

Mack again expected to be area's best

By MIKE ROSENTHAL
SPECIAL WRITER

Don't be surprised if this year's list of the top 10 area soccer players gives you a feeling of déjà vu. There are plenty of familiar names on the list, as perennial stars return for their senior seasons.

For the third straight year, the list is topped by Birmingham Seaholm's Ryan Mack, who may not only be the top player in the state, but country as well. Inured are eight seniors and two juniors.

1. Ryan Mack, Seaholm - The senior forward was recently chosen for the United States Under-17 National Team and is a top Division I college recruit. But first, Mack's fans will enjoy watching him for one more season.

Mack tallied 27 goals and 21 assists last year, earning All-State honors.

"One of the most skillful ballplayers in high school in the country," Seaholm coach Ken Hammond said of Mack. "He's extremely talented, a game-breaker, playmaker and a good finisher. He even played goalkeeper for me in a district game two years ago. He's an excellent

dribbler. The kind of player who can take on any number of people and be successful."

2. Chris Kogut, Country Day - The senior forward earned All-State honors last year, leading the Yellow Jackets with 21 goals and adding 12 assists. "He's very technically quick," CDD coach Paul Bartoshuk said of Kogut. "He has fast feet and is a good finisher. He is very capable of taking players on in the attacking one-third of the field. He has a lot of experience."

3. Jeff Beeler, Brother Rice - Rice's captain, the senior center-midfielder earned Second Team All-State and First Team All-Catholic and All-Area honors last year. He netted 10 goals and added five assists in 1996. The versatile player also played some forward for Rice. In the off-season he played defense for his club team.

He plays both ways equally strong. "Rice coach Jay Louis-Preseccot said, 'He's a tough defender and very intelligent. He's had great coaching at every level and been very successful. He makes everybody around him a better player because he's so smart.'"

4. Aaron Byrd, Lahser - The

center-midfielder was a sophomore sensation last year, netting 15 goals and earning the Oakland Activities Association's Division III most valuable player honors, along with First Team All-Area notice.

"He's very skillful," Lahser coach Eddie Van Schaick described Byrd. "He goes to the target whenever he has a shot. He's always looking to create something, either for himself or somebody else."

5. Brian Larkin, Troy - The best of a strong, balanced group of Troy players this season, the senior midfielder had 17 goals and seven assists last year and earned All-Area honors.

Troy coach Carlos Wheatley calls Larkin "a good, natural, all-around soccer player."

"He has good vision," Wheatley said. "He is unselfish and the kind of player you want on the field all the time. He is dangerous from just about anywhere, as far as his shooting goes, and very good in the air."

6. Braden Ruddy, Roeper - The Class D All-Stater enters his fourth year as a starter for Roeper. He scored 17 goals and added 13 assists from his midfield spot last season.

"Braden has been involved in the Olympic Development Program," Roeper coach Mike Ruddy said. "He's a Division I prospect. He's extremely skillful, a hard worker and unpredictable. He is probably our best individual player who has good speed and good quickness."

7. Luke Spreitzer, Troy Athens - A multi-talented player, the senior goalkeeper earned Honorable Mention All-State honors as a sophomore and was Honorable Mention All-Area last season. He may be the area's top goalkeeper this year, then again, he may be one of the area's better forwards, depending on how coach Tim Storch decides to utilize his talents.

"He's a very talented goalkeeper," Storch said of Spreitzer. "If we focused him in goal, he would be in the running for one of the top goalkeepers in the state. He's also one of our best field players. Fortunately, we have some capable backup goals behind him. We're going to try to use Luke in both capacities. I'm not really sure how that's all going to sort out."

8. Erik Nelson, Country Day - The senior midfielder earned Second Team All-Area

notice last season. He benefits from his near year-round association with Kogut as both play for the Birmingham Blazers during the summer. The pair should prove to be a formidable one-two punch.

"Nelson has really improved his game to the point where he's one of the top midfielders in the state," Bartoshuk said. "He's very adept at controlling the game, an excellent dribbler and a great passer. He's the best playmaker on our team."

9. Joe Morelli, Brother Rice - A Second Team All-Catholic selection last year, the junior is one of the area's top defenders.

