

Girls soccer preview: Gators primed to fulfill lofty expectations

Reservoir, Glenelg return 10 starters; River Hill makes jump to Class 3A

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(Enlarge) Reservoir's Kelsey Reiff, who led the county in scoring last season as a junior with 20 goals and five assists, leads a Gators' squad with 10 of 11 starters returning from a team that finished third in the county in 2008. (Staff photo by Drew Anthony Smith)

Like the howling winds that often precede a thunderstorm, Josh Sullivan hears what others are saying about his Reservoir girls soccer team.

"I am hearing it from all over," said the second-year coach.

And he likes what he hears. "I think it's great," he said.

What many are saying -- and what Sullivan is hearing -- is that Reservoir is the team to beat this fall.

"If you look at us on paper, with all the returning starters and especially the new talent we have, and looking what other schools lost, I can definitely see how people see us as the favorites," Sullivan said. "But I'm telling the girls the game is not played on paper. We are preaching to them about staying humble. Nothing is going to be

handed to us, we have to earn it."

Reservoir, which finished third in the county last year, has 10 of 11 starters returning. Included in that group is Kelsey Reiff, who led the county in scoring as a junior with 20 goals and five assists.

When Sullivan took over last year and inherited a team that had won three county games the previous year, the "expectations were low," he said. Not anymore.

"We have a lot talent," said Reservoir senior Kelsey Reiff. "It's all there. We just have to put it together and reach our goals."

The teams that finished ahead of Reservoir last year -- Class 2A state champion River Hill and Wilde Lake -- don't have the experience or depth that the Gators enjoy this season.

River Hill graduated three of its top four scorers and lost returning senior Anna Kim when she suffered an ACL injury in July playing lacrosse. Those four players combined for 43 goals. Kim, a first-team all-county selection, had nine goals and nine assists and was the Hawks' top returning player. Also lost to graduation was Amy Song, who had 19 assists and was the Columbia Flier/Howard County Times Player of the Year.

The Hawks, who have earned three straight state titles, return only five starters. Still, River Hill is perennially one of the county's strongest teams and finds a way to reload each year.

"It is no different than any year," said fifth-year River Hill coach Brian Song, whose team has moved up to Class 3A, joining Reservoir, Wilde Lake and Centennial, among other county teams, in the East Region. "The players will strive to win another championship. We have less experience, but a lot of heart."

Wilde Lake has five returning starters, mostly on defense. "We have a lot of potential, but a lot of questions to be answered. Especially on offense," said coach Phil Webster, whose team lost to River Hill last fall in the regular season before surprising the Hawks, 2-1, in the county championship game.

The Wildecats graduated five first-team all-county selections.

Like River Hill, Glenelg has earned three straight state titles. But unlike River Hill, the Gladiators return 10 starters.

In previous years, Glenelg has had to incorporate new players at the start of the season. With so many returning players, coach Dean Sheridan hopes his team will "play a little better early without losing sight of the final goal."

There will not be a game at the end of the regular season to determine the county champion. Instead, the team with the best regular-season record will claim the title.

There is a new wrinkle, however. The county champion will play the Anne Arundel county championship Oct. 27 in the District V Championship game.

Taking the field

As the season begins -- the first games are Sept. 4 -- here's how the teams look:

Atholton

2008 record: 5-4-2 county, 7-5-2 overall

Top players: Seniors Lizzy Parr (M), Allie Mitzner (M), Katie Mann (D); junior Bridgette Snyder (F); sophomores Amy Weinberg (GK), Adrianna Vitagliano (D); freshman Katrina Macadoff (M).

What you need to know: Coach Stephanie Stoutenborough expects the Raiders, led by the return of many defensive starters, to be "very competitive." Parr, a second-team all-county pick last year, and Mitzner have started since their freshman season and "are great leaders on the field," Stoutenborough said.

Parr "is very quick, has amazing foot skills and a great left-footed shot and cross," Stoutenborough said. "She is a hard worker and never lets down on the field."

Stoutenborough said that Mitzer "dominates the middle of the field and is a strong, tough defender with good field vision and a strong outside shot."

Weinberg started in goal as a freshman and, according to her coach, "has come into this season stronger, more comfortable, and as more of a vocal leader. She has quick reflexes, is strong in the air, and controls her box."

Atholton is working on attacking quicker and playing with more intensity this season.

Centennial

2008 Record: 5-4-2, 5-7-3

Top players: Seniors Alice Crowe (M), Victoria Mace (D), Amanda Middleton (D), Alexa Narron (D), Victoria Pino (M), Stephanie Schultz (M), Jennifer Simkin (F).

What you need to know: "The county is very competitive," said fourth-year coach Kristen McManus, "but hopefully we are going to compete for the county title. We have a strong team coming back."

With 11 seniors and six returning starters, McManus is counting on experience and maturity to pay dividends for the Eagles. "With our senior leadership, we expect to be competitive," she said.

McManus said Mace and Simkin, a three-year starter, "both have a strong work ethic and field awareness." Simkin had eight goals last season and is the leading returning scorer.

