

Sanchez's squad wants to be more than competitive in Pac-12

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During the past two seasons, the Colorado women's soccer team has claimed the Colorado Cup trophy twice.

While the Buffs certainly hope to bring that trophy home again -- and they begin that quest on Friday against Northern Colorado -- they've got much bigger goals this fall.

"The big picture now as we progress the program is to have some more success in Pac-12 play," head coach Danny Sanchez said.

CU went 8-8-4 in 2012, Sanchez's first year with the Buffs. That was a big step forward from the previous year, when they went 4-13-2.

What the Buffs didn't like was their 2-7-2 record in the Pac-12 Conference (still an improvement over the 1-9-1 mark in 2011). That record included six one-goal losses, three of those coming in overtime. So, the Buffs were competitive; they just couldn't pull out enough victories.

"Last year, we had a lot of almost wins and we want to turn those almost wins into wins," senior forward Anne Stuller said. "Almost isn't good enough any more."

With eight returning starters, including Annie Brunner in goal and Stuller leading the attack, the Buffs believe they've got the tools to take the next step and start winning some of the games that got away in 2012.

"Going into it, I think we're deeper this year," Sanchez said. "I think that our bottom (of the roster) has definitely come up; it's more competitive for playing time and starting spots than maybe it was at times last year.

"Really it's about who is going to perform, and we need our returning players that were solid last year to be better."

One of the problems that plagued the Buffs last year was finding the back of the net. They scored 27 goals, but just 11 of those came in conference play. In nine of their Pac-12 games, the Buffs were held under two goals. In fact, they've been held to one or zero goals in 19 of the 22 Pac-12 games they've played the past two years.

"We need to find some more options in front of the goal, we need to have a more diversified attack than we were at times last year," Sanchez said. "Finding more attacking options and more people finishing and maybe turning those 2-1 losses into 2-2s or 3-2s for us, I think that's really the one thing that will push our program going forward."

As usual, the Pac-12 will be loaded, led by perennial powers Stanford and UCLA. Sanchez said several conference foes return the bulk of their rosters. That's only going to make the Pac-12 more competitive, he said.

Stuller, however, said she's looking forward to the challenge.

"It's our third year now in the Pac-12, so we're completely adjusted, completely comfortable with it," she said. "We like where we are. Pac-12 play is important. We're the best conference in the nation, or one of the two, ACC or us. So, if we play well there, we'll have a very good season."

Brunner sees no reason why the Buffs can't have a good season, especially after realizing last year that they can compete with their Pac-12 foes.

"A lot of the returning sophomores now, juniors who were young, have the confidence to say, 'Hey, we can hang with these guys,' and I think we'll be able to prove that," she said. "It's going to be that difference of taking the little things we're learning in practice and putting them on the field."

If the Buffs can do that, they'll take the next step and, possibly, make a run at the postseason.

"We were right there every game and it's just about who improved the most in the offseason," Stuller said. "We've just got to hopefully improve more than other people did."

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