

Discussion begins with A-B

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By David Benoit, Globe Correspondent | September 9, 2007

As the 2007 girls soccer season gets underway, teams across the Bay State are licking their lips in hopes of a trophy presentation in November. From the fields of **Acton-Boxboro** to the pitches at **Dedham** and **Whitman-Hanson**, this season is promising to be full of competitive battles to knock off two-time defending state champion **Braintree**.

The best won't be determined until November, but coming into the season Acton-Boxboro seems to be the team to beat in Division 1. Coach Ruairi Sweeney has seven returning starters from a team that went 19-2 and was ranked at the top for much of 2006. Although they lost only once in the regular season before losing on penalties to Winchester in the MIAA North semifinals, the Colonials weren't satisfied with their season.

"The strength [of this team] is the hunger that they have for making it a more successful season than last year," said Sweeney. "Whether it is wins or losses isn't really a big deal, but they want to get better."

That team returns a solid core, with senior captain Monica Jensen solidifying the back, and fellow seniors Courtney Findlen and Lindsey Raymond spreading the ball around from the center of midfield. A-B also returns All-Scholastic forward Cassie Wagner, who has 57 points in two seasons.

"Cassie brings an all-around soccer game, she kind of reminds me of Ronaldo. I tell her to watch him all the time because she can learn a lot from him," Sweeney said. "She is so skilled and she is so smart, everyone talks about her scoring but it is her passing they should talk about."

In **Westford** they has a player who may be the best antidote to A-B's forwards, junior A.J. Millet, who has 17 career shutouts and a 0.59 goals-against average. She is the top keeper in a league of offensive stars, and Westford will use her to lead a competitive team. Playing in front of the all-state keeper will be captain Jocelyn Veilleux, a senior forward.

Newton South, with a solid offense, will be another tough Dual County League team.

In the Atlantic Coast League, Whitman-Hanson is loaded with talent. Led by a class of juniors that includes the duo of All-Scholastic Kristie Mewis and Devin Petta, who combined for 48 goals last year, the Panthers will be giving defenses fits.

"They have been very potent offensive force and have really been controlling the games the past two years," said head coach Dave Floeck, who returns seven starters from an 18-win squad. "We are a team that can score goals. We finished last year with 86 [goals] in 21 games, and of those we are returning 74 of those, so I think we are going to be a tough team to stay with."

Emily Ballard, who anchors the defense for a second straight year, will be the only senior in the starting lineup.

Newburyport compiled a 21-2 record last season and lost only two starters, making it a favorite in the Cape Ann League. The Clippers return five league all-stars, including captain Margaret Mahoney, who will be joined up front by prolific scorer Jillian Kinter. In the midfield, Taylor Bresnahan and Laura Muise will also look to score. Muise, Mahoney, and Kinter went 1-2-3 in league scoring last season, combining for 70 points.

Last year, Newburyport lost a heartbreaking Division 3 state semifinal when Norwell scored with less than two minutes left.

"Winning the league or the tournament isn't necessarily a goal of mine, the consistency part is really the key," said Newburyport coach Robb Gonnam, who added, "I would like another crack at Norwell."

The Cape Ann League also features **Masconomet**, which surprised many en route to the state semifinals last year. Coach Paula Yanakakis's team returns five players, including tri-captains Erica Skinner, Annie Burns, and Cait Clark.

In the competitive Bay State League, mighty Braintree has graduated some extremely talented players, opening doors for Dedham to take a good shot at the title this year. The Marauders, 16-5-1 last season, bring back nine starters and are the team to beat.

But don't count out Braintree, which is pursuing an unprecedented third straight state championship. The Wamps return seven players who have been on a championship team, including three of four defenders. Senior captain Kalie Whitehouse, Lauren Allison, and Erica Bernasconi will roam the back line.

Expect **Weymouth**, retuning nine starters and led by all-stars Jess Stuart and Kim Clooney, to also contend.

Needham and **Framingham** are also expected to field strong teams. Nora Dooley leads a Needham team that has high expectations and a lot of returnees, while Framingham turns to Melanie Baskind, one of the top midfielders in the league. **Newton North**, as always, will stay in the mix.

Winchester coach Chris Scanlon has his team off to a hot start, and will look to rebound from his worst regular season in his 29 years at the helm. It was his team's first third-place finish in the Middlesex League. . Seniors Meg Sullivan and Michelle Troisi will look to lead the Sachems back to the league title. **Lexington** and **Belmont** are other contenders.

Cardinal Spellman will look to improve on a 21-2-3 campaign by bringing back eight starters, including Alex Keddie. They'll have to contend with a St. Mary's team in the Catholic Central that brings back eight from a 19-win team.

Andover, with six returning starters, will try to improve on its 17 wins in the Merrimack Valley.

Dighton-Rehoboth, led by senior Kelsey Mahoney and a strong group of freshmen, will be another team to watch.

In the Mayflower League, **Sacred Heart** will lean on All-Scholastic Jessica Gray as it bids to repeat as champion.

Marshfield is the favorite in the Old Colony, though it will have to get past talented Bridgewater-Raynham.

Dover-Sherborn brings back a talented junior core in the Tri-Valley. **Norwell** has the talent needed to make it to the Division 3 state championship game for a second straight year. ■