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Soccer blows by MICDS, Timberland in preseason Jamboree, anticipation grows as team nears Marquette matchup opener

BY NATHAN RICH AND
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Everything seemed to go right for SLUH Soccer last Tuesday. From finding the back of the net eight times in just 70 minutes to not letting up a single shot on defense, the Jr. Bills fought hard under the scorching sun to roll over visiting opponents Timberland and MICDS.

The fall soccer Jamboree is a preseason tradition that features two 35-minute scrimmages against opposing high school teams. This year, the practice bout was the Jr. Bills' first taste of real gameplay in several months, and served as a preview of the deep talent on this year's team. Head Coach Bob O'Connell was able to play all of his varsity players over the course of the two games, and SLUH still shut out the competition, beating Timberland 6-0 and MICDS 2-0.

The offense dazzled against Timberland. The Jr. Bills hoarded the ball for most of the half and their quick passes created several breakaway opportunities.

"To be honest, I was really pleased with the amount of chances we created. We scored six goals in the first period—that's a lot of goals," said O'Connell. "I don't know if I've had a group in any game

or Jamboree score that many. I thought offensively it was pretty good."

Both teams seemed to have an obvious size advantage against SLUH, but experience proved sufficient for the Jr. Bills. Three of SLUH's starting forwards this year are seniors, including Tyler Van Bree, who joins varsity for his third year in a row, and Stephen Saladin.

"We're pretty good up the middle," O'Connell noted. "We have a lot of senior leadership up the middle of the field. Having Stephen play for us again this year is something that a lot of schools don't have. His speed is different and his toughness is going to help us score goals."

Rounding out SLUH's senior offense is Johnny Ferrara, who started at right forward in both Jamboree matches. Ferrara led the team with two goals in the match against Timberland. His first goal, a vicious shot that looped over the head of Timberland's defense after a breakaway, showed the speed and precision of SLUH's offense when it's clicking.

Still, senior Evan Yalavarthi saw room for further improvement.

"They were introductory matches so we did put up a lot of goals, but I also thought we still have a lot of work to do," he said. "We are still trying to figure our formation out. I think we have all the players and

pieces we need but it will still take time to combine them all together. We don't really have the chemistry yet to win a state championship."

Yalavarthi, who starts at midfield, also brings varsity experience to the roster. He joined the team as a sophomore, and now he's looking forward to being a leader for the young team.

"We have a lot of talented players on the team but also the team is kind of young," said Yalavarthi. "We have a senior in each spot, though: defense, midfield, and offense and then we have the younger players around us, so I think the seniors will definitely be leaders."

Junior Midfielder Davis Ragan is one of those surrounding players.

"We have a lot of talented players" said Ragan. "I feel that as a team we are yet to prove ourselves, but if the Jamboree was any indication of the future, I'm excited."

On the back end of the field, play on Tuesday night was just as clean. Senior center back Ben Ridgway and sophomore center back Christian Thro were able to keep pace with both teams' strikers all night, chasing down every breakaway. Senior Brian Critchfield, who started in goal against Timberland, only touched the ball once in his roughly 20 minutes of playing time.

The pair of defenders also made contributions on offense. Ridgway rushed the net to score off a corner kick against Timberland and Thro notched an assist against MICDS after he rocketed the ball up the field to junior Sam Tieber, who scored on the breakaway.

Still, O'Connell faces uncertainties about the starting defense.

"Some of the areas we are still questioning is who the goalie will be and how we'll play in the back," he said. "I think the Jamboree answered some of those questions but we still need to see our back three or four against some better, faster kids."

Ridgway agreed with both O'Connell and Yalavarthi: the ceiling for SLUH soccer is still higher.

"We didn't let in any goals and I see that as a success but it's early in the season and there's always room to improve," he said. "But as a first look of what our team's going to look like, it was very good."

The wins last Tuesday showed the strength of SLUH's roster this year, but they will have a tough task ahead of them on their season opener. This Tuesday, the Jr. Bills will travel to Marquette to take on the Mustangs.

"Marquette is always really well coached, to open with them will be a real test. I know



Junior Sam Tieber against MICDS photo | Richard Taylor

they have a forward, number 10, who's really special as well," said O'Connell.

"I'm excited to play Marquette," said Ridgway. "They're supposed to be a pretty good team so it will be a good test to see how we play as a team. If we can come out with that game, our season will look pretty good."

In the meantime, O'Connell plans to focus on defense at practice, drilling his team on defensive responsibility and when to press opposing teams. Even this early in the season, though, the Jr. Bills are looking past the season opener and keeping their focus on its end: the playoffs. After losing back to back district semifinals, var-

sity soccer is looking to finally capitalize on some of its talent.

"This is one of the best teams I've had since I've been playing," said Yalavarthi. "Obviously our end goal is to win a state championship. Last year we didn't really get the chance to come together as a team so we never reached our potential. This year, we're starting out strong and if we keep winning we'll definitely make it to the state championship."

