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By Dennis Garcia

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ASHEBORO - There was really just one ultimate goal for Uwharrie Charter Academy soccer coach Frankie Aguilar when he took over the Eagles' program last year. His goal, he said, was to make it to the state 1-A championship.

After advancing to the fourth round last year in Aguilar's first season, he firmly believes the Eagles can take that next step this year and by all accounts so far, the team is certainly playing up to those lofty expectations.

The Eagles are currently unbeaten in Piedmont Athletic Conference play, and will bring a 7-0 league record and 10-3 overall mark when they return from Spring break to meet Trinity on April 23. UCA recorded a razor-thin 1-0 home win over the Bulldogs on March 19 and Aguilar said beating THS on the road would be a big step in the Eagles' ultimate goal.

"Trinity is a tough team, especially on their home field," Aguilar said. "This will be a key game."

So far, the Eagles have answered every challenge in the PAC. UCA has outscored league foes 39-4, including a 3-1 win over Wheatmore on April 1. WHS has won the past three PAC regular-season championships in the latest realignment.

"I have learned from older coaches that to be a winner, you have to beat a winner and to be a champion, you have to beat a champion and Wheatmore was the champion the past three years," Aguilar said.

The two teams will meet once again on May 5.

The Eagles finished third in the PAC last season before recording playoff wins over Corvian Community (6-3), Cornerstone Christian (3-1) and Bradford Prep (3-2). A 4-2 loss to Polk County ended the season at 16-6, shattering the school record for most wins in a season, which was 12.

The Eagles started this season with wins over Mid-Piedmont Conference 3-A foes Ledford and Montgomery Central. Losses to 4-A Ragsdale and Southwest Guilford were followed by a run that has seen UCA win eight of their last nine games with only a loss to 4-A Richmond in that streak.

"When Mr. Waddell (UCA Dean of Students and former athletic director Chris Waddell) gave me the opportunity to coach, I checked the record and there was a lot of talent, but they needed a coach who was dedicated to them," Aguilar said. "I have always had the mentality that if you don't come to practice, you don't play. As long as you give 100 percent at all times, it doesn't matter if you are a freshman, junior, sophomore or senior. Last year we had four freshmen in our starting lineup."



*Uwharrie Charter Academy girls' soccer coach Frankie Aguilar.*

There are some characteristics that are so important in soccer that the Eagles have mastered, Aguilar said.

"Working as a team and having chemistry and learning how to talk to each other and not keep quiet when you play are important," the second-year UCA coach said. "The communication has been really good on the field. From goalie to forward to the bench, we are a family. If only one communicates, we're not a group."

In outscoring their foes 56-13, the Eagles have received contributions from a number of different players. Senior Jazmin Palma leads the team in scoring with 20 goals and 24 assists for 64 points, the 16th best in the state. Her 24 assists are third among all players.

"She's a phenomenal player and a hard-working girl," Aguilar said. "She has stepped on the field and carried this team. I have never seen someone who has as much dedication and mentality for the sport. She does not want to lose."

Palma said the win over Wheatmore gave the team a shot of confidence.

"It meant a lot to us, especially beating them by more than one goal," Palma said. "It shows that our hard work has paid off. It meant a lot to the team. Our hard work is paying off and we keep the same attitude for everything."

Palma said she and her teammates enjoy the discipline-approach initiated by Aguilar.

"In practice, we definitely are pushed more," she said. "Practices are more physically challenging and difficult. We go on long runs, do a lot of sprinting, a lot more passing and moving. How we practice is how we play. We're there to play and have fun, but we're there to win, too."

Senior Kendall Jarrell, who scored four goals in the Eagles' latest game, a 6-1 win over Providence Grove April 9, has added 15 goals and 15 assists to the offense.

"Kendall is another great player who I said to her once you see the ball, kick it," Aguilar said of taking advantage of offensive opportunities. "She has an amazing left foot."

Junior Reece Craven has added 12 goals and has recorded 29 points so far.

While the offense has been productive, averaging 4.3 goals per game, the defense is surrendering an average of just one goal per game. The UCA defense is led by seniors Abbie Gudino and Laken Sexton, junior Sidney Sutphin and sophomores Savanna Chriscoe and Destiny Fisher. When the opposition does get a shot on goal, senior Alexis Marion is there for the save.

"If I didn't have Alexis, it would be something different," Aguilar said of the four-year performer. "She is the key to not allowing a lot of goals."

For the Eagles to reach the ultimate goal of the state 1-A title game is well within reach.

"We just have to continue to work hard and believe in ourselves," Palma said. "We did lose to Polk last year, but that doesn't mean we will lose to them again. You have to believe in yourself. Sports is mental and if the mental part isn't there, you won't be winning. We have to continue to work hard physically and continue to believe. I believe we can do it. Everyone else has to believe, too."

It would be hard not to believe.



*Coach Aguilar on the sidelines.*