Glenelg

2008 Record: 4-6-1, 10-7-1

Top players: Seniors Kristen Schmidbauer (M), Ellie Axenfeld (M), Hope LaHayne (D/M), Katie Chase (F/M), Alex Collier (F/M); juniors Liz Ebling (D/M), Rachel McCarriher (M/F), Cat Cottrell (D/M); sophomores Brooke Carey (GK), Danielle Burris (M/F).

What you need to know: Glenelg moves up to Class 2A this season, which means the playoffs should be more challenging. But the Gladiators, who are in the South region along with nearby rival Marriotts Ridge, have the talent to capture a fourth-straight title (They won 2A in 2006 and 1A the last two years). Axenfeld is a returning all-county player and will be a four-year starter and two-year captain. She and Schmidbauer, another returning first-team all-county performer, work well together in the midfield.

Schmidbauer, Chase and Collier each had a team-high seven goals last year, and Axenfeld contributed 10 assists. Carey showed her toughness in goal as Glenelg won last year's state title in a shootout.

Coach Dean Sheridan, in his 11th season as varsity coach, said his team has the talent and experience to compete for both county and state titles. His concern is that the players don't become complacent because of their past success.

"It's all up to them," he said.

Hammond

2008 Record: 4-7, 4-9

Top players: Seniors Amy Albano (M/D), Katie Lippitt (D), Kaitlyn Potts (D), Christina Maldonado (M/GK); juniors Samantha Gailey (M), Angela Humpert (F/M).

What you need to know: First-year coach Nathan Rauscher expects to have "a winning season and to be in contention to win every game."

The team has one sophomore and the rest are seniors and juniors, so Rauscher is hoping experience will help turn things around. Three of the four defensive starters are seniors.

"They have great dedication and plenty of potential for a very successful season," he said.

When Maldonado is not in goal, she and Gailey will key the midfield. Senior Katie Suntum will be in goal when Maldonado is at the midfield position.

Howard

2008 Record: 3-8, 5-10

Top players: Seniors Mackenzie Calhoun (M), Nicole Clark (M), Gina Colarusso (D), Alyssa Kozlowski (D).

What you need to know: The Lions have a "very strong returning senior class," according to fourth-year coach Michelle Osterberger. Kozlowski, Clark (six goals, seven assists last season) and Calhoun have each started since their freshman season. Osterberger said that Kozlowski has verbally committed to Bryant University in Rhode Island.

Senior Kathleen Rohrbach, who played goalie her sophomore year, but had to sit out last season due to an illness, will be competing with last year's goalie, Erin Leatherman, for the starting position. Juniors Julia Cocozza and Kendall Neff also provide experience as they begin their third varsity season.

"I think that the experience of this group of players and a very strong supporting team will make us a team to watch this season," Osterberger said. "Last year's record was a disappointment, but I think that was due to the fact that it took us a little time to get in sync as a group. We are really working hard this season to start with the same intensity that we finished last season with (which included a playoff win over Atholton and taking Wilde Lake into overtime)."

Long Reach

2008 Record: 0-11, 1-13

Top players: Senior Nicole Snell (M); Juniors Katie Haarer (M), Jess Sachs (M); sophomore Courtney Glasser (GK).

What you need to know: Coach Josh Webster said last year's team was hurt by "a barrage of injuries to our best players" that prevented the Lightning from sometimes fielding a competitive team. "This year's team needs to stay healthy and we'll be competitive in every contest," he said.

Sachs returns after leading the team in assists as a sophomore, and Haarer is back from knee surgery after missing her sophomore year. Webster said that in the four games Haarer played as a freshman, "She made an immediate impact with both goals and assists." Seniors Grace Bonner and Snell "give our team the fire and intensity needed in order to compete in Howard County," Webster added.

This will be Webster's seventh and final season coaching Long Reach, which has moved down to Class 2A. He looks forward to spending more time with his young family.

"It's hard for me to commit to two families," he said.

Marriotts Ridge

2008 Record: 7-4, 7-8

Top players: Seniors Marissa Goon (D), Samantha Olson (GK); Juniors Katie Kanner (F), Kara Schaffer (M), Rebecca Fath (M).

What you need to know: Goon and Olson have each started every game since their freshman season. "Marissa is the backbone of our team," said coach Robin Grey. "Her versatility is her strength."

Grey said Olson is "our anchor in the back. Samantha has an uncanny ability to read her opponents and the ball ... I expect great things out of Samantha. She is arguably the best keeper in the county."

Grey said the Mustangs have "speed all across the board," but that they are "young and a bit inexperienced. We have a lot of talented individuals, but if we're going to be anything in the county this year we've got to come together as a unit and be more consistent in our level of play."

Grey added that "our goal is to remain competitive throughout the season, building on each game so that we peak come playoffs. We'd like to make a run at the playoffs this year."

Mt. Hebron

2008 Record: 6-4-1, 8-6-1

Top players: Seniors Aileen Virella (F), Carly Weillminster (F), Kathleen Stafford (M), Julianne Giles (D); Junior Kelly Snyder (D); sophomore Claire Nickles (D).

