

Sports Final

Soccer team finishes strong

■ An early struggle forgotten, the soccer team's strong finish gave cause for hope for next year's team.

By CHARLES REED
Staff Writer

During halftime of the final game of the season, Delco soccer's leading scorer, Rich Neal, sat toward the sideline with a bland expression as coach Bill Munger attended to the bandages on his injured left knee.

It wasn't disinterest splashed across Neal's face — it was the look of someone who was "in the zone." Neal had already scored twice in the game, and it appeared that Delco was in good shape to mop up Penn State Mont Alto and finish the season with its fourth straight win.

Delco started the second half with the sun at its back. Early into the frame, Neal scored his third of the game (his third hat-trick in as many contests) when he slid the ball by Mont Alto's goalie after a cross-continental feed from Osmond Mbaeri, who, at times, appeared to be more accurate than NASA.

Neal, a sophomore Business Major who hopes to play football and soccer upon his transfer to University Park next year, later added a rare header, his second of the day, to seal the deal for Delco. With four goals on the afternoon, the former member of the German Junior National Team had accomplished the seemingly impossible soccer feat of scoring 12 times in the final four games.

In Delco's net, goalkeeper

Andy Slowik cheered with his usual gusto, obviously a little bored from the lack of action on his side of the field, attributable, in part, to the strong defense of sweeper Matt Makowski.

Slowik would soon be tested, though, as a disgruntled and confused Mont Alto team sneaked in a soft goal, ending his bid for a third shutout in the final four games.

It appeared to be a mercy goal, given to a far inferior team that had begun to take cheap shots as it played with increasing frustration.

For Mont Alto, it was too little, too late.

Unfortunately, the same could also be said for Penn State Delco's season.

The game ended and the players gathered for a light celebration. The turf of Delco's soccer field was brown and torn, a grimacing victim of two months of torment. On the sideline, first-year coach Bill Munger grumbled as he smiled, saying, "Too little, too late."

Munger is a tough man, unaccustomed to losing.

A former member of the Junior Olympic Development Program (the highest achievement for young players), he was a two-year starting forward for Millersville's soccer team, and after graduating in '96, he went into the Army Reserves.

These days he is a manager in the investigations department with a local bank. He also coaches on the side with Interboro high school, in Prospect Park.

This experience did not prepare him for Delco's unexpected 1-6 start. However, it did give him the tools necessary to dig his players out of that hole.

"Coach [Munger] is the best

— the best," asserted Neal. "He has a lot of patience. I get frustrated and I look at him, and he's calm. He is dedicated to the team, the players. He's a friend, a brother."

Slowik agreed: "He would do anything to help us."

The roots of Delco's resurgence took hold early. In the second game of the season, Mbaeri (pronounced "em-beary"), the usual wall in front of the net, was given a red card and ejected from the game. Munger decided to switch Slowik, a sophomore Communications major who also played on the tennis team, to goal, and, for a change, he started him there in the following game.

With Slowik taking care of business in the net, "Oz" Mbaeri was allowed to work his magic in the field, using the free, wild style that he developed during his youth in Nigeria. He began to make passes, as smooth as those of a pick-up artist, and Delco began scoring.

Still, Munger only had 12 or 13 players showing up per game, and, with classes interfering with many players' practices, the losses began to add up.

There were numerous opinions on the early-season slump: "We struggled the first part of the season," said Munger, "but once we came together, once everybody knew their role — well, we won the last four."

"Once we got a strong 11 to dedicate, then we improved, especially on defense — they had been scoring a lot of goals against us," added Neal.

"Injury after injury after injury. We had a very slow start," said Slowik, "but we picked it up midseason, and we



Photo by Ron Hill

A soccer player keeps the action rolling at Penn State Delco's last match.

were a playoff caliber team in a tough division."

The turning point came after a humiliating loss to Delaware County Community College (DCCC). Delco fought to a shutout win over PSU Wilkes Barre in the next game, but it had its sights set on revenge against Williamson, a team that had embarrassed Delco in the '99 season.

"We had it in for them after the tough loss last year," Munger said with a slightly bitter voice.

His team came out and obliterated Williamson 7-2, and the ball was rolling.

By the final game, the ball movement and player positioning was precise, indicative of a team far better than the 5-6-0 record with which it finished the season, and far better than the team that lost its only playoff game (again to DCCC).

