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PHU boys soccer picking up where it left off

BY ERIC HORCHY Dec 19, 2016



The Palm Harbor University boys soccer team is winning.

Shocking news, that is not.

Boys soccer, girls soccer, it doesn't matter. The sport is synonymous with PHU. Both teams will enter winter break with unbeaten records, though the girls played to a draw last Tuesday on the road against Class 5A District 7 foe Plant High.

While surprising to few familiar with Pinellas County high school soccer, the boys' start to the season is a welcome return after stumbling at times early last year. The Hurricanes raced out to a 4-0-1 start before dropping to 7-6-2 overall heading into district tournament play. But in typical PHU fashion, the 'Canes flipped the switch at the right time. Two wins brought the program its second straight district championship and PHU picked up two more in the postseason before falling 3-1 in the Class 5A region finals against Winter Park.

It was the Hurricanes' second trip to the region finals in as many years and they did so with a new coach. Wipoj Huse handed over the reins to Shaun Falcon after the 2014-15 season, but the transition was temporary.

'I took a year off last year and I was really excited and anxious to come back," Huse said after the PHU boys defeated Plant 3-0 last week. He coached the program for two years but took last season off after the birth of his child and a return to his native Thailand. "It was definitely a plan to come back. I was cheering them from Thailand. I was disappointed they didn't do well at the beginning of the season but they made a great run during districts. I was so proud of them."

That pride's rolled right into 2016, Huse said, despite retaking a young, inexperienced squad.

"We have a young team, but they've come a long way," he said. "I got a chance to meet the younger guys at the beginning of the season and I told them my expectations. So far they've lived up to it, but the scary part to the whole thing is I think we can get so much better. We have not played to our full potential."

PHU has leaned on a stingy defense that's surrendered just five goals through nine games. The "scary part" that hasn't quite come into focus yet is the 'Canes attack.

"I think the defense has been holding up some big games for us," Huse said, praising the play of sophomore Dan Wintermeier, junior Will Cotter, and seniors Kevin Meehan and Tom Rugel. "We were dominated by Wiregrass and Steinbrenner in one of the halves but they held up by playing team defense, so that's been helping us out. But we've got to get better. We have a long way to go and this district is so tough."

Representing PHU's top challengers to defending its league crown are the two teams Huse said his team struggled with: Steinbrenner and Wiregrass Ranch. The Hurricanes played both within three days of each other, beating Wiregrass 1-0 at home Steinbrenner 2-1 on the road.

While there are still regular season games to be played when PHU's returns to action in January, the top seed in the district tournament has already been sewn up. That six-team competition to reach regionals takes place from Jan. 24-27 and will be hosted by PHU.