

Worst to first. It is not an easy feat, yet there is precedent that says it can be done. Major League Baseball's Minnesota Twins and Atlanta Braves started the trend when they battled in the 1990 World Series after placing in the basement only one year prior. Football kept the tradition alive as the St. Louis Rams and New England Patriots won Super Bowls in 1999 and 2001, respectively, after having sub-par seasons. However, the accomplishment does not just happen in the big time, free agent world of professional sports. The University of New Mexico men's soccer team finished 0-6-1 in MPSF action during the 2001 season, only to sweep the regular season and tournament titles in 2002.

Worst to first. This is the task at hand for the 2003 San Diego State University men's soccer team, and head coach Lev Kirshner believes he has a team in place that is ready to take on the challenge. An array of injuries struck the Aztecs in 2002, turning an optimistic season into an unfortunate disappointment. The squad, however, has reloaded with the best incoming crew Kirshner has recruited and several key players return from injury, making the future look bright again for men's soccer on top of The Mesa.

"We have high expectations for this year's team and what we can accomplish," said Kirshner. "Our goal is to win the league's regular season and tournament titles, thereby receiving an automatic bid into the NCAA tournament. With the kids we have in place, these are reachable goals

for the upcoming season. Once you get into the tournament anything can happen as evidenced by the 1987 Aztec team that advanced to the championship game after earning the final spot in the tournament."

A lot of the optimism for the year comes from the great success the team had during the spring. The Aztecs went undefeated in their last five games (4-0-1) and started to realize what it is going to take to get to the top.

"We have a great deal of confidence after our tremendous spring. The guys really started to believe in each other and what we have here as a group," said Kirshner. "I believe this season can be something special."

Kirshner points to the depth of the squad as one of the keys to the season. A year ago, injuries cut the roster thin but with 13 newcomers the shelves have been restocked.

"This is by far the strongest recruiting class since I have taken over and that says a lot as we have had some great recruits come in the past couple seasons," said Kirshner. "What makes this group stand out is their diversity. We have hit every positional need, gained experience through the transfers, and added youthful enthusiasm with the freshmen. Plus, we have increased our depth to a level where there is virtually no gap between our first and second string; a great problem to have. The competition in practice for starting roles should be fierce and hopefully will push us to the next level."

The following is a position-by-position breakdown of the 2003 Aztecs.

Forward

The offensive firepower for the upcoming season will be provided by a quality, young group of forwards. Eric Wohl, Raul Bautista, and Matt Couch lead the pack up front and Kirshner cannot wait to see the trio gel together during the season.

"I am really excited about seeing this group grow together as a unit," said Kirshner. "They performed very well during the spring, complimenting each other with their diverse styles of play. Wohl is a prototypical goal scorer as he just knows where to be to get the ball in the back of the net. Bautista is a well-rounded player that has a great ability to finish, and Couch is a very tough, powerful forward who uses his strength to dominate aerial contests better than any young player I have seen."

Wohl is a junior who led the Aztecs with five assists in 2002 and was the second leading scorer on the team with 11 points. Wohl has already tallied 28 points in his first two years on the Mesa and has become a great offensive threat for the Aztecs. Bautista will gain from the experience of

starting in all 19 games his freshman season, despite having to play on the defensive side of the ball for several games. Couch also enters his sophomore campaign with experience under his belt, as he was the fourth-leading scorer for SDSU with seven points in 2002.

Dione Scott and Kraig Chiles enter the program as freshmen who have great offensive ability and will compete for playing time right away. Scott was the Mission League Offensive Player of the Year at Notre Dame HS last season and has tremendous speed, which should provide many goal-scoring chances. Chiles is a local product that will give the Aztecs depth and an opportunity to score goals any time he is near the goal.

Midfield

"We really focused on bringing quality talent to the middle of the park this off-season. After injuries exposed us at that position last year, we knew how important it would be to fill this role and I feel we got some great players that will help us immensely," said Kirshner.

The Aztecs are looking forward to Kevin Sapanli teaming with newcomer Josh Boys to form a duo that will cause havoc on the rest of the league. Sapanli is returning to the midfield after a year studying abroad in Italy. He was an All-MPSF performer in 2001, as he led the Aztecs in scoring with eight goals and 19 points. His return will surely give the Aztecs a lift on the offensive end. Boys transferred to SDSU after three seasons at Oregon State, and will use his experience and great size to dominate on the defensive end of the midfield.

"Sapanli and Boys give us great skill and experience at two of the key positions on the field," said Kirshner. "Most of our offensive attack will be run through Kevin and it will be great to have a player of Josh's caliber behind him to free Kevin to attack."

Blake Perry and Heath Creager will start the year at outside midfield with plenty of talent competing for a job. Perry is a junior coming back for his second year with the Aztecs, after a stop at Fresno State his first season. Creager, decorated as the top player in Arizona out of high school, brings a wealth of championship experience after playing last season at Indiana University.

Several homegrown talents will battle for playing time at the outside positions. Nick Clemens, Colin Jennings, and Kraig Chiles all have come out of the San Diego area with outstanding abilities and will contribute for the Aztecs this season.

"It is great to get hometown kids who have grown up with San Diego State and know what Aztec soccer is about," said Kirshner. "Jennings and Chiles have grown up playing together, which is a great asset



Matt Couch

Aztec Outlook

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as it adds good chemistry to the team."