"We came out kind of flat," Slowik said with a distant

expression as he described the playoff loss. "I don't think were emotionally pumped up. We had the talent, but we didn't have the desire."

Mbaeri, a sophomore who plans to major in Biology after his transfer to University Park next fall, agreed: "We lost because we didn't practice for a whole week and everybody came in tired."

Because of the strong finish to the regular season, Munger can look forward to next fall with hope. With one solid season behind him, he'll have five players returning from this year's squad, including center/midfielder Mike Allen, who Munger calls "a playmaker, big hustler," and defender Melvin Clarke, who "stepped up the last four games, stepping up when he needed to step up."

Although, with Delco's outstanding finish, one must doubt that it was only Clarke who stood tall.

Volleyball team pulls together as season ends

By MARY DiMEGLIO
Staff Writer

Comparable to Venus and Serena Williams on the tennis court, volleyball courts in Pennsylvania are home to competition between "family" members.

The Commonwealth Campus Athletic Conference pits Penn State University's satellite campuses against one another in women's volleyball.

And the competition is fierce.

The head coach of the Penn State Delco team, Tom Pflieger explains, "You may see those people up at Main campus in volleyball clubs, so you want bragging rights. The CCAC is absolutely more competitive [than the Eastern PA Collegiate Conference, of which the team is also a member]."

It is no surprise to Pflieger, a PSU Delco men's volleyball veteran and '97 PSU graduate, that his team made the CCAC playoffs.

"This is definitely the best women's volleyball team I've seen since I've been here as a student or a coach," commented Pflieger. "The girls like each other, and they are competitive, which can't be taught."

The team was tied for second place in the southern division with PSU

Mont Alto, and defeated them in a one-match tiebreaker.

PSU Schuylkill then defeated PSU Delco, knocking them out of contention.

One unfortunate incident that plagued the PSU Delco team was the loss of would-be returning starter Sarah Stover, who was killed in a car accident a week before the beginning of the semester.

"Sarah would have really helped this team because the position she would have played is one that we haven't been able to nail down all season," Pflieger said.

The team's first two tournaments resulted in losses and negatively affected their record.

"If we hadn't gotten off to a bad start, we could probably have hosted the playoffs here," said Pflieger. "Our best hitter, Vanessa Behl, had an injury early on. And Julia DellaGuardia, our best passer, didn't come on the team until after our first two tournaments, which hurt us. We really could have used her abilities earlier in the season."

Freshman Lauren Hart, a Springfield resident and O'Hara graduate commented, "During the first two games, we weren't working together

very well. Now, we communicate a lot better on the court."

Pflieger cites the skill and leadership of the three returning players as one reason for the team's strength this year.

Of co-captain, Sophomore Colleen Kelly, Pflieger commented, "This year she saw that we had the chance to do really well, and she's been the most head-smart person on the team. She makes very good decisions, and has been more aggressive than last year."

Sophomore Vanessa Behl also returned this season.

"When Vanessa is out there, our team just plays better," said Pflieger. "She is probably the best hitter in the league."

Pflieger commented that returning Sophomore Julienne Balmer improved significantly from last year, as her skills went from those of a beginner to those of a starter.

"Her serves go in just about every time. She is very consistent," said Pflieger.

Currently, students at the Commonwealth Campuses are only eligible to play in the CCAC for two seasons. Because many campuses now offer four-year programs, there is a push to change the eligibility require-

ments so athletes can play for all four seasons.

"I think it would make for a more competitive league," said Pflieger. "I only get [players] for two years, and that's tough as a coach. The three girls I have back from last year got a lot better, and that makes me feel good. I guess I've done my job."

Kelly added: "We [the three returning players] were not worried about the new talent, because we knew we would have a fun season, regardless. It was a nice surprise to see all of the new players. Having the talent and the fun is twice as good."

This year, Pflieger plans to put more effort into recruiting players for next season, particularly from the high schools that many current PSU Delco students graduated from, such as Academy Park, Interboro, Springfield, Ridley, and Chichester.

"I hope to get girls to commit to come here next year, for academics first, and also to play volleyball. [I want] to let them know there is a team, and they can continue their volleyball career and get varsity credit," said Pflieger.

"Hopefully, [the recruiting] will keep the team strong for many years to come."