What you need to know: Stafford and Giles have been varsity starters since their freshman season and are two of the captains. "They are extremely talented athletes," coach Tim Deppen said. "They are strong and fast and make great decisions on the field."

Deppen said the team is led by aggressive forwards and a solid defense.

"We have the strength and talent to surprise some people," said Deppen. His squad has nine seniors, nine juniors and two sophomores.

Oakland Mills

2008 Record: 1-10, 4-11

Top players: Senior Bonnie Carney (D); Junior Anna Kiely (D).

What you need to know: Carney (stopper) and Kiely (sweeper) "are quiet leaders but they dictate the play," said coach Susan Rosner, in her seventh season. "They are very smart, very calm. They lead with their play, not their mouth."

The Scorpions have six seniors, six juniors, three sophomores and four freshmen, and Rosner said the fate of the season rests on "how quickly they can learn to play together."

Rosner said the four freshmen -- Lara Celtnieks (F), Emilie Scantlebury (M), Marlee Slaughter (D) and Alicia Wooten (M/D) -- will start.

"We're going to need them to be key players this season," she added.

Reservoir

2008 Record: 9-2-1, 11-4-1

Top players: Seniors Kelsey Reiff (F), Payton Boule (M), Marissa Dearden (GK), Danielle Roarty (D), Lauren Enriquez (D); Juniors Megan Armstrong (M), Katlyn Axenfeld (M).

What you need to know: The Gators won only four games two years ago. Last season under first-year coach Josh Sullivan, Reservoir reached the regional final before losing to Fallston.

"I think last year's success really opened their eyes to what their possibilities could be and in turn motivated them for this coming season," Sullivan said. "With the majority of the team returning, the excitement is there for a good season."

Reiff, who led the county last season with 20 goals, said the team is ready for the challenge.

"There is obviously pressure, but nothing that we're scared of as a team," she said. "We just have to go out and play our game."

River Hill

2008 Record: 10-0-1, 16-1-1

Top players: Seniors Amy Triscoli (M), Carlynn Hudson (GK), Anna Theisen (F).

What you need to know: Triscoli and Hudson, who have been on the varsity since their freshman season, join Theisen and juniors Kellie Song (M) and Stephanie Norman (D) as the five returning starters. Two players new to the school this year are seniors Allie Kohr (M/F), an IAAM B Conference all-star last year at Chapelgate, and Sally Meehan (D), whose family moved here from Utah.

Coach Brian Song said he will look to Triscoli, Theisen and Kohr to spark the offense, and hopes that players "looking for their chance and opportunity" will take advantage and make significant contributions.

"I play the kids that perform in practice," he added.

Song admitted that the Hawks don't have their customary depth and that the scores of games might be closer this season. Still, he said that with his "first 13 players, I'll be right there."

With eight county championships and seven state titles, no one is counting River Hill out.

Wilde Lake

2008 Record: 9-2, 12-4

Top players: Seniors Beth Glaros (M), Maddy Parks (D), Toria Shepherd (D), Caitlin Connolly (D); Juniors Kiana Richards (M), Carly Solow (M); sophomore Gillian Sawyer (F).

What you need to know: Glaros, a second-team all-county selection last season, and Parks have started since they were freshmen, and are two of six returning starters. Sawyer scored 11 goals last season, including one in the county championship victory over River Hill, and Glaros had eight.

The Wildecats have experience on defense, but "this is a young team," said coach Phil Webster. "We have a lot of very big shoes to fill."

Wilde Lake topped River Hill in the county championship game last season before losing to Fallston in the regional semifinals.

Chapelgate

2008 Record: 4-7 IAAM B Conference, 5-9-1

Top players: Seniors Kelly Stambaugh (GK), Courtney Stull (M); Junior Laura Lovaas (M); sophomore Kristin Thomas (D).

What you need to know: Second-year coach Kable Cunningham said the team's strength is its defense, led by Stambaugh. "Kelly is and has been an incredible goalie," Cunningham said. "She keeps the game close."

Stambaugh, 5-foot-10, had 113 saves last year. She has verbally committed to the Air Force Academy.

Stull (six goals, one assist) is the leading returning scorer. Cunningham said that freshmen Jennifer Yahiro (M/D) and Natalie Delinsky (F) are "a solid addition to our team."

"We expect to be competitive in the league," said Cunningham, whose non-league schedule includes a Sept. 18 game against Reservoir.

Glenelg Country School

2008 Record: 2-12 IAAM C Conference, 3-14

Top players: Junior Jessica Ortega (M); sophomores Olivia Clark (D), Christina Horne (F), Krystal Roggerson (M).

What you need to know: Horne is back after breaking her collarbone early last season, and coach Christy Mink looks for her to be "the go-to person for goal scoring." Mink added that Clark "will play a pivotal role in the back in terms of setting up the offense," and that freshman goalie Emily Walsh "should also prove to be an asset to the team as she shows little fear in the box."

The Dragons will be without top offensive threat Olivia Weinrub, an IAAM All-Star selection as a junior. Weinrub injured her right leg late last season and injured the same leg over the summer.

"We graduated a lot of seniors, so this will be a rebuilding year with many young players," said Mink, whose program is in its third season.

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