

As the saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. UCLA in 2002 employed a philosophy of taking things one game at a time, and that attitude propelled the team to its fourth NCAA Championship. NSCAA National Coach of the Year Tom Fitzgerald does not intend to stray from that mentality in 2003.

"With the departure of five crucial seniors and the addition of seven freshmen, this is going to be a different team, and our focus has to be similar to last year in that we can't look too far into the future," Fitz talking about Pac-10 and national championships, it will be important for us to focus on each game individually. One of the key factors for our results in 2002 was we never got too excited about our victories but never too disappointed in our losses. Maintaining that even keel throughout the season, especially with our players coming and going for national team duty, will be a challenge for each member of the squad."

Fortunately for the Bruins, their large, star-studded senior class will provide leadership and a strong foundation to set the winning example for the seven incoming freshmen that comprise Soccer America's No. 1 ranked recruiting class. Leading the way will be a slew of honors candidates in Adolfo Gregorio, Leonard Griffin, team captain Tony Lawson, leading scorer Matt Taylor and goalkeeper Zach Wells. These five seniors were key players in UCLA's title run in 2002, along with team MVP Aaron Lopez. Big things are expected of this group in 2003.

The highly-touted freshman class could also make a big impact. Many of them carry national team experience, including U.S. Under-17 National Team captain Brandon Owens and U-18 members Chad Barrett and Patrick Ianni. Although these players will miss most of the pre-season training while on national team duty, the experience gained from playing overseas should be beneficial for them and for the Bruin team in the long run.

## DEFENSE

UCLA was extremely successful in 2002 with its three-man backline of Scot Thompson, **Tony Lawson** and **Leonard Griffin**. Thompson's graduation will leave a question mark in the pre-season as to whether someone can fill his shoes or if the Bruins will employ a four-man backline. Freshman **Brandon Owens** is the most obvious choice to replace Thompson but will miss most of the pre-season while playing in the U-17 World Youth Championships. The return of Lawson and Griffin takes a lot of pressure off, as those two players have proven to be two of the best in the nation.

Griffin, who has been UCLA's secret weapon of sorts throughout his career, is quietly emerging as one of the top defenders in the nation. The 2002 honorable mention All-Pac-10 honoree had an impressive showing over the summer in the Premiere Development League (PDL), earning All-Western Conference honors. "Leo was very consistent and very impressive throughout the 2002 season," said Fitzgerald. "His technical ability, along with his calm demeanor, portray him as a potentially high MLS draft pick."

Lawson, UCLA's team captain and sweeper, is arguably the fastest player on the Bruin team and has speed equal or superior to anyone in the country. In his first season as a full-time starter last year, he received second-team all-conference honors as well as Soccer America Team of the Week acclaim. "With his speed and his continual positive attitude, Tony will not only be a team leader but also a potentially important draft selection come January," Fitzgerald stated.

Although a freshman, Owens is experienced beyond his 17 years and has the tools necessary to replace Thompson at right back. Owens has made over 30 caps with the U.S. U-17 National Team and is a two-time Parade All-American. He will miss the pre-season and perhaps the first two games while playing at the World Youth Championships, but will gain invaluable high-level competition and experience.

Also unavailable for parts of the season will be sophomore **Jordan Harvey**, who could miss part of the playoffs when the U-20s play in the delayed U-20 World Youth Championships. Harvey missed five games during the 2002 season due to national team commitments but was still regarded highly enough to earn honorable mention All-Pac-10 honors.

Two other freshmen could see considerable playing time in the back or in midfield – **Patrick Ianni**, who will miss some pre-season training on national team duty; and U-18 national team pool player **Kiel McClung**. Both Ianni and McClung were NSCAA/adidas All-Americans. Others in the mix are redshirt sophomore **Ryan Valdez**, junior **Kurt Schmid**, redshirt freshman **Mike Gardner** and newcomers **Scot Davis** and **Chris Davis**.

## MIDFIELD

The midfield returns virtually intact from 2002 and is highlighted by last season's Team MVP **Aaron Lopez** at defensive midfield and highly-touted senior **Adolfo Gregorio** at right midfield.

Lopez had a breakout sophomore season in 2002, earning Team MVP and College Cup Offensive MVP honors. Lopez was the hero of the NCAA Championship game, scoring the game-winning goal with 1:02 remaining in regulation. Said Fitzgerald, "Aaron started out the season as the silent aggressor and quickly elevated himself to play the key role at defensive midfield. His ability to beat opponents in the air and to be the link-man between our defense and our forwards has made him an extremely valuable ingredient in our success."

Gregorio, who ranked third on the team in scoring in 2002 with 24 points (9g, 6a), was the talk of the 2002 College Cup, where he put on an impressive display of skill and technique that proved that he was one of the premier outside midfielders in the country. "His technical ability, speed and finishing has set him apart from most wide midfielders," Fitzgerald noted. "The experience gained in the past year by traveling with the Olympic team has provided him with some experiences that few players get to enjoy. He too should be listed very high when it comes time for MLS draft. Wide players who can beat opponents on the dribble and score goals are important to any team, regardless of the level."

Junior **Mike Enfield** and senior **Dru Hoshimiya** will compete for the playmaking role. Enfield, a former U.S. U-20 and U-18 national team member, started 19 games last season in this position, recording three assists. Hoshimiya was an honorable mention All-Pac-10 performer who started 19 games in 2001, but he was slowed by injury in 2002, seeing action in 10 games.

