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Snow hindering early days of girls soccer

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The turf playing surface at the MDU Resources Community Bowl has been cleared off, with snow lining the entire field.

TOM STROMME, TRIBUNE

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Last year the mid-April snowstorm threw a massive wrench into spring sports schedules.

For the moment, the snow currently on the ground is only slowing down the practice schedules of girls soccer teams, as they are the latest-starting of the spring sports.

“Officially the first day of the season was Monday,” new Century girls soccer coach Laura Hertz said. “We’re doing tryouts this week and then announcing the team on Friday. Unfortunately every soccer program is in the same boat, there’s so much snow on the ground that it’s hard to get outside.”

While that does come with the added cost of needing time in the Fore Seasons Center golf dome to get practice in, it does allow for coaches, particularly new-to-the-program ones like Hertz, to get their feet under them.

“I’ve been working on a lot of organization, making sure we had a full coaching staff and getting ready for the season,” Hertz said. “We got two days in this week in the golf dome, but that gets spendy, so we’re hoping the turf fields get cleared off soon.”

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Hertz was brought in as part of a two-coach move to replace Ryan Okerson, who resigned as coach of both the Century boys and girls teams.

Hertz joins the Patriots after a highly unusual down year in which Century missed making a trip to the state tournament for the first time in program history.

“Nobody ever wants to focus on the past, and having a new coach can be scary and bring changes,” Hertz said. “What I’m focused on is getting the girls focused on playing well together, so we’re working to get a team we need where we have strength in the right places and work well together.”

Still early, there’s no concrete sense yet as to who will be trying to make an impact on this year’s Century team, whenever they do manage to get out and play matches.

While the team struggled to put balls in the net last season, scoring just 20 goals in 16 matches, they retain what is hopefully the majority of a defense that had its moments against tough competition.

“At times it can be easy to rely on one or two gifted individuals and put too much on their plate, so what I want to do is work on support and have the girls be able to feed the ball to scoring positions,” Hertz said. “We want to be able to get the ball to someone that is able to take a shot.

“We have a solid defense and have good leaders on our team, which will help.”

That defense will be put to the test against opponents like Legacy.

Whereas the Patriots missed the state tournament for the first time ever, it was in large part due to the Sabers, who actually beat Century in the state qualifier last year to advance to the program’s first-ever state tournament.

“We have a good core of girls coming back, including a small group of seniors, and they were excited to make state last year,” Sabers co-head coach Mick Lenhardt said. “We have a big group of sophomores and juniors that also want to get back to state again, and we have a good group of freshmen coming in that are pushing hard.”

The first run at state ended in disappointment, as the Sabers were beaten 3-0 by West Fargo Sheyenne and 2-0 by West Fargo.

Much of last year's team is back, however, and is looking to use that as encouragement for this season.

"Making state is great, but you want to build the program," Lenhardt said. "So you have to go after the top. We have to go out on the field and prove ourselves."

As with the Patriots, the Sabers are stuck indoors, and are still waiting for their opportunity to get into the golf dome.

That has made things a little difficult on Lenhardt, now working with previous JV coach Luis Moreno as co-head coach, but they're finding things to work on anyway.

"Everybody is wanting to get outside and play, they're chomping at the bit," Lenhardt said. "You have to keep a positive attitude and do what you can."

While the Patriots are in work in progress offensively, the Sabers bring back a pair of elite scorers that were critical to their success last year.

Now seniors, Oakley Will and Payton Kooiman registered 36 points in their junior years, 60 percent of the team's scoring.

Lenhardt is hoping his team can provide them with better support from other directions so teams can't shut them down as easily.

"Oakley, Payton and Madison Lein, who plays on our back line, they're three key players that set the tone for the team and are back this year," he said. "They're willing to jump in and do whatever they need to do to win."

While they have scorers, defense is at the forefront of Legacy's improvement targets this year.

In Legacy's five regular season losses last year, they conceded a total of 22 goals, 13 of which were scored by two-time defending state champion Minot.

"We need to play a better defensive game as a team," Lenhardt said. "We were a little reliant on Oakley scoring last year, and when she wasn't scoring, people were like, 'Oh no!' So we need another goal-scorer to complement her."

A benefit for Hertz's squad is that their opening matches of the season, currently scheduled for April 11 and 14, are against Legacy and Bismarck High, with the Legacy game currently in the book as a non-conference match.

"Our schedule might end up getting condensed, because our first game is April 11 and I don't know if the fields will be ready by then," Hertz said. "It's a busy schedule, including a road game in Williston one night and a home game the next afternoon."

"It always helps to see conference games early, and then replay them. Teams can change a lot from when you see them the first time in a season, so it's hard to make assumptions from that first game."

Legacy has no such luxury with their schedule.

After their opener against Century scheduled for April 11, the Sabers face Williston, Dickinson and Minot, all on the road, and with no idea how many of those games will actually be played.

“We’re supposed to go to Williston and Dickinson, so we don’t know where those games are going to end up,” Lenhardt said. “We tell the girls that the schedule will be what it will be, we can’t control how fast the weather changes or when the snow will melt.

“We’ll just focus on getting better and when we can play, we’ll play.”

With Minot’s highest-end players, including Senior Athlete of the Year MaLiah Burke, graduated after last year’s state championship, there is an opening for a team to topple the defending champs.

“Minot’s the two-time defending champion, so until someone knocks them off, they’re the cream of the crop,” Lenhardt said. “Bismarck is solid, Jamestown had a good season last year, Mandan and Century have some good returning players. Might be a good battle between the top five, six teams.”

“Minot’s been a powerhouse for quite some time,” Hertz said. “They still have a fairly young team, so they’re on everybody’s list. We’ll do a little reconnaissance and see other teams’ games (to find out who else might be a competitor).”

But for now, the teams must wait for the snow and ice to melt.

How long that will take is anybody’s guess. But until it happens, soccer won’t be played outdoors in Bismarck.

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