

Alton Girls Soccer Program Left With Unexpected Work To Do With Tough Regular Season Slate Approaching

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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ALTON - On record, last season was the best ever for the Alton High School girls soccer program. The Lady Redbirds finished the season at 17-5, the most wins in a season in program history.

When it came to the playoffs, they beat Collinsville 3-0 in the Regional Semifinals but came up short against Edwardsville in the regional title game by a score of 2-1.

All of that came after a 3-13 campaign in the 2021 season.

Things were on the rise for the program, but after graduating six and losing other key players for various reasons, head coach Gwen Sabo finds her team in a bit of an unexpected rebuild.

"Truthfully, I was very surprised. We had a very low turnout this season," Sabo said Monday afternoon before practice at Public School Stadium.

"We had 46 in the program last year and we had a very good season, lots of positives, one of the best seasons ever, and this year we had 30 girls come out."

"I'm really surprised by it and kind of dumbfounded," she said.

The program was hoping for a better turnout to replace what it has lost.

"Overall we lost six starters," Sabo said.

Three of those she knew about with Haylie Butler, Taylor Freer, and Tori Schrimpf all being Spring 2022 graduates.

But over the offseason, Sabo was hit with some deflating news.

Kennedy Stephens graduated early in December and will be ineligible for Spring sports. Alayna Rabozzi is going to flight school, and having to fly so many hours per week, she won't be available throughout the season. Lily Freer chose to play club soccer for her Scott Gallagher team that won nationals last year.

All of these came as a surprise to coach.

"I wasn't really expecting those three," Sabo said.

The team was set to bring back three of its top four scorers, but now they'll have to settle for two. Lily Freer scored 16 goals last season and Tori Schrimpf had 12.

The dangerous Emily Baker returns after a 31-goal campaign last year and so does Lyndsey Miller who had 10 goals and 12 assists.

"I still have talented players coming back, I just wasn't expecting to have so many gaps as I do," Sabo said.

"We have a lot of gaps to fill, but that's just more opportunity for girls that didn't play as much last year, or girls that weren't even on varsity or in the program last year."

Of the current varsity roster of 18 players, eight of them are newcomers, and five of those eight are underclassmen.

Sabo mentioned that the likes of the Baker sisters certainly help, Emily the goal scorer, and Peyton the goal stopper.

Peyton Baker was the starting goalkeeper all of last season and picked up an impressive 11 shutouts. Both sisters are already committed to play soccer in college.

"I have a strong senior class, Sabo said. "The seniors are excited. Some of them are going off to play college soccer, some, this is just their last time playing soccer and I think they're all ready to step in and fill in some gaps for me."

Seniors Madi Cooke, Katie Stark, and Juliana Rensing all return to the team with some big shoes to fill.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how our seniors can kind of become leaders on the field and positively influence and encourage their teammates," Sabo said.

With all that going on, the Lady Redbirds can look forward to a pretty grueling schedule.

They'll kick off the season in the annual Metro Cup Tournament, where schools all over the Metro-East are pitted against some non-conference schools that they wouldn't otherwise see.

Alton will take on Mascoutah, Springfield, and Gibault Catholic to open the season, all three being pretty tough opponents.

Other difficult non-conference tilts include past Class 3A State Champions Triad, Class 1A Sectional Champions Althoff Catholic, an overnight trip against Rock Bridge High School in Columbia, Missouri, and a couple of cross-town rivalry games with Marquette Catholic and Civic Memorial.

Then there is the daunting Southwestern Conference in which they play in. A couple of games against Class 3A Sectional winners Edwardsville, and two more against an ominous O'Falon team, and the Redbirds' schedule seems pretty challenging.

The Metro Cup Tournament game against Gibault will be played at Gordon Moore Park on March 17 at 7:45 p.m.

Alton's home-opener will see two Alton alumni behind the benches when Tyler Hamilton and Piasa Southwestern come to town on March 21 at 6 p.m.

Alton will play half of its home games at the high school's Piasa Motor Fuels Field and the others on the turf at Public School Stadium.