On the left side, seniors **Ty Maurin** and **John Carson** will battle it out for the starting job, along with redshirt freshman **Eli Meschures**. Maurin, who played in 22 games with 12 starts, had a solid 2002 season, earning all-conference honorable mention acclaim. Carson, an academic all-conference player, has played in 27 games in his career with six starts. Both players possess good speed and technical ability. Meschures, who redshirted last season, was a three-time All-CIF selection in high school and a member of the Cal South team that won the 2001 ODP National Championship.

Sophomore **Luke Mehring** entered last season as an unheralded player but emerged as the Bruins' Rookie of the Year. Unfortunately, Mehring was hit hard by the injury bug over the summer with a possible sports hernia and could miss significant playing time depending on the progress of his rehab. Said Fitzgerald, "Luke is probably one of the most versatile players on the team. So if he is unable to perform, it will hurt the depth of our team considerably. If this happens, his presence would definitely be missed."

Two standout freshmen could see considerable playing time – **Taylor Canel** and **Trini Gomez**. Canel is a member of the U-18 National Team pool and earned NSCAA/adidas California Player of the Year acclaim, as well as McDonald's and NSCAA/adidas All-America honors. Gomez, who graduated a year early from high school to join the Bruins, is a U-17 National Team member who has earned 11 international caps. Soccer America magazine rated Gomez the No. 16 recruit in the nation.

Other midfielders who will give the Bruins a tremendous amount of depth are junior **Phillip Harr** and freshmen **Damon James** and **Benny Feilhaber**.

"With the addition of some key freshmen midfielders, we are very deep here," said Fitzgerald. "Consistency and determination will be the formulas for success."

## FORWARD

UCLA has great talent at the forward position, along with many proven scorers. Leading the way will be two players whose end of the year play in 2002 gives great hope for 2003 - leading scorer **Matt Taylor** and No. 4 scorer **Cliff McKinley**. Newcomer **Chad Barrett** will join the senior duo.

Taylor led UCLA in all major scoring categories a year ago with 12 goals, eight assists and 32 points and was the leading scorer in the NCAA Tournament with five goals, three coming in the NCAA quarterfinal win over Penn State. He had a successful summer playing with the PDL's Orange County Blue Stars, earning All-Western Conference honors, and the Bruins expect him to continue his success in the fall. Taylor is another senior who could also show up on the MLS radar screen.

McKinley also had a strong NCAA showing, scoring two goals and four assists in the playoffs, as well as drawing two crucial penalty kicks. He finished the year with six goals and seven assists, all career highs. McKinley also tied an NCAA Tournament record with three assists in the quarterfinals. Said Fitzgerald, "Cliff's end of the season performance is what we expect of him throughout the 2003 season."

Freshman Barrett is a prolific goal scorer and one of just two non-Californians on the squad. The Gatorade Oregon Player of the Year scored 32 goals, 21 assists and 85 points as a senior at Southridge HS and 69 goals, 41 assists and 179 points in his career. Barrett is a starter on the U-18 National Team.

Others expected to provide depth up front are sophomore **Evan Corey**, whose 2002 season was slowed by an injury but who is now healthy and ready to go for 2003, and junior **Ahmed Khalil**, a former U-18 National team pool player.

## GOALKEEPER

The Bruins return one of the top goalkeepers in the West and possibly the nation in senior **Zach Wells**, who will be pushed hard by redshirt freshman **Eric Reed** and sophomore **Nate Pena**.

Wells, a two-year starter, is coming off a 2002 season in which he was named the College Cup Defensive MVP and earned NSCAA All-Far West honors after posting a 0.76 GAA and seven shutouts. However, he could be slowed a bit in 2003 after undergoing surgery on his pinkie finger at the beginning of the summer.

Reed, who redshirted last season due to an early-season illness, had an impressive spring and has worked hard over the summer to get himself in position to contend for the starting job. He is a former member of the U-18 National Team. Pena served as the No. 2 keeper behind Wells last season and saw action in four games with one start against Fresno State. Pena gave up just one goal last year, earning a 0.73 goals against average.

Said Fitzgerald, "Zach's experience certainly gives him the nod early on, but with Nate and Eric pushing him and having been able to play all summer themselves, the competition will be fierce for the starting spot."

Also looking for roster spots are **Travis Shiba**, who was with the Bruin squad during the spring, and freshman Floridian **Chris Litchford**, who was his class valedictorian and played three games with the Central Florida Kraze in the PDL this summer.

## SCHEDULE

UCLA faces a tough challenge in its first two weeks of the season, opening against NCAA quarterfinal opponent Penn State at the Cal State Fullerton SoccerTown Classic, then going up against Big Ten runner-up Ohio State. The following week will be even tougher with matches against NCAA semifinal opponent Maryland and perennial power Virginia at the Maryland Tournament.

The Pac-10 season will showcase UCLA battling three other NCAA Tournament teams in NCAA runner-up Stanford, California and Oregon State not once, but twice.

"The Pac-10 season again will be the toughest part of our schedule," said Fitzgerald. "With four of the six teams making the NCAA Tournament, and those teams returning the majority of their players, the Pac-10 will challenge us right down to the wire."