"He's been starting since early in his freshman season," Louis-Preseccot said. "He plays very tight-marking defensively and also makes a lot of runs offensively. We're looking for him to get more involved in the offense this year. He can run forever and still get back on defense. He's an intense player and a real leader."

10. Ryan Byrd, Groves - Like many of the area's elite players, Byrd, a senior sweeper, is a team captain in more than just name.

"He's a good leader," Groves

coach Tom Gond said. "He's got excellent foot skills and is real good at picking up the first man through from the offense. It seems like he's always in the right place at the right time."

Other top players: Troy - Brian Murphy, Justin Coffey (senior, midfielders), Dave DeHorn, P.J. Stranahan (junior defender), Andover - Scott Epstein (senior sweeper); Athens - Nate Sanford (senior forward); Adams - Bobby Tull (senior defender), Mike Ashen-Strong (sophomore forward); Avondale - Chad Schwab (senior forward), Sebastian Ponce (sophomore sweeper); Roeper - Marty Clurik (junior goalkeeper); Brother Rice - Chad Nowak (senior midfielder); Country Day - Dan Doman (senior defender), David Barkholz (junior sweeper), David Barkholz (sophomore forward); Lahser - David Burnett (senior center-forward), Nick Lardo (senior midfielder); Southfield Christian - Dan Bryant (senior midfielder); Cranbrook - Josh Epstein (junior midfielder); Groves - Adam Cohen (senior forward).

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Athens' top returner is senior Luke Spreitzer. An Honorable Mention All-State goalkeeper in 1995, Spreitzer may split his time between goal and forward this year as Coach Tim Storch searches for players who can put the ball into the net. The top full-time forward will be senior Nate Sanford, a returning starter.

"We're looking for people like Sanford to pick up some of the scoring slack from Hodges," Storch said. "We're going to have to score goals by committee, rather than relying on one or two kids to rack up a ton of goals. We need a group of people to score five or six goals here or there."

Other Red Hawks' returners include four key seniors: midfielder Chris Blust plus defenders Mike Veselnsky, Alex Eve and sweeper Rick Garrish.

Storch wants to "play a controlled passing game using the flanks, play solid defensively and rely on good, strong goal keeping."

Athens should be strong but may find it difficult to match last year's accomplishments - a 13-5-2 record and OAA Division I championship.

5. Birmingham Seaholm - The big man is back for his senior season, giving the Maples hope that they can again contend for OAA Division I honors following an 11-5-2 campaign. Ryan Mack, who was recently chosen for the U.S. National Under-17 team, may be the top player in the state. The forward had 27 goals and 21 assists last season. As expected, Seaholm's offense will revolve around Mack again. But the key to the team, according to Coach Ken Hammond, is how the Maples integrate Mack into an overall team strategy.

Hammond said he must find "a way in which we can work as a group. Ryan Mack is an outstanding player. The key is being able to blend him with the others, and the others with him - to be unified."

The "others" are a pretty fair group, which includes three Honorable Mention All-Area choices - senior midfielder Zachary Kadro, senior defender Josh Menig and senior goalkeeper Chris Glime. Another key returner is junior defender Jess Scheuler.

Hammond hopes to play a "ball control" offense.

6. Bloomfield Hills Lahser - The Knights simply overwhelmed OAA Division III squads last year on their way to an 18-2-1 overall mark and a district championship. Lahser is expected to dominate its division again.

The Knights return their top scorers, including OAA most valuable player Aaron Byrd, an All-Area center-midfielder who netted 15 goals as a sophomore last year. Also back is senior center-forward David Burnett, also a 16-goal scorer. The Knights' top defensive player is senior midfielder Nick Lardo.

Lahser Coach Eddie Van Schaick will again employ a wide-open offense.

"We just play very offensive and try to score one more goal than the opponent. We'll try to go for a passing game rather than a running game."

7. Rochester Adams - New Coach Ralph Torre takes over a squad which was a respectable 8-8-3 while playing the tough OAA Division I schedule. This year's Highlanders will likely have to look up at Troy, Athens and Seaholm.

Adams will receive senior leadership from defenders Bobby Tull, a Second Team All-Area choice, and Eric Stubenvol, plus midfielder Mike Ashenfelder. Torre also inherits a pair of returning sophomores: senior forward Ricky Strong and midfielder Ben Walker.

