

There has been one constant in Pete Caringi's 25 years of coaching collegiate soccer.

He always finds a way to produce a winning club. Well, almost always.

In 24 previous years, Caringi's teams have finished at .500 or better 23 times, including a current streak of eight straight. With only eight players returning from the 2005 team, many observers would justifiably feel that UMBC's impressive streak could end, but historically, the Retrievers have performed very well when they appear to be outmanned.

"This will be a big challenge," the reigning America East Conference Coach of the Year admits. "But I look forward to it. My goal is to win a championship. People think I might be crazy to say that, because of the players we lost. But we will have some talented players out there and will hopefully be a much better team in November than in September."

The 2005 Retrievers (9-7-3, 6-2-0) held or were tied for the conference lead from Day One of league play until they were edged, 3-2, in overtime, by eventual league champion Stony Brook on the final day of the regular season. The Retrievers finished second and earned a trip to the post-season for the 10th time in 11 years, but two late Binghamton goals spelled a 4-1 defeat in the America East semifinals.

"Looking back on last year, I thought it was a successful season," Caringi says. "After a tough first two weeks, I am proud of how we came back and how well we played in the league."

But the Retrievers have suffered heavy losses, including the graduation of defensive stalwarts Marcus Gross and Matt McGowan amongst eight seniors, and the loss of two-time America East Midfielder of the Year Matt Watson, who signed a professional contract.

"The senior class accomplished a lot, but we did play a lot of young players", Caringi says, pointing out that five freshman were often on the field at key positions for UMBC last season. "I really liked what I saw in the spring as the group of returners had an outstanding chemistry and really played team soccer."

The Retrievers will only send out three seniors this season: David Feazell, Kevin Mezzadra and Bobby Woods. All three are starters, and along with junior defender Bryan Moffa and sophomore netminder Steve King, this quintet should form a solid leadership group for Caringi's club.

Offense

On offense, the versatile Feazell is expected to continue his steady growth as a constant threat, whether he plays a wing midfield or forward slot. He scored a career high five goals and 12 points last season. "Dave always had fantastic speed and is starting to demonstrate the scoring ability he has shown at the club level," Caringi says. "I am very confident he will build upon what he did last season."

Caringi would prefer to utilize Feazell's abilities at midfield, but would then have to rely on some talented but inexperienced personnel up front. Sophomore Kevin Gnatiko, who scored three goals and added three assists in primarily a reserve role in 2005, certainly has the wheels to keep up with Feazell, but must play at a more consistent level to reach his vast potential.

Freshmen Andrew Gillis and Dan Maudslay will also be given long looks in the pre-season. Gillis, a local product from Calvert Hall, is big, strong and good in the box, and Coach Caringi feels his game is very adaptable to the Division I level. A native of York, England, Maudslay has a reputation of being a goal scorer and Caringi is anxious to see what he can do on the front line.

Red-shirt freshman Pierre Pont is also a candidate at the striker position.

Mezzadra is UMBC's lone returning All-Conference performer from a year ago, although Caringi thought he was overlooked for first team honors. The former Loyola-Blakefield standout led the Retrievers with six goals and 14 points, despite his defensive responsibilities as a central midfielder. He had a brilliant game against nationally ranked Davidson, scoring two goals while UMBC played a man down in a 2-2 draw. Should the forwards struggle, Mezzadra's size, strength and creativity in the box could be an asset on the front line.

"Kevin is really looking forward to his senior year," Caringi says. "He is so valuable to us because of the versatility he provides."

Sophomore Dan Bulls earned a great deal of playing time in his freshman campaign and contributed three assists. He played out wide in the fall, but moved inside this spring and can be effective in either role.

Sophomore Mike Novotny experienced some playing time last season, while red-shirt freshman Matt Ward has recovered from last year's back trouble and both local players will battle for minutes in 2006.

Newcomers to the midfield include junior transfer Marco Valent and freshman Scott Williamson, who both have potential to earn playing time right away.

Defense

Despite the loss of Gross and McGowan, the Retriever defense could still be the strength of the 2006 team. That is because senior Bobby Woods and junior Bryan Moffa both return to the left and right marking back positions, respectively, and there are several talented newcomers who will battle for the central spots.

Woods adapted well to his position last year after spending his first season at UMBC in the midfield. Always supremely-conditioned, the Colorado native played with more aggression in 2005. Moffa rarely makes an error on his side of the field and possesses the skills to lead a counter attack. Both players helped keep the opposition to less than 10 shots per game at the UMBC goal.

Five newcomers could all see action on the UMBC back line. Elliott Marshall is an All State player from the Dallas area who is a solid 6-foot-2, 185-pound central defender. L.J. Pijnenburg will be the first native of New Zealand to suit up for the Retrievers, and at 6-foot-1, 195 pounds, is reputed to be a physical interior defender. Local product Paul Potemra, who was also an All Metro punter/place kicker, played central defense at The Bullis School, one of the top programs in the Washington, D.C. area.

Sophomore transfer Jovan Petrovic and freshman Anton Thomas are both highly skilled players that could earn minutes somewhere in the UMBC backfield.

"They all have outstanding credentials-we will see how they fit in as a unit," Caringi said.

The only Retriever that could be penned into the starting lineup in a defined position is sophomore goalkeeper Steve King. The local product took over the starting role in the nets at Hartford in the league opener and played every minute the rest of the way. He did not allow a goal in his first 424 minutes of action, posted eight solo shutouts in 12 starts and earned America East All-Rookie Team honors.

"Steve was put into a tough situation with a fifth year senior ahead of him," Caringi recalls. "He worked hard, got an opportunity, did the job and won the position. He showed a lot of poise for a freshman and right now, his confidence is sky high. I believe he is one of the best goalkeepers in the area."

Freshman Matt Henderson, a native of Plymouth, Fla., has outstanding prep credentials and will back up King.

UMBC will return to the Soccer Stadium this season and find a new, plush Bermuda grass surface. The Retrievers had put together a streak of 28 straight games (2002-05) without a loss inside Hilltop Circle and Coach Caringi is thrilled about returning after a good year on the Momentum turf of UMBC Stadium.

"We are very happy to be back on that field," Caringi says. "It's a great environment and you are really close to the fans. Our winning streak was built on that field. It's going to be a great facility and it does give us a big home field advantage."

However, don't expect UMBC's 2006 foes to be intimidated. A tough non-league schedule pits the Retrievers against nationally ranked Virginia Tech in the second game of the season and UMBC will face western powers Gonzaga, UC-Irvine and UNLV before September ends. Although he appreciates the top-to-bottom strength of the America East Conference, the Retriever mentor knows there are no "gimme" league games.

"The league is extremely tough, probably underrated," Caringi admits. "It's just a matter of time before this league gets multiple bids. It's quite an accomplishment just to make the conference tournament. America East is putting an emphasis on soccer and it's only going to get stronger."

Coach Caringi will draw on his junior college experience and even the success of a recent team at UMBC as he welcomes so many new faces to the program in August. While at Essex Community College, he dealt with major roster turnover every year and earned national title game appearances in 1984 and 1989. In 2002, UMBC had lost six players in a two-year span to professional contracts, yet that team won a regular season league title and finished at 11-6-3.

"The learning curve is going to have to be accelerated because we have some really tough games at the beginning of the year," Caringi says. "My goal is to see how good we are and develop the team into a cohesive unit that will be difficult to play against at the end of the year. We have some question marks, so I will have to be patient, but I love the challenge-and I think the players will, too."