

HOW IN THE WORLD? BUILDING A SOCCER POWERHOUSE AT FRANKLIN PIERCE

BY CHERYL JENSEN



Five Division II national championships for the women's soccer team. A national championship in 2007 for the men. Fourteen trips to the NCAA Final Four tournament for the women, four for the men. Four members of the men's team drafted into Major League Soccer. Numerous New England-10 conference championships, Coach of the Year honors, Player of the Year awards, All-American players. The list goes on.

For the last two decades, Franklin Pierce University soccer teams have consistently been winners in their conference and regular competitors in the NCAA Division II playoffs, often coming home with the top trophy. Players come from all over the world to join the nationally and internationally-recognized Franklin Pierce teams.

Why? How did a relatively young, small school in Rindge, New Hampshire become a soccer powerhouse?



Strategic Decisions

It all started with a couple of strategic decisions back in the late '70s, says Bruce Kirsh, Vice President and Athletic Director. He was a new athletic director at the time and Walter Peterson was in the early years of his 20-year term as president. The college itself was young and still finding its feet, having just been founded in 1962.

"I knew one of the ways to stand out is to achieve high quality," President Emeritus Peterson says. "One of the places to do that is in athletics.

"Walter had a vision for the college to excel," Kirsh says, "and he recognized that a high-quality athletic program could help bring visibility and support for that goal." It was logical to focus on soccer, he says, because it's a relatively inexpensive sport – it doesn't require a lot of expensive facilities or equipment.

The International Connection

The second crucial decision, Kirsh says, was to recruit internationally. "In the world of soccer, if we wanted to be a national program, the international athlete had to be part of our strategy," he says. "There were plenty of good players in this country, but most were taken up by the Division I schools."

"Soccer is the number one sport in many countries," says Marco Koolman, the men's head coach, "so it makes sense to recruit globally. We recruit from all over Europe, Scandinavia, the Caribbean, a little bit in Africa."

Last season's 28-member men's team included 13 students from countries such as Japan, Poland, Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, England and more. The women's team, with a total of 31 students, included eight players from Brazil, Ireland, Sweden, Canada, England and Serbia. "The international connection is a key factor," says Jeff Bailey, the women's

head coach, “and, at that time, not that many coaches were going abroad.”

In fact, both Koolman and Bailey were themselves international recruits. Bailey, from England, came to Franklin Pierce as a student soccer player in 1988 and, after working in business for a few years after graduation, came back as the women’s coach in 1996. Koolman, a native of the Netherlands, first played soccer in the U.S. at Gannon University in Erie, Penn. He’s been coaching at Franklin Pierce since 2000.

“With the diversity of our teams,” Koolman says, “the students establish lifelong friendships and relationships that they may not otherwise have experienced. They learn from different cultures and different situations. It teaches them the value of respect and understanding.”

Playing with students from several countries was part of the attraction for Jenna Mello and Laura Stockdale, the co-captains of this year’s women’s teams.

“I was looking at bigger schools,” Mello says, “but I liked the campus community and the focus on academics as well as athletics – and the opportunity to play with international students. I’ve

had the opportunity to play with athletes from the Irish national team, the Finnish national team, and the English national team.” Mello, who is from Londonderry, N.H., graduated in May with a major in sports and recreation management.

Stockdale, from England, agrees. “The different countries all have different playing styles. When you combine them and bring all the strengths into one team, it’s a bonus.” Stockdale graduated in May with a major in marketing and plans to play semi-pro soccer and professional soccer if a professional women’s league gets off the ground in 2009.

Consistent Reputation

Throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, the Franklin Pierce soccer program steadily improved and its reputation grew. By the 1990s, the women’s team was regularly going to the NCAA Final Four and, in 1994, won the first of five Division II championships. After many years of getting to

the championship game, the men’s team won its first Division II title in 2007.

“History is key,” says Bailey. “Many schools have two or three good years, but we’ve been able to keep this rolling year after year. It would have been easy to settle into being mediocre, but our program has developed a consistent reputation.”

The Right Leadership

Not only was support from the college administration important, Kirsh says, but the leadership of the coaches was crucial. He gives much credit to Mark Krikorian, who took over as coach of the women’s team in 1990.

“Within two years, the women were going to the Final Four,” Kirsh says. “After two tries, Mark led them to Division II championships in 1994 and 1995.” Krikorian currently coaches at Florida State University, a Division I school. “He is one of the finest coaches in the country,” Kirsh says. “And, since Jeff Bailey has taken over, the women have gone to the Final Four virtually every year.”



The men’s team, coached by Tod Silegy for 21 years, began to win consistently in the 1980s, making it to the NCAA tournaments several times but never winning the title until 2007. “The men’s team spent years trying to get past Southern Connecticut State in the championship game,” Kirsh says. “The program has seen enhanced growth in the last few years under Marco.”

Koolman is quick to acknowledge previous coaches and players. “Winning a national championship doesn’t just happen. It’s a process that takes years. We can’t not give credit to the ones before us. We have built on their sweat and commitment.”

