and leadership plays a big role in those."

The seniors include a quartet of four-year players who made their final appearance at Alumni Field: defenders Kerri Bakker and Kelly Lindsey, forward Meotis Erikson and three-time All-America midfielder Anne Makinen. Versatile senior Monica Gonzalez—who made a crucial switch from forward to defense—has one year of eligibility left due to an ACL injury in '98 while senior midfielder Carolina Marino has played an important role the past two seasons, earning a walk-on spot after previously serving as a member of the Notre Dame rowing team.

The leadership of the senior class has been built on a series of thrilling successes and heart-wrenching failures.

"So many different things have happened to us and those experiences mean so much," says Erikson, whose career has been split between the equally-successful coaching regimes of Chris Petrucelli and two for Waldrum.

"All those experiences have helped me in my soccer career and have helped me be a better person. Without those rough times, you don't get the important life lessons.

"Our senior class is not afraid of responsibility and we aren't scared of pressure."

Bakker—a team captain and 19-game starter, after making just three starts from '97-'99—played a crucial role in early shutouts of Washington and Portland, when she was named defensive MVP of the Portland Invitational.

"It's a big honor to be a captain but we have such a strong senior class," says Bakker, who has shown marked improvement in her speed of play, strength and heading ability. "If I could choose one word to describe our class, it would be unity. We're always there to pick each other up in the tough times."

Lindsey—whose national recognition has been obscured by a series of injuries—missed six midseason games due to injury but again has battled back to help fortify the defense. Gonzalez also has been a cog in the back, after making the position switch.

"Monica had not played much before this season but has been a huge player this season while making an impressive transition to defense," says Waldrum. "She could've packed it in mentally but she came out with a great attitude and work ethic. We wouldn't be where we are without her."

Marino has appeared in just 11 games with the Irish but has been a valuable member of the squad—as evidenced by the excitement shown by her teammates when she scored her first career goal versus Seton Hall. "Caroline is so professional and workmanlike," says Waldrum. "She shows the younger players how to be a veteran."

Anyone who has watched the Irish—particularly in recent weeks—can't deny the on-field connection between Makinen and Erikson, who have combined

on 20 goals during their career, including 11 this season (no other combination has more than five). The Makinen-Erikson combination has clicked for goals in four postseason games this season, including scores off set plays to open the scoring in the NCAA wins over Michigan and Harvard.

"We definitely have a connection, because we know each other's personality and style," says Erikson, who was Makinen's roommate for two years and is her pregame passing partner. "I've learned how to run off of Anne's passes and she knows how I like to have the ball played to me. It's a subtle thing, but it can make a big difference."

Despite her status as one of the nation's premier players, Makinen continues to act like anything but a superstar. During the week of the quarterfinal, she accepted a teammate's challenge and strode to the chilly practice field decked out in nothing but long underwear and a lightweight sweatshirt (plus cleats, a cap and gloves) before sprinting onto the frozen tundra proclaiming "It's not that cold out here" (she quickly changed into warmer gear 15 minutes later).

"Most people outside of the team think of Anne as a really serious person, but her antics the other day didn't surprise us," says Erikson. "Anne has one of the most unique senses of humor you'd ever find."

Waldrum sees an even deeper thread to the development of his star player.

"Anne is almost 25 and she had concerns heading into this season, because she's so much older," explains Waldrum. "But it's been great to see the friendships she has developed with some of the freshmen. That's good for Anne and certainly is good for the freshmen, who look up to her so much."

Erikson has been a consistent offensive presence throughout her career but has picked up the pace down the stretch, with points in nine of the last 11 games (5G-8A), including three game-winning goals and a pair of game-winning assists.

"I've improved most in my mental approach—not so much tactically, but maturity-wise and how I've handled things," says Erikson, who has yet to miss a game at ND, logging 100. "I've learned to put things in perspective and deal with pressure. Things like that help you become a better player."

Prior to the final regular-season game of their careers (Oct. 13 vs. Boston College), the seniors were asked to address their teammates but Erikson concedes that "it was hard to say anything that hadn't already been said."

Their teammates then surprised the seniors by presenting each with a booklet containing letters of thanks and appreciation.

"That's one of the most prized possessions I have," says Erikson. "Sometimes you don't realize how much you affect one another."

As they near the twilight of their Notre Dame careers, the class of 2001 clearly has made its unique mark on the growing tradition of the Irish women's soccer program. But that feeling works both ways.

"Notre Dame has been such a great experience for all of us," says Erikson. "We've had the chance to play for two of the best head coaches in the country and have been fortunate to play with so many amazing teammates."

"Notre Dame is such a close-knit place, that's how it is with our team and on the campus in general. This has become a home for me and I can't imagine having gone anywhere else."



Notre Dame's 2000 senior class includes (top-to-bottom, from left): Meotis Erikson, Anne Makinen, Carolina Marino, Kerri Bakker, Lindsey Jones and Monica Gonzalez.