"We are always, and I really believe this, more concerned with our own development," echoed O'Connell. "Hopefully we keep getting better. We don't want to be the best team in August, we want to be peaking by the end of October."

Senior Chris Brooks commits to Yale University



Brooks posing in the Yale Bowl.

photo | courtesy of Chris Brooks

BY JACK RYBAK
CORE STAFF

Senior Chris Brooks, a standout wide receiver for SLUH since his freshman year, verbally committed to Yale University on July 16.

Brooks made headlines recently, ranking at number 30 in the 2022 Rivals Missouri Top 30 ranking. Brooks began to shine on the field his junior year, when racked up 400 receiving yards and six touchdowns. The Jr. Bill standout also achieved the 2020 1st Team All-Metro title.

Brooks had several schools to look at, but decided on Yale for the opportunities he would have both on the field and in the classroom. "There's no doubt in my

mind that I want to try to pursue going to the NFL," said Brooks. "(Yale is) just the best place for me in both aspects of my own athletic future and my future outside of football."

Another large factor for Brooks was the feeling of familiarity and the welcoming feeling the campus gave off.

"It was a place that felt like home. When I went up there for a visit or a week, it felt exactly like SLUH," said Brooks. "Even the campus and just seeing the people there and meeting all the coaches, I kind of knew it was the place I wanted to call home."

The SLUH has high praise for Brooks as a phenomenal player on the field and a better person off the field.

"As a leader, as a football player, as a student, and as a young man, I believe God does not make them much better than Chris Brooks," said assistant coach Adam Cruz. "He is the quintessential role model and ambassador to the school."

While Brooks continues to look towards his future, he is also looking forward to the upcoming season with the Jr. Bills. This is the Year of the Bill and Brooks plans to go all the way to the state championship and bring a ring with him on his way to Connecticut.

"I think that next year is gonna be very, very good," said Brooks. "State Championship or nothing."

Cross Country sets sights on state title after 3 years as runner-up

BY JACKSON COOPER AND
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CORE STAFF, STAFF

If you happened to venture to Forest Park on an early morning this summer, it would have been hard to miss the SLUH cross country team putting in miles on the trails and gearing up for what is hoped to be a successful season.

In each of the past three years, the Jr. Bills have achieved great success in both the St. Louis area and the state of Missouri, winning their district and sectional in all three years. The team has also come tantalizingly close to a seventh state title in each of those years, finishing second in the state meet in 2018, 2019, and 2020. In all three years, SLUH has also been the highest finisher from the St. Louis area in Class 5, the highest MSHSAA classification level, beating out other top schools such as Marquette, Lafayette, and Ladue in the process.

This high level of success is nothing new for a program that has won 26 of a possible 29 Metro Catholic Conference championships (including 17 straight), and both the runners and the coaching staff will look to finally get their hands on another state trophy at the end of this upcoming season.

The current team retains a remarkable amount of depth from the varsity squad that took home second place at the Gans Creek Cross Country course in Columbia, Mo. last year, losing only three of the seven run-

ners to graduation. The four remaining members of that team—seniors Grant Brawley, Baker Pashea, Sean Kellogg, and Justin Glass—as well as all three alternates—juniors Wyatt Seal, Tim Greiner, and Nolan Meara—remain with the team, and are followed by another group of runners hungry to prove themselves. This experience and depth puts the Jr. Bills squarely on the shortlist of favorites to bring home a state championship in November.

For head coach Joe Porter, it is important that his runners know that, while winning a state title is a great accomplishment, it is not always an effective measuring stick for a season's success.

"We're trying to be right and run our best races at the end of the season, but we also want to establish a brotherhood and a community where everyone cares about everyone else," said Porter. "Those are the things that are going to determine success, the (state) title is not something that I'm going to be talking about at all during the season."

In comparison to last season, members of the top group of varsity runners are ahead of schedule in terms of the paces that they are hitting in workouts, much of which can be attributed to the return to summer morning runs held by coaches, which couldn't take place for much of last year due to Covid-19 restrictions.

This year also featured the return of the weeklong training

trip that top team members take to the small northern Missouri town of Brashear, which helped to further grow the brotherhood between teammates.

"The team has been doing really well so far," said Brawley, who is one of four team captains this year. "We're ahead of schedule compared to this point last year. We as captains are trying to get everyone motivated to do workouts and runs, and also to try and help push the bottom guys and teach the freshmen what to do and get them involved, and just to get excited for a good season."

This past week in particular, the resiliency of this team has already been put to the test, as the recent heat wave has forced daily practices to occur either inside the Danis Field House after school or in Forest Park before school.

"Yeah, it's not fun for anybody," said Porter. "We've had some guys come in the mornings and get in workouts, which has been an optional thing to kind of get practice out of the way. It was still hot this morning, but we went out and ran right through it."

As for short-term goals, the focus of the varsity, JV, and freshman teams are set on upcoming meets. Freshmen and sophomores will run in their first race on Wednesday, Sept. 1, at the O'Fallon (Ill.) Futures Meet. Varsity and JV begin their racing season the following Saturday, Sept. 4, at the Granite City Invitational.