

Search & Rescue

Men's soccer is banking on its largest recruiting class in Rutgers'

history to get back on track. *By Bill Glovin*

More than 15 framed photos of former Scarlet Knight all-Americans grace the walls of the soccer offices, housed temporarily in a metal trailer in the Hale Center parking lot. Some players are pictured as heat-seeking missiles. Others pose stoically, peering into the distance like Greek gods. All are in Rutgers jerseys. Propped up against the wall is a poster of Alexi Lalas (RC'92). That poster—produced by Adidas to promote its line of soccer shoes—not only links one of the biggest stars in the history of American soccer to Rutgers but is also found in bedrooms of countless young American soccer players.

For coach Bob Reasso, who suited up 18 new

recruits to fill 30 roster spots this fall, the pictures do more than cover bare walls. “The images are the first thing that recruits and their parents see when they come to visit,” says Reasso, who uses them to talk about soccer’s winning tradition at the university. They were crucial, he explains, in helping to build the “largest and deepest recruiting class” in his 22 years at Rutgers.

The coach is upbeat and energized about the new players. “A Big East title and making a run for the NCAA tournament championship is always our goal, and it will be no different this season,” says Reasso. He’s counting on his ability to size up talent to rebound from last season, in which a combination of injuries to key players, controversial calls, and funny bounces led to Rutgers’ first .500 season under the salt-and-pepper haired coach.

scarlet sports

The search for new players to fill the larger-than-usual number of roster spots left vacant by graduating seniors began where it always does: in New Jersey. Expected to have an immediate impact is Mercer County Community College's Ricardo Arenas. Not only did Arenas lead the school to last year's national final, he plays for the Guatemalan national team. Other New Jersey blue chippers include midfielder Nick LaBrocca, striker Adam Sternberger, and goalie Lubos Ancin, who started for the Slovakian junior national team before moving to the U.S. All competed on all-state, regional all-star, or top club teams.

Still, Reasso says that New Jersey high schools aren't the mecca for talent they once were and that the 2002-2003 recruiting class "was one of the worst in Jersey in the past decade." The silver lining, however, was that "we felt that we got three out of the top five players."

Associate head coach Jeff Zaun (CC'95) points out that New Jersey no longer has a monopoly on talent, in part, because neighboring states have caught up with it. The growing popularity of youth soccer in the U.S. has drawn more kids to the sport, making recruiting more competitive. Rutgers coaches now find themselves shoulder to shoulder with as many as 150 other coaches at tournaments, which are held almost every weekend in the spring and summer.

Another reason for the shift is that immigrant families from countries where soccer is king aren't settling in the same numbers in the New York metropolitan area, but are moving further out into the region. "In the late '80s or early '90s, any one of the top 15 players in New Jersey was capable of establishing himself on the Division I level," says Zaun, himself a former New Jersey High School Player of the Year. "This year Pennsylvania was the best state in the region. New Jersey gets a little

better next year and in two years we should be very good again. It's cyclical."

Rutgers coaches traveled as far as the Netherlands to recruit this year, but the biggest prize of the high school class, Tommy Birch—a member of the U.S. youth national team from 1999-2001 and Mid-Penn Player of the Year—hails from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. The coaches also went after five players from Bethesda Alliance in Maryland, the best 17- and-under club team from Maine to Virginia. "Jeff sensed early on that these kids wanted to play together; we pursued them very hard, and landed four of the five," says Reasso.

Reasso hopes that from this new crop of players will emerge another Lalas, who plays for the Los Angeles Galaxy of Major League

Soccer, or Peter Vermes (CC'88), a former U.S. national team member. Both their photos feature prominently on Reasso's wall.

"Recruiting is the absolute life-blood of your program, and great players beget other great players who create a nucleus," says Reasso, who

begins another sentence before finishing the last. "Dave Masur's decision to transfer here in my first year in 1981 got the ball rolling for us. Future all-Americans like Vermes and Bobby Joe Esposito (CC'87) came on Dave's heels, and on their heels came Alexi [Lalas], Lino DiCuollo (RC'93, CLaw'96) Steve Rammel (LC'91), and Dave Mueller (ENG'92). Alexi, Steve, Lino, and Dave went to both a national final and a Final Four—and that led to the next crop of great players."

