

Alton Girls Soccer Coach Gwen Sabo Reflects On Record-Setting Season

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
May 27 2022 2:00 PM



ALTON – The Alton High School girls soccer team had a bounce-back season for the ages. It came after a 3-13 campaign in 2021, one that head coach Gwen Sabo said was “extremely disheartening.”

“I could not believe we had such a down year,” Sabo said. “I would love to erase our record from last season from my memory, but I think us having such a down year last year played into our success this year big time.”

The Redbirds came out and posted a 17-5 record this season.

To Sabo’s knowledge (and she said she did a lot of digging) this season record-wise was the best in program history. She reached out to former coaches and players as well as scoured the internet to confirm and she says she is “98% confident” that her team had the winningest season in school history.

“I have a very competitive group of girls and as a team, we agreed that we weren't going to let last year's record define Alton soccer and we were determined to do better this season,” Sabo said.

They were certainly better this season, and the program has come a long way from just 12 months ago, The Redbirds scored 86 goals this season compared to last year’s 21. They boasted 11 shutouts this season compared to only two last year. A second-place finish in the Southwestern Conference compared to sixth last season.

A huge part of this year’s success Sabo says is due to the amount of talent she had returning.

“As a coach, I felt confident we would do better this season compared to last year just based on the players I had returning,” she said. “Four of my five seniors opted to not play high school soccer their junior seasons, so I knew it would be clutch having them back in 2022. I also knew I had a very talented freshman class coming in, so I was looking forward to seeing them on the field.”

Sabo had returnees like Tori Schrimpf who opted to play club soccer her junior year. She had the Freer sisters freshman Lily and senior Taylor. Also, the Baker sisters who are both juniors. Peyton helped pick up those 11 shutouts in goal and Emily was Alton’s most explosive forward finishing the season with 31 goals.

“As for the Bakers and the Freers, it has been a super cool experience to have two sets of sisters all on varsity together and all be key contributors to our success,” Sabo said.

“This is one of the reasons I love coaching high school soccer. There's a community aspect that you just don't see at the club level. I've had the pleasure of coaching some awesome kids in my four seasons at Alton, and I always love it when a player/family I've connected with has a younger sibling who makes their way up to the high school to join the program.”

She used freshman Lyndsey Miller as an example. Sabo got to coach her older sister Addison for three seasons before she graduated and went on to continue playing in college.

“I love getting to make those connections with families in the community,” she added.

With the mixture of age, the team was still able to find terrific chemistry together which is something Sabo strived for.

“To be honest, I'm not exactly sure how we did so well this year,” Sabo said. “I think we had a really motivated group who cliqued together from the very beginning. I always stress team chemistry, which is why we do so many team bonding activities, and I think that really paid off for us this year.”

“I started three freshmen every game from the beginning of the season and because we had such good team chemistry with the younger girls and the older girls, the freshmen were able to feel confident on the field and perform their best.”

Two of those freshmen were Lily Freer and Lyndsey Miller who were constant starters. The others were Kristina Castelli and Abi Davis who rotated in and out of the defense toward the end of the season.

Alton's five losses this season were against great teams as well. A couple of defeats from O'Fallon, a 3-1 setback against Triad, and two absolute heartbreakers against the Edwardsville Tigers. Edwardsville is now in the sectional finals and O'Fallon and Triad are both defending state champions.

The Tigers were the ones to end Alton's season in the regional finals back on May 20. The Redbirds fell 2-1.

“Believe me, being an Alton grad myself, I definitely consider Edwardsville to be our rival which is why losing to them to end our season stings even more,” she said. “I truly felt like we had a better team this year and should have won a regional title.”

After a tough exit to the season, Sabo believes she has all the pieces to have another good season next year. She will be returning all but three starters from this season's lineup. Those three were Taylor Freer, Tori Schrimpf, and Haylie Butler. The other two seniors graduating from the program are Josie Paniagua and Caroline Stobbs.

"I think we are definitely on the right track as a program to have another successful season next year," Sabo said. "It's going to take a lot of work and dedication in the off-season, but I'm optimistic that this group will do that."

"We set team goals at the beginning of each season, and I guarantee winning a regional will be at the top of our list."