



C.J. Risak

Lousy planning doomed Ocelots at the NJCAA

THE SEASON'S over, sure. But the doubt remains, and likely will linger for some time.

After all, it had been 10 years since Schoolcraft College's men's soccer team had reached the National Junior College Athletic Association Tournament. If it takes another decade to again travel that distance, the memory of this trip will continue to eat away at those associated with it.

Ending the season with a pair of 3-0 losses in a national eight-team tournament could certainly be tolerated if the Ocelots had been defeated by superior forces. The question is — Were they?

It's a question without an answer.

Coach Van Dimitriou admitted after SC's loss to Lees McRae, which doomed his team to a last-place finish in the tournament, that his players could have been better prepared. Indeed, said Dimitriou, not much went right.

The blame for the problems — and he must be held accountable — is Dimitriou's.

HIS TEAM had the raw talent to make a run at the national title. The team that beat SC in its opening — Passaic County CC — made it to the NJCAA title game before losing.

Still, Passaic was beatable. This squad of mostly foreign players had more speed and an abundance of talent, to be sure. But a disciplined, low-pressure style could have been effective, even successful. The Passaic keeper, Ormsion Cl-Juste, looked particularly vulnerable.

SC matched up well with Lees McRae, too. It's true the officiating cost the Ocelots in this match; they had to play with 10 men after losing Jerry Sassel to a red card in the first half.

Afterwards, Dimitriou recounted all the errors. The bus ride took too long, which resulted in no practices the two previous days before the Passaic match; the officiating was too lenient; the opposition had far more players with foreign experience than he anticipated.

Maybe so. But what it comes down to is a lack of preparation.

Dimitriou got no scouting report on the teams he would face. He said he thought he could make adjustments during the first few minutes of play.

NONSENSE. If he had taken the trouble to get some information on Passaic, he might have discovered its sweeper, Keith Thomlinson, played for the Jamaican national team. Thomlinson scored Passaic's

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staff writer

It's really not that hard to build a championship football program. Just ask Mark Duffner, the coach at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass., who took a team that was 4-6-1 in 1985 and — in the next five seasons combined — posted a 49-5-1 mark.

Pretty impressive. And again, it wasn't all that difficult. Duffner was HC's defensive coach for five seasons before taking over the head post, following the death of coach Rick Carter. So his first step in transforming the Crusaders into a top-level squad was to make certain the defense was championship-caliber.

The step proved to be a short one. Duffner merely called Bob Englah, a solid recruiter in the Detroit area. And Englah went no further than Detroit's Catholic League to find the type of defensive stalwarts Duffner wanted.

Stefan Stratton, from Orchard Lake St. Mary's, together with Matt Fras (from West Bloomfield), Chris Kovath and Pete Dankert (Plymouth), all Redford Catholic Central graduates, were starters on a Holy Cross defense that yielded just 9.6 points per game this season, second in the NCAA Division IAA.

OUTSTANDING, EH? This group might not agree, exactly. They aren't accustomed to finishing second in anything. Example: The Crusaders' record since Stratton and Fras, both seniors, have been at HC is 39-4-1. For juniors Kovath and Dankert, the team's record is 28-4-1 in their tenure.

Example No. 2, supplied courtesy of Dankert: HC is clobbering Brown 55-0 in the waning seconds and complete it to HC's 1-yard line. Trying to avoid the shutout, Brown attempts another pass, but it's deflected and Dankert — a middle guard — intercepts.

"We pride ourselves in our defense," said Fras. "It's the same as it was in high school, at CC."

Need more proof? Consider Stratton. Two

COACH AND player agreed, and when Dingle — whose temper earned him so many yellow cards during the season he shouldn't have been playing in the tournament at all — made a disparaging remark about Dimitriou's coaching, Dimitriou told him to find his own way home.

Dimitriou repeated the same threat to another player late in the match when his orders were disobeyed — play or find your own way home.

Such tactics won't breed harmony on any team. Emotions were certainly running high during the season's final moments; so was disappointment. But a talented player but threaten players with abandonment 600 miles from home, whatever the problem.

