

SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY 2013 WOMEN'S SOCCER OUTLOOK

New head coach Katie Shields is confident that the 2013 Saint Louis University women's soccer team has enough talent to make a run at the program's first Atlantic 10 Conference title since 2006.

Shields, however, doesn't initially mention physical skills when discussing the strengths of this year's Billikens. Instead, she emphasizes her players' positive mindset as well as their dedication to returning the program to a place of prominence in the A-10 and beyond.

"Our players believe in themselves, which they absolutely should," said Shields, who is in her second season at SLU after serving as an assistant coach in 2012. "They have raised the standards and changed the culture as far as what it's like to be a part of this team. The program has a buzz around it now. The players have prepared themselves and have bought in to what we're doing, and they're starting to see how much fun it is to be a part of the culture we've developed."

The journey toward this confidence began in January after Shields was selected as the third head coach in SLU women's soccer history. Significant progress made in spring workouts and games, plus a strong commitment to improving fitness during the summer, gave the team a springboard into preseason training camp.

"Last spring we talked a lot about what we want to be like as a program, how we want to be perceived and what kind of soccer we want to play," Shields said. "The returning players took those discussions to heart, laid a good foundation and have continued to meet our standards. That went a long way toward making a very smooth transition into the preseason."

A shining example of the Billikens' veteran leadership occurred at the outset of camp.

"Jessie Jarrett and Jenny Hummert set the standard in our preseason fitness test," Shields said. "It's very encouraging to have two senior captains do that. The team as a whole came back very fit, which allowed us to start at a better point than before."

Seven freshmen have joined SLU's 18 returning players. The newcomers have adapted well to a new environment, enhancing their potential to make immediate contributions.

"Getting everybody on the same page as far as our style of play and identity as a program has been the key emphasis," Shields said. "We brought in a group of freshmen who have some attacking power and punch, which the coaching staff had identified as a need for the program. We focused a lot on incorporating them into our attack during the preseason, and it's been exciting to see them jell with the veterans."

"We've built a solid base to carry into the season, which has taken the enthusiasm we had coming into camp to a higher level," Shields said. "Now we're looking forward to seeing how far we can push, how we can continue to layer different elements of the game and sophistication into the team."

Defining and discussing goals is a key element in any team's preseason preparation, and the Billikens are no exception. Experiencing a three-year drought with no postseason play has provided the team with an obvious primary objective.

"We spent about two hours one day during preseason camp in a specific goal-setting team meeting which was heavily driven by the players," Shields said. "We set some benchmarks for the team in terms of wins, goals scored, goals against and shutouts. But our primary goal, the one we're focused on the most, is qualifying for the A-10 tournament and competing for the championship."

“We felt as though we could have qualified last year, but we came up short and were disappointed about it,” Shields said. “This year’s team has the talent to not only qualify for the tournament, but also to win it. We just need to put the pieces together.”

While stingy defense continues to be a Saint Louis women’s soccer trademark, goals have been hard to come by for the Billikens in recent seasons. But Shields believes this year’s team has the right combination of mindset, style and personnel to sizzle in the final third.

“We have players who want to keep the ball on the ground and play an attractive style of attacking soccer,” Shields said. “It’s a team that’s excited to score goals. With our returning players having another year of experience under their belts, plus the addition of the freshmen, I’m confident we’ll create a lot more scoring chances than we did last year.”

The Bills’ 18-game schedule includes a program-record 11 home contests, beginning with Western Michigan Aug. 23. The eight-game conference schedule starts Sept. 27 at home against St. Bonaventure. SLU plays twice the following two weekends before concluding with three consecutive one-game weekends.

“I like the A-10 because the schedule is a bit different every year,” Shields said. “St. Bonaventure, Duquesne, Massachusetts and Rhode Island are new teams, at least for me, that we’ll face this year, and adding George Mason obviously gives the conference a new angle. We don’t see the defending champion, La Salle, but Dayton was right there on their heels. The Dayton game is always a fun one that we get as a one-game weekend.

“I think it will be a tight race, and I think we have a great shot at winning it,” Shields said. “We finish with three one-game weekends, and that’s as good a setup as you can get from a scheduling perspective. The players are looking forward to it. It’s laid out well for us, now we just have to play up to our potential and take advantage of the opportunity.”