Torre wants to play a possession game. The key to the season, Torre said is "how we come along with trying to play that (possession) type of game, and figuring out how to do it."

Adams should be strong but may find it difficult to match last year's accomplishments - a 13-5-2 record and OAA Division I championship.

The Falcons return their top player, senior sweeper Ryan Byrd, a Second Team All-Area and Honorable Mention All-State selection last season. Also returning is Groves' leading scorer, senior forward Adam Cohen, along with senior midfielder Ryan Miller and senior midfielder-forwards Ben Shomer.

Coach Tom Gond says Groves will again be a solid, physical team this season.

"We have extremely strong defenders. We're strong right up the middle and extremely strong on defense."

9. Bloomfield Hills Roeper - Roeper returns key players across the field who helped the team finish 14-3-4 last year. Roeper was the undefeated MIAC champ and reached the Class D semifinals.

Braden Ruddy returns as a fourth-year starter at midfield. The Class D All-Stater totaled 17 goals and 13 assists last year. Other key returners include All-State Honorable Mention choice Marty Clurik, a junior goalkeeper, plus junior defender Adam Brennan, who moves into the sweeper spot this season.

Also back is senior forward Morgan Trinkans and senior defender Joe Abraham.

"We're going to play fairly defensive and not take a lot of chances," said Coach Mike Ruddy. "When we get the ball we'll try to keep it. We'll basically play ball-possession. We'll be reasonably good defensively but scoring goals could be a problem."

10. Auburn Hills Avondale - The Yellow Jackets will be the area's United Nations team, featuring players from Argentina, Romania, Columbia, and possibly other countries as well. The multi-national squad blended well last year, placing third in the OAA's Division III and finishing 11-7-1 overall.

Avondale will combine youth with experience. The Jackets have just three seniors. But seven of their 11 juniors are third-year lettermen.

Avondale's top returners

include senior forward Chad Schwab, a Second Team All-Stater who tied school records with 21 goals and 29 points last season, plus three Honorable Mention All-Area picks: senior center-midfielder Christian Mejin, who may move to forward this year, senior center-midfielder Alin Forgaci and sophomore sweeper Sebastian Ponce.

"We should be a much better skilled team this year," said Coach Dave Nuczynski. "We're going to try to work through our wings. Hopefully we can try to spread the field out a little more. Last year we just attacked through the middle."

Other teams to watch:

Rochester had a senior-dominated starting lineup last year. So the usually-strong Falcons will have to rebuild under first-year Coach Erik Pfeiffer. He expects to have five sophomores and a pair of freshmen among his contributors this season. Fellow OAA Division I competitor West Bloomfield should be more skilled this year, according to Coach Deepak Shivraman. But the Lakers will also be young, with just three seniors. The key players should include the junior trio of midfielder Steve Kolb and forwards John Wayman and Brian Davidson. Although Cranbrook was just 5-7-6 last year, Coach Rob Suf-

fredini hopes the Cranes can contend for Metro Conference honors this season. They're led by All-State Honorable Mention midfielder Josh Epstein and fellow junior Oliver Chapman, the goalkeeper. Southfield Christian was second to Roeper in last year's MIAC race, but lost most of its starting lineup. Seniors Lael Bryant (midfield) and Dan Caldwell (defender) remain to lead the team. Coach Scott Berthel hopes to play a "fluid" passing game. Andover hopes to battle Lahser and Groves in OAA Division III. The young Barons are led by Honorable Mention All-Stater Scott Epstein, a senior sweeper, plus

senior forward Justin Schram. Coach Lee Fruman expects to start five sophomores and freshmen. In the Western Lakes Activities Association, both Walled Lake teams have new coaches. Central will be coached by Joel Sharpe, who'll use a possession-style game. His leading returners include seniors John Frandevy (midfield), Jason Auer and Pete Kelso (defense). Western Coach Joe Nora will inherit a rebuilding team which will feature many freshmen and sophomores. Southfield-Lathrup will feature a mix of seniors and freshmen, led by senior captain Nate Cooper and Tom Dillon, both defenders.

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