Recruiting for Talent and Character

When Koolman describes his approach to recruiting players, it’s not athletic ability that he mentions first. “I look at the student’s personality and character traits,”



Nicknames

Everybody on the men's soccer team has a nickname, James Thorpe explains, or more than one. His are "Thorpey" and "Honey Mustard," the latter because he loves – well, you guessed it – honey mustard dressing. Top, however, came to Franklin Pierce with his nickname. His parents, he explained, saw the movie, "Top Gun," starring Tom Cruise, and he became "Top."

JAMES AND "TOP"

It's very unlikely that James Thorpe from East Long Meadow, Mass. and Adit "Top" Phataraprasit from Bangkok, Thailand, would have met if they hadn't been soccer players. Yet the two young men, both members of the 2007 championship men's soccer team at Franklin Pierce, have become not only teammates but fast friends.

In fact, Top, now a sophomore, credits James with giving him the encouragement he needed when he was having a hard time in his first semester. "The beginning was tough," Top says. "I wasn't playing well and I was down so many times. The senior captains really helped."

James was one of those three captains. "Top was nervous," he says. "I know what it's like. I was in his

position once. I told him not to worry, we all make mistakes."

His advice must have worked. Though he sat on the bench for the first two-thirds of the season, Top ended up starting in the last games, including the semi-finals and finals.

"He really worked hard," James says, "and made a big improvement. He can truly say he helped us win the championship."

The advice was coming from a pretty reliable source. James was an All-American goal keeper and only the fourth student in Franklin Pierce history to be drafted by a major league soccer team. He was recruited to Franklin Pierce from Brighton Academy in Maine, while Top played soccer in high school in England before coming to Franklin Pierce last year. He has another connection, however.

Top's father, Pradit Phataraprasit, also played soccer at Franklin

Pierce and was coached by Bruce Kirsh, now Vice President and Athletic Director. A 1979 graduate in economics and management, Phataraprasit is now Deputy Minister of Finance for the Government of Thailand.

Top's teammates have become like another family, he says. "We may compete for a place on the team but, off the field, we're good friends."

Both Top and James lived in the Lakeside Townhouses by Pearly Pond, as did four other teammates. They often got together for the evening, cooking and listening to music.

"We're always eating food from a different culture or listening to music from another country," James says. "Even Top is starting to like American music."

he says. "It's easy to identify good players, but the biggest challenge is to get to know the individual. I look for the type of individual who buys into the kind of program we have here – who understands the role of the student-athlete in a campus community.

"I try to find out what their motivations are outside of soccer," he says.

"I find that those who have a good understanding of the importance of academics, that this translates to the soccer field. Just being a talented soccer player is not enough. They have to be motivated to do both. Most of our students won't go on to be professional soccer players. My main job is to make sure they all get a degree in four years.

"We all learn as much from our defeats as we do from our successes," Koolman adds. "Wins and losses are part of life. It's easy to celebrate when you're victorious. Your true character gets tested when you deal with obstacles. Overcoming them becomes a victory in itself."

Koolman is convinced, he says, that James Thorpe, an All-American goal

keeper who has been drafted into major league soccer, made it in soccer because of his commitment to academics. "James had to work very hard at academics," Koolman says. "One of the reasons he came to Franklin Pierce was because of our excellent academic support program."

Thorpe agrees. "Coach makes it clear we have to work hard at school, not just at soccer," he says. "He watches us and he'll suspend anyone if they're late to class or whatever. That's what my parents loved.

"The teachers don't treat us like 'star' athletes," he adds. "They don't do us any favors. They're willing to work with us but they don't just let us off."

Bailey looks for someone who is intelligent as a player, he says. "Soccer is a random kind of game; there are no set plays so you have to be able to adjust." He also looks for students who can concentrate and manage their time well – qualities that make for good students as well, he says.

Both Bailey and Koolman emphasize the importance of recruiting team players, not "stars." "Soccer is a team sport," Koolman says. "I stress that everybody has an important role, everybody has their own strengths and weaknesses and talents. If we all do our share, it leads to overall team success."

"You can have the greatest players in the world but when you're on the field, you have to work as a team," says Thorpe. "We might have all come from teams where we were maybe the best or second best player, but here everyone is good. You have to learn how to not expect to be in the spotlight or go somewhere else."

Integrating with University Life

The emphasis on team goes beyond the soccer field. The student athletes are expected to become part of the Franklin Pierce community, Kirsh says. "There are no athletic dorms or residence halls," he says, "and the student athletes get no special academic support. They are integrated into university life as much as possible."

And they are expected to perform in the classroom as well as on the field, he says. Both the men's and women's teams have done well academically.

In the soccer program's history, six players from the men's team and eight from the women's team have been named Academic All-Americans, an award based on grade point average and athletic performance. "This is the highest individual honor for academics that student athletes can earn," Kirsh says.

Eleven men and 21 women have received academic honors from the Northeast-10 Conference and, since the NE-10 Commissioner's Honor Roll was started in 2004, 12 men and 27 women have been named to it.

"Student athletes at Franklin Pierce on the whole tend to have higher grade point averages and graduation rates than the general student body," Kirsh says.

Walter Peterson, the man who helped start the soccer legacy at Franklin Pierce, keeps up with the program and is proud of what he sees. "Franklin Pierce has built a diversified athletic program within its means at the right level," he says, "a program where character and academics are just as important as athletics. We can take great pride in it today." 