(continued on page 16)



REASSO (TOP) CREDITS HIS ASSISTANT COACHES AND FORMER KNIGHTS PEDRO LOPES, (LEFT), NOW HEAD COACH AT NJIT, AND JEFF ZAUN, WITH FINDING MANY OF THE NEW RECRUITS.

Eighteen new players join the Scarlet Knights men's soccer team this fall, listed here with their hometowns and schools.

NEW JERSEY Ricardo Arenas, Guatemala City (Mercer County CC); Nick LaBrocca, Howell (Christian Brothers Academy); Lubos Ancin, Burlington (Burlington HS); Adam Sternberger, Petersburg (Ocean City HS); Arkadiusz Jodelka, Iselin (JFK HS)

MARYLAND Billy Chiles, Silver Spring (Springbrook HS); Larry Mark, Beltsville (DeMatha Catholic HS); Alieu Terry, Silver Spring (Montgomery Blair HS); Daniel Waldo, Bethesda (Walt Whitman HS)

PENNSYLVANIA Tommy Birch, Mechanicsburg (Cumberland Valley HS); Jason Pelletier, Middletown (Middletown HS); Warren Richards, Philadelphia (Friends Central HS)

NEW YORK Jared Komar, Hyde Park (Roosevelt HS); Tamer Mohamed, Queens (Holy Cross HS); Lexton Moy, Manhattan (Friends Seminary)

GEORGIA Brinker Dailey, Atlanta (Wesleyan HS)

FLORIDA Joe Donaho, Tampa (Jesuit HS)

NETHERLANDS Bart Koffeman, Den Haag

“ We didn’t reinvent the wheel, we just had a great group of kids who bought into our system, and a terrific group of assistants. ”

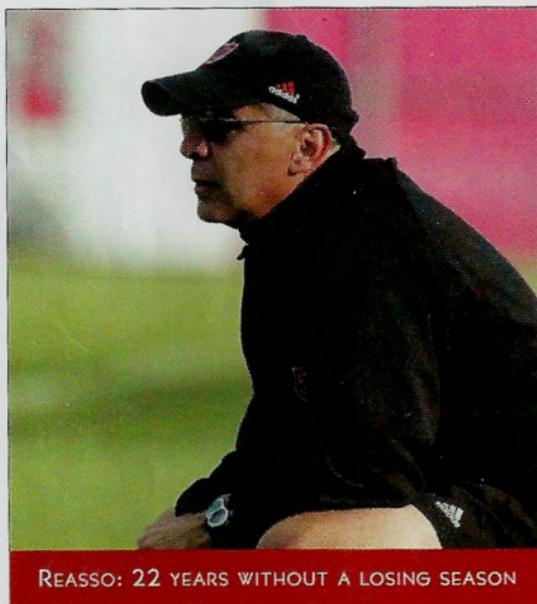
~SCARLET KNIGHTS MEN’S LACROSSE COACH JIM STAGNITTA, NAMED DIVISION I NATIONAL COACH OF THE YEAR AFTER GUIDING RUTGERS TO A 10-5 RECORD AFTER A 2-12 CAMPAIGN IN 2002.



(continued from page 15)

“Bob showed me and several other players who are now coaches how to run a forthright, first-class program,” says Masur (LC’85), who coached Big East Conference rival St. John’s to a national title in 1996. “He was the first coach to organize a national tournament on his campus; Rutgers was also one of the first [university] programs to draw a significant number of fans.” Masur says he also learned the importance of going out of one’s way to develop close, personal relationships from Reasso. Case in point: Reasso spent three hours last Memorial Day with a recruit as he passed through New Jersey on his way home from a wedding. Soon after, the player committed to Rutgers.

The university’s academic reputation and affordability are also selling points, as are the 9.9 scholarships mandated by the NCAA.



REASSO: 22 YEARS WITHOUT A LOSING SEASON

Making this year’s class of players even more impressive is that, due to NCAA penalties, Reasso had only 7.8 scholarships to dole out.

While there are any number of arguments that Zaun uses to influence a blue chipper to don scarlet, he always harks back to his own Rutgers experiences, which include two Final Fours. “We play in a beautiful facility and haven’t had a losing season in 22 years, which makes my job easier,” he says. Every recruit wants those things, he adds. Not to mention a chance to see his photo up on Reasso’s wall someday.