Nate Slesnick, Josh Arenas, and Jason Benedict will add depth to an already loaded midfield. Slesnick will look to learn from Boys in the middle, as he could be the future defensive midfielder for the Aztecs after a great spring. Arenas is a very deceptive player who knows what is happening on the field. Benedict greatly increases the athleticism of the team, and loves to go one-on-one which should create exciting flank play.

Defender

The Aztec backline also returns several players that will boost the defensive power of squad. Kenny Fechner and Jeff Whitton both look to contribute for SDSU after redshirting due to injury. In addition, senior captain Ryan Curtis will remain in back after a successful transition to central defender last spring. Curtis is the squad's veteran having started in at least 17 games in each of his first three seasons, and having played in every one of the Aztecs' 58 games during his career.

"The return of Fechner and Whitton, along with Curtis, gives us a formidable backline that will be difficult to score on," Kirshner said. "With the three working together this spring, we were able to post four shutouts in 10 games. These three will be instrumental in our success of defending."

Newcomers should take the defense to the next level, as Kirshner has brought in several players who will contribute. On the top of the list is Jordan McKee, a junior transferring in after a national championship run at Yavapai College in Arizona. McKee is the most decorated recruit on the Mesa since the days of three-time World Cup participant Marcelo Balboa. McKee was the 2002 junior college player of the year and named the MVP of last season's national tournament.

In addition, Andrew DiCicco, Mike Mercuriali and Robbie Diaz will compete for starting spots. DiCicco brings an east coast presence to SDSU after being named all-state in Connecticut the last two seasons, while Mercuriali has shown great perseverance and determination and was rewarded for his efforts as he started a few games in the spring. Diaz also had a great spring after practicing with the squad a year ago during his redshirt season.

Goalkeeper

The Aztec pedigree for goalkeeping has turned into one that is second to none. Over the past three years, SDSU has begun a progression of all-conference goalkeepers and Kirshner believes he has the talent to keep the streak intact. Fifth-year senior captain Colin Hanke will try to take advan-



Colin Hanke

tage of his first starting role after playing behind some of the best goalkeeping talent in the league.

"Hanke has great shot-stopping abilities and when he gets consistent game experience under his belt, he will be a dominating goalkeeper," said Kirshner.

Freshman Tally Hall comes in with high expectations to continue the great tradition of Aztec goalkeeping. With Hall's talent he should challenge for the starting position this season. Hall, like Hanke, played his high school soccer in Washington and was an all-state selection after leading his squad to the state semifinals by stopping seven of 10 penalty kicks in two overtime playoff victories.

Schedule

One of the goals for Kirshner, since his arrival in 2000 as the head coach of the SDSU program, is for the Aztecs to play the best competition in the country. The 2003 lineup is no different with four tournaments and five opponents that were in last season's NCAA championship.

"We have an absolutely awesome schedule. Arguably, it's the best we have ever had," said Kirshner. "The variety of teams, the level of our opponents and the different locations we will play make it a perfect fit for our team. Additionally, we are playing against teams that will prepare us for post-season competition."

SDSU will enjoy 10 games at the Sports Deck this season, while traveling across the country to New Jersey and playing in Las Vegas for a tournament.

The season begins with the Aztecs host-

ing the SDSU adidas Tournament on opening day at the Sports Deck, Aug. 29, against 2002 NCAA tournament squad, Oregon State. The first tournament concludes with a matchup against Long Island on Aug. 31. The Aztecs will face off against San Diego rival Point Loma Nazarene on Sept. 4 before another home game against UC Riverside on Sept. 13. The Aztecs will then hit the road for the UNLV Soccer Tournament for matchups against Bowling Green and Drake on Sept. 19 and 21, respectively.

Next the Aztecs travel across Highway 8 to the USD Tournament, which brings Hofstra and Albany to San Diego for contests on Sept. 26 and 28. October will take SDSU to perennial soccer power, Rutgers. The two squads face off at the Phillips/adidas Classic in Piscataway, N.J. on Oct. 3, and will also mark the return of Kirshner to face his mentor Bob Reaso and his alma mater. The second game of the classic on Oct. 5 pits SDSU against St. John's, which finished the 2002 season ranked in the top 10 after advancing to the NCAA tournament a year ago.

San Diego State returns home to face local rival University of San Diego (Oct. 11) before opening up the conference schedule. After a disappointing run through the MPSF season a year ago, the Aztecs are ready to surprise some of their familiar foes. Kirshner sees the same teams battling for the first in the league, however.

"New Mexico has won back-to-back tournament titles and we will have to beat the champion if we want to take over the top spot," said Kirshner. "Also, San Jose State will be tough as they always are fighting for the automatic bid. This conference has great parity and will require consistent performances from start to finish."

The Aztecs begin the MPSF year in Las Vegas against UNLV on Oct. 20. The squad then hosts Denver (Oct. 24) and Air Force (Oct. 26) before traveling to San Jose State (Oct. 31) and Sacramento State (Nov. 2). The regular season wraps up with two NCAA squads from last season as they visit Los Angeles to face Loyola Marymount on Nov. 5 before finishing the year at home against the defending MPSF champion New Mexico on Nov. 9.

The Aztecs look to return to the MPSF tournament, which will be hosted by Sacramento State this year. The top six teams during the regular season advance to postseason action. The tournament begins on Nov. 13 with quarterfinal action between the bottom four teams, as the number one and two seeds earn byes. The semifinals will be held on Nov. 14 with the final on Nov. 16. The winner of the tournament earns an automatic bid to the NCAA championships.