

Soccer Outlook '07

UMBC Head Men's Soccer Coach Pete Caringi is extremely confident that the 2006 season was an anomaly and that his program has quickly erased those memories and will return to its winning ways in 2007.

The Retrievers had posted eight consecutive winning campaigns heading into last season, but had to replace six starters and 12 letterwinners. After opening with good performances against St. Joseph's, (5-1 win) Virginia Tech, (3-2 loss) and Gonzaga (2-2 draw), things started to go terribly wrong in game No. 4 vs. U. Mass.

The Retrievers fell to the Minutemen, 1-0, but also lost central fullback **L.J. Pijnenburg** for most of the season with a knee injury. In the next game vs. Drexel, UMBC had a 1-0 second half lead, but gave up a "bad" goal to the Dragons and ended up with a 2-1 loss. As league play opened at home in late September, UMBC scored early to take a 1-0 lead over Boston University, but unflappable fullback **Bryan Moffa** was given two yellow cards midway through first half and the Retrievers played a man down for 65 minutes. The Terriers scored late and UMBC had to settle for a tie, a scenario which played out again a week later as Vermont scored in the 80th minute to earn a 1-1 draw.

The end result was a 5-9-3 record and a seventh-place (2-4-2) finish in league play, which kept UMBC out of the America East Tournament. Coach Caringi had a list of excuses to choose from, but he said, "At the end of the day, we didn't get it done."

But, in the next breath, the coach continued, "But I haven't been this excited in awhile. I think we have a lot of potential. You don't win on potential or on paper, but a lot of things have come together to get us back to where we want to be. The players are really looking forward to this year and, as a coach, that's what you get excited about."

The optimism stems from a strong performance in last season's finale, a 5-2 win over playoff hopeful Hartford, a very strong spring campaign and a mixture of now-seasoned veterans and several outstanding newcomers who the coaching staff feels can be molded into a strong league contender.

"We had a great spring with the returning group and I feel that has really propelled the players into the off-season. Good teams are made on the strength of the returning players. But I am also excited about the newcomers...they will make an impact." Caringi said.

One area that must be turned around is the Retriever defense. The offense may have grabbed the headlines during the program's great years, but UMBC averaged 8.6 shutouts per season from 1999-2005. The Retrievers did not blank a single opponent in 2006.

"We could never get a set lineup," Caringi lamented, referring to the missed games by Pijnenburg (nine) and Moffa (three) and the inexperience of the rest of the group. "I don't know if I've ever gone through a season where we were making it up as we went. Soccer is not a game where you can give up a goal or two every game and be successful."

But Coach Caringi is convinced that the defense will be a drastically improved unit. Moffa, the team's lone four-year letterwinner, worked extensively with classmate **Philippe Bissohong**, and juniors Pijnenburg and **Jovan Petrovic** and the quartet had what Caringi termed "a great spring." After a season split between defense and midfield, Bissohong returned to his natural interior defensive slot and developed a great chemistry with the blue-collar style of Pijnenburg.

Moffa, who led the America East with five assists last year, or Petrovic could also be moved into a defensive midfield slot if any of the younger Retrievers prove they can handle one of the marking back positions. Sophomore **Anton Thomas** started three games in the back in '06 and the staff is very high on freshmen **Jeremy Taylor** and **Chris Williams**. Another pair of freshmen, **Mike Gutowski** and **Dustin Dzwonkoski** round out a deep and flexible unit.

Coach Caringi is also confident that junior netminder Steve King can return to his high level of play achieved during his freshman year. He posted shutouts in his first four collegiate starts, but did not record a single "goose-egg" in '06 while playing every minute of every UMBC contest.

"Steve constantly had players changing in front of him," Caringi said. "It is like a quarterback with a changing offensive line. It just doesn't work out. The continuity we had a great spring will be a big plus. I expect a big difference this fall."

Sophomore Matt Henderson will back up King.

Offensively, UMBC lost the services of 2006 leading scorer Kevin Mezzadra (nine goals) and second-leading scorer David Feazell (six goals). But Caringi feels that the offense will have many more options this season.

"This is one of the quicker teams that we've had in a long time," Caringi said. "We have a lot of options that we haven't had since some of our best years. I think we'll be fun to watch."

UMBC's pure strikers are sophomore Andrew Gillis and freshman B.J. Quigley. Gillis scored two of his three goals in the season finale last season as he took the season to become acclimated to the level of Division I competition. The coaching staff raves about the improvement in Gillis' game over the spring and summer as he looks to serve as a target player surrounding by tremendous overall speed.

Coach Caringi describes Quigley as a natural goal scorer. Maryland's Gatorade Soccer Player of the year amassed 27 goals last season, including all the critical playoff scores in Archbishop Curley's MIAA title run.

Juniors Kevin Gnatiko and Dan Bulls should be mainstays on the offense, either up front or in the midfield. The dynamic Gnatiko scored four goals and added three assists last season, but also picked up his commitment level to the game in the spring and summer. The versatile Bulls has logged a lot of minutes in his two seasons and is looking to emerge as more of a scoring threat this season.

A pair of newcomers can certainly keep the pace with the fleet Retriever offense. Junior Shondell Busby, a transfer from Francis Marion University and freshman Levi Houapeu should figure

prominently in the UMBC offense. Busby led his team in scoring in 2004 and earned Peach Belt All Tournament Team honors the following season. Like Gnatiko, Houapeu prepped at Watkins Mill and scored 18 goals in his senior season. Either player could see action up front or at an outside midfield position.

Junior Mike Novotny, who competed in all 17 games last season, and freshman Sean Rothe could also see action at wide midfield. The coaching staff has options in the interior midfield slots, including moving Moffa, Petrovic or Bulls into one of the positions. Sophomore Matt Ward played a myriad of positions in his first campaign and possesses the skills to patrol the center of the field. Freshman John Paul Waraska is a highly-regarded player who could see action in his initial season and local standout Brendan McCarron can play midfield or in the back.

Although the coaching staff is confident that the team will bounce back this season, they also realize the strong, but usually topsy-turvy America East Conference will provide an enormous obstacle to that challenge. There have been five different regular season champions over the past five seasons and it has been the norm to see also-rans in one season challenge for the title a year later.

“There is not an easy game in the conference,” Caringi said. “From top to bottom, it is extremely tough. Our challenge will be to get back into the tournament and play our best soccer at the end of the year.”

UMBC opens the 2007 campaign by taking on Air Force and Temple at the Navy Tournament, then the Retrievers will host the 11th annual adidas Kick Off Classic on the second weekend of the season. Tough non-conference tests vs. some of the region’s strongest team await the Retrievers before they open league play vs. Stony Brook on October 6.