



2009 Women's College Soccer Preview

by Paul Kennedy, Tuesday, Sep 1, 2009 12:00 AM ET

THE DEFENDING CHAMPION TAR HEELS, aiming for North Carolina's 20th national championship in 28 years, could be one of the great Anson Dorrance teams of all time. Stanford, with a strong returning frontline and a pair of incoming U-17 internationals, could have the best shot of dethroning UNC. It's been hit or miss for North Carolina in recent years.

If winning NCAA Division I women's titles every other year means hit or miss.

The Tar Heels may not have been favored when they won in 2006 (they fielded seven freshmen in the championship game) and 2008 (they had to defeat a pair of unbeaten teams, UCLA and Notre Dame, at the Women's College Cup), but they will certainly be the team to beat in 2009.

While Notre Dame and UCLA, both finalists at the last four Women's College Cups, lost key players, the Heels return just about everyone from their 25-1-2 team.

Nine starters are back who beat Notre Dame, 2-1, and they don't include Nikki Washington and Meghan Klingenberg, whose departure for the Under-20 Women's World Cup deprived the Heels of speed on the right side of midfield and on the left flank during last year's NCAA Tournament.

Despite the loss of Yael Averbuch and Allie Long, who both moved on to WPS, the Heels are loaded with attacking threats, beginning with Casey Nogueira, whose two goals in the final were both world-class, according to Coach Anson Dorrance, and gave her the national scoring titles for points (58) and goals (25).

Nogueira is joined in the UNC attack by sophomore Courtney Jones (daughter of former San Francisco 49ers Pro Bowl tight end Brent Jones) and JC transfer Jessica MacDonald (who led UNC with 10 assists).

The midfield is led by U.S. Olympic gold-medalist Tobin Heath, who had a rather quiet '08 campaign but is available from the start of the '09 campaign.

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Washington and Klingenberg each compiled nine assists before heading to Chile, where the USA won the championship.

Other returnees include midfielder Ali Hawkins and defenders Whitney Engen and Kristi Eveland, all members of the exceptional class of freshmen who arrived in the fall of 2006.

This year's freshman class lacks the depth of the '06 class but includes Canadian Rane Premji and Lucy Bronze, who should both contribute immediately.

The '09 Tar Heels, who are bidding for their 20th national championship in 28 years, have a chance to be one of the great Dorrance teams of all-time.

They will certainly have the opportunity to prove it, facing five elite-eight teams in the first two months of the season - UCLA, Notre Dame, Texas A&M, Duke and Florida State.

Notre Dame lost two-time Hermann Trophy winner Kerri Hanks as well as Brittany Bock and Carrie Dew, two of the most promising young players in WPS with Los Angeles and FC Gold Pride, respectively.

Junior Lauren Fowlkes, who was absent from the '08 College Cup because of U-20 World Cup duties, will anchor Randy Waldrum's backline, the midfield is solid with returning starters Courtney Rosen, Rose Augustin and Courtney Barg, and Melissa Henderson, the heir apparent of fellow Texan Hanks, and senior Michele Weissenhofer, a flip throw-in specialist, head the frontline.

Like Washington, Klingenberg and Fowlkes, UCLA's Sydney Leroux missed the NCAA Tournament to travel to the U-20 World Cup. There she scored five goals - matching her total for the Bruins in the regular season - and win the tournament's MVP award.

Her return gives UCLA the country's top 1-2 scoring threat with frontline partner Lauren Cheney, the 2008 Olympic gold-medalist.

The Bruins, whose big loss was playmaker Christina DiMartino, hold the dubious distinction of reaching six straight College Cups but winning none of them.

Stanford, last year's fourth College Cup participant, could have the best shot of dethroning UNC.

The frontline of senior Kelley O'Hara and junior Christen Press and sophomore Lindsay Taylor combined for 45 goals last year.

Also back are New Zealand international Ali Riley on the backline and sophomores Teresa Noyola and Camille Levin in midfield.

The top recruits are a pair of former U.S. U-17 stars Rachel Quon and Courtney Verloo.

One team looking forward to the 2009 season is Portland, which for once won't be missing any players because of national team (USA and Canada) commitments.

The Pilots won 19 straight games before losing to Stanford in the quarterfinals. They were deprived of Michelle Enyeart, Keelin Winters and Elli Reed, who all played with the U.S. U-20s in Chile. Sophie Schmidt has missed time while representing Canada at the national team level. They will all be committed to UP in 2009.

Two other teams that will benefit from having their U.S. youth stars available all season are Florida State and Penn State.

The Seminoles' loss to Notre Dame in the quarterfinals snapped a string of three straight trips to the College Cup. U.S. U-20 Becky Edwards returns after missing the 2008 postseason and will anchor the defense that lost three starters. Also gone is Finnish striker Sanna Talonen, who turned pro. FSU's most intriguing recruit is French youth star Ines Jaurena.

Penn State, which is seeking its 12th straight Big Ten title, welcomes back All-American goalie Alyssa Naehrer, while Christine Nairn, Naehrer's teammate on the U.S. U-20s, delayed her arrival in Happy Valley to play in Chile. Since then, the left-footed Nairn has been capped on the senior national team, making her the first U-20 to earn that honor.

Here's a look at some of the other national contenders in major conferences:

ACC: Behind North Carolina and Florida State in the preseason conference poll was Boston College, whose incoming class includes former U-17 teammates Victoria DiMartino and Kristen Mewis. All DiMartino and Mewis did at the 2008 Under-17 championships in New Zealand was win the Silver Shoe (No. 2 in scoring) and Bronze Shoe (third in MVP voting). Other ACC contenders are Virginia and Duke, which are both led by midfielders, junior Sinead Farrelly and senior Elisabeth Redmond, respectively.

BIG EAST: Notre Dame and West Virginia are the favorites in their respective divisions. The Mountaineers, who are seeking their 10th consecutive berth in the NCAA Tournament, are led by midfielder Carolyn Blank and forward Megan Mischler. Other top Big East players are Connecticut senior Brittany Taylor, who was a medical redshirt last season but could be one of the top defenders in the 2010 WPS draft; Georgetown midfielder Ingrid Wells, who red-shirted in 2008 to play with the U.S. U-20s; and Rutgers goalie Erin Guthrie.

BIG TEN: Penn State's competition will include Michigan State and Illinois. The Spartans feature Laura Heyboer, the first freshman in conference history to receive Offensive Player of the Year laurels last season after finishing with 19 goals and 47 points. The Fighting Illini are coming off their sixth straight appearance in the NCAA Tournament.

BIG 12: Texas A&M, which reached the 2008 NCAA quarterfinals, and Missouri, last year's champion, tied for the top spot in the preseason coaches poll. Goalies Kristin Arnold and Kelly Dyer were among four A&M players named to the preseason all-conference team. Seniors Crystal Wagner, Meghan Pfeiffer and Kristin Andrighetto give Mizzou plenty of experience. The Big 12's best player could also be its most versatile: Nikki Marshall, a forward for Colorado but a defender with the U.S. U-20s.

SEC: Florida earned its ninth SEC title before advancing to the round of 16 in the NCAA Tournament, and will be favored again in 2009. The Gators return their top four scorers: Tahnai Annis, Lindsay Thompson, Angela Napolitano and Ashlee Elliott.

WCC: Conference coaches picked San Diego, which had a school-best 6-1-0 record in conference play last season, second behind Portland, the unanimous preseason favorite. Decimated with injuries, Santa Clara slumped to 4-12-4 record in 2008. The Broncos have plenty of talent in seniors Kiki Bosio, Dani Potts and Katherine Reynolds.

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