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Gibbons turns heads with stingy defense

By Joe Trost
Special to ESPNRISE.com

With each passing day, Jen Crittenberger is hoping the storybook season for the Cardinal Gibbons (Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.) girls' soccer team has another chapter.

"This season has been the biggest and best memory of my life so far," Crittenberger said. "I don't want it to end."

Prematurely end, that is.

Standing a mere three wins away from the program's first state title and unbeaten season, Crittenberger & Co. not only have stolen the spotlight from Florida's powerhouse programs, but they're also on the verge of history.

"When people think of Florida girls soccer, they think of St. Thomas Aquinas, Satellite and Jenkins," Crittenberger said. "We have talked about how cool it would be to have a banner with our names hanging at the school. It gives me chills just thinking about it."

The Chiefs, who enter Friday's regional final against Merritt with a 27-0-2 record and the No. 6 spot in the latest ESPN RISE FAB 50, have been led by their defensive back line.

"Our defense has been the most solid position on the field," Gibbons coach Margo Flack said. "I know every member of the team has such faith in them, because [of] the confidence they possess."

The speedy Florida Gulf Coast-bound Crittenberger highlights Flack's defenders, but Ally Buerosse, Nicole Grunwalk and Merridith Delinois are three other stars in front of goalie Haylee Shoaff.

"When your team has confidence in the defense, it allows so many more things to happen offensively when you have a defense like that behind you," Flack said.

Buerosse, a junior, has received rave reviews this season because of her aggressive play, which has set the tone defensively for Gibbons.

"Ally is the motivator on and off the field," Flack said. "On the field, she is the most aggressive defender we have. She plays on the left side with an extremely dangerous attack in her, too."

And then there's Shoaff, the 5-foot-10 brick wall in the back. While Flack says she has become the vocal leader in the back, the junior is just happy people are listening.

"I actually have defenders who listen to me when I'm setting the defense up," Shoaff laughed. "There are times when defenders don't listen to their goalie, but my defenders trust me."

"It feels amazing accomplishing what we have so far, and it would be even better to win it all. I hope we

can, and I know a lot of other people hope we can, too."

With the outcome of each remaining game riding on her shoulders, Shoaff welcomes the pressure and challenge the next three games will bring.

"She is a force in the box," Flack said. "Every time Haylee makes a save, the best part about it is she did it for the whole team. She's the type of keeper that gets to those shots other keepers can't."

Joe Trost covers soccer for the Chicago Sun-Times and is a regular contributor to ESPNRise. You can reach him by e-mail at joetrost@hotmail.com.

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