(Dimitriou did reverse his position and offered to take Dingle home, but Dingle opted to ride back with another player's family.)

I'm certain some feel such actions needn't be reported. After all, most competitors are not going to take losing well. Arguments are commonplace under such frustrating circumstances. And Dimitriou also has been known to have a short fuse.

Still, his players' disgruntlement was well-founded. All athletes experience losing. They don't like it, but it happens. It's easier to handle when the athlete knows an all-out effort to win has been given.

"WE KEPT answering all the calls," said Bogataj. Indeed, Spring Arbor — which was tied with SC 43-43 at the half — could never establish much of a lead in the second half. The game was tied for the final time at 72-66; after that, the Ocelots pulled away.

Lynell Collins ignited the win with an exceptional all-around performance. Collins had 22 points, 11 re-

bounds and seven assists. Kweil McGill and Randy Watters — Watters, still hampered by a hyperextended knee, played just 20 minutes — got 16 points apiece and Barry Quayle had 12 points and 10 boards.

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The win improved SC's mark to 4-1, which made Bogataj's dissatisfaction with his team's play more tolerable. "We have eight freshmen playing, so their going to have their ups and downs," he said. "And the kids keep playing so hard."

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Not at first, however. SC led by five after five minutes, but some defensive adjustments by Albion turned the tide quickly. By halftime, the Ocelots trailed 41-34. Twenty-six turnovers and just 10-of-15 free throw shooting (66.7 percent) did not aid SC's cause.

Mitch Fyke paced the Ocelot scorers with 19 points. Watters was the only other player for SC to reach double figures; he had 16. Dave Hamilton finished with five points and a team-high eight boards. Gary Parker's 19 points was best for Albion's JV.

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Then again, Kovath's sideline-to-sideline, kamikaze style is common among HC defenders. As Duffner said about his Catholic League stars, "All four have been just super. (Stratton) runs like crazy and is physical as heck."

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BOTH FRAS and Stratton are sorry to go, too. Both were recruited heavily by Mid-American Conference teams but ended up at HC for the same reasons: academics, the coaches and ties with other HC players from Detroit.

Stratton was friends with Andy Martin, another OLSM grad who was a Crusader team captain; Fras knew Chris Sullivan, a former Birmingham Brother Rice quarterback.

Neither had any regrets regarding their choice of college — well, almost no regrets. The Patriot League does not allow conference members to participate in the NCAA IAA football playoffs because it would interfere with semester finals.

"It did at first (bother me)," admitted Fras, a second-team choice in both the Patriot League and the Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference (a group of 31 schools). Fras was second among the Crusaders in sacks (nine) and tackles for loss (six); he had 104 tackles and caused two fumbles.

"Knowing we were better than a lot of teams in the playoffs... yeah, it bothered me at first. I would like to have proved ourselves against some of the better teams."

Stratton agreed. "You do regret it," he said. "You think about it, but overall coming here has worked out well."

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Fras described his four years as a Crusader simply: "I enjoy the success. It's fun to win."

And that's a lesson all four players have learned well.

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STRACTION, A SMALL defensive end to start with (6-foot, 220 pounds), missed only two games. And he didn't just return and go through the motions; he came back with a fury. He finished the season with 62 tackles, including a team-high 10 quarterback sacks.

"I was surprised I was able to come back so quickly," said Stratton, who was an All-Patriot League first-team selection. "Luckily, I was able to get over it fast. I wanted to get back as quick as I could. I didn't want to miss (my senior season)."

Quick — that's the best word to use in describing HC's defense. Size certainly is secondary. Dankert anchors the defensive line, but is just 6-1, 225. Fras, another defensive end, is only 6-1, 215.

"They run very well," said Duffner. "Speed has always been a factor for us (in recruiting). We're looking for people who can run."

Which is what Kovath does exceptionally well. An all-state running back at CC, Kovath (6-0, 180), a cornerback, was everywhere for HC this season.

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Kovath's statistics provide all the proof needed. Cornerbacks are usually low on the defensive charts in tackles because they're so far outside they can't get in on many plays. Not Kovath; he was second on the team in tackles with 113. He also led the Crusaders with five interceptions and

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