

SPECIAL FEATURE

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TRINITY - North Carolina soccer coaching legend Anson Dorrance once wrote that if a team is going to be at the top of its game, the light has to stay on all the time. There can't be just flashes of brilliance here or there, but a light that illuminates the program each and every time they take the field must be present.

Wheatmore High School girls soccer coach Rick Maness believes wholeheartedly in what Dorrance wrote, so he took that approach with the Warriors. The lights are more than just on for the WHS girls soccer team this season. Those lights are shining as bright as any light has ever shined before.

The Warriors have put up stunning numbers to date as Friday's 6-0 Piedmont Athletic Conference victory over Uwharrie Charter Academy lifted WHS to a perfect 12-0 on the season. In those 12 wins, the Warriors have recorded an unbelievable 94 goals while holding their opposition to just two. The 12-0 mark includes a 6-0 mark inside the Piedmont Athletic Conference and includes non-league wins over Southwest Guilford and Asheboro.

"Every now and then you get lucky as a coach and you get a group like this," said Maness who, in his 13th season as head coach, is the only soccer coach the Warriors have ever had.

"They are a fun bunch to watch. I just sit on the sideline and watch them figure things out."

No one has been able to figure out the Warriors this season. Not only are the Warriors unbeaten, but WHS has been forced to play the entire 80 minutes just five times all season. Under NCHSAA rules, if a soccer team has a lead of nine goals or more at halftime or at any time in the second half, the game ends. Wheatmore has won seven games that way, a number of them after just one half. The closest any opponent has come has been four goals as the Warriors defeated Asheboro and SWG 4-0.

WHS is currently the No. 1 ranked team in the West.

"I borrow a lot of things from one of my mentors at the collegiate level," Maness said, referring to Dorrance, who has led the Tar Heels to 21 national championships. "He told me he once asked one of his players how good she wanted to be and she said she wanted to be a great. He then turned the lights off and then turned them on. In order to be great, he said, the light has to stay on all the time."

The soccer player Dorrance was talking to was none other than Mia Hamm.



Junior Haley Vazquez (left) and sophomore Ellie Garrison. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown Photography.



Wheatmore freshman Natalie Bowman. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

said. "Since they have been back, we were one-for-three and two-for-four. Her (Summer Garrison) and Zellie, with their height, they will go horizontally over people."

Of course, scoring is just one aspect of soccer. The team has been dynamite on the defensive side as well. Goalie Victoria Lowe along with Rachael Pierce, Shea Driggers, Maggie Messner, Rian Perry, Kylie Biggs, Kara Comer and Haley Vazquez have all had stellar seasons and Comer has also recorded 22 assists this year and is closing in on the school record.



Assist leader Kara Comer. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

season and our goal is to go further than any team has ever gone. It's been a fun ride and I hope it continues."

It should as long as the lights remain on.

The lights have shined particularly bright offensively for sophomore Ellie Garrison and freshman Natalie Bowman. Garrison, who scored 29 goals in 12 games as a freshman, has tallied 37 goals with eight assists this year and Bowman has added 21 goals and nine assists.

"Ellie has all the tools," Maness said. "She's smart and she's hard working. She is wide open."

And the Warriors should be even better as the season goes on. Junior Summer Bowman, the older sister of Natalie who scored 34 goals last year and tallied three times against UCA, and Izabella Ringley, a junior who is in her third year at the varsity level, are returning after missing most of the season with injuries.

Both have already paid big dividends, Maness said, especially in the corner kick department.

"We were probably 20 percent on corner kicks without them," Maness



Team leader in goals scored Ellie Garrison. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

To motivate his defense, Maness has offered the team "shutout pizza." It started out that a shutout meant a pizza party for the girls. But with nine shutouts in their first 11 games, that motivation became quite expensive. Now the girls are rewarded for a shutout week.

The Warriors, who were 11-0 last season, including a first-round playoff win before falling in overtime in second-round action, continue to strive for some lofty goals set for this year.

"We have four segments to our season," Maness said. "We have preseason, the first half of our conference season, the second half of our conference season and then the playoffs. The furthest any team has gone has been to the third round and that was in 2019. We've had a good preseason, we're finishing up the first half of the conference