

CABRILLO MEN'S SOCCER PREVIEW

Rocha's return cause for optimism

By RYAN MOSES

sports@santacruzsentinel.com

The start of Cesar Rocha's college soccer career has been delayed long enough.

Two years ago, Rocha was a star senior goalkeeper at Pajaro Valley High, where he drew interest from San Jose State to play at the NCAA Division I level. But he decided to attend Cabrillo College instead so he could work and help his family financially. He didn't play for the Seahawks that year because at 17 he could still play for the Santa Cruz Breakers club program.

He was set to join Cabrillo's roster last

season, but a week before the start of practice he tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee while playing pick-up basketball. After surgery last September and a year of physical therapy, Rocha is back and refocused on the game.

He made his first start for Cabrillo on Aug. 30 in the Seahawks' 2-1 season-opening win over Canada. Rocha never knew how good it would feel to get back on the field.

"All this time off made me realize how much I like to play," Rocha said. "There were some days when I was tired from play-

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ing. With this year I realized that this is what I like to do. I would go to soccer games and I wanted to play. This injury brought me down, but at the same time it made me realize how much this is worth and how much this means to me."

Now completely healthy and committed, he's determined to catch the attention of D-I coaches again. The 6-foot-1 Rocha backs an experienced Seahawks defense led by sophomores Riley Stevens, an Aptos grad, and co-captain Trevor Ross of Santa Cruz.

"I've been rehabbing a lot, working on stuff that will help me on my goalkeeping," said Rocha, who was named one of the team's captains. "I've been training pretty much since I was a little kid, so I wouldn't say it's hard. What you learn you don't forget. The first couple weeks I was rusty, but now I feel fine. I don't feel at the level I want to be at, but I think I'll get there."

Ross said the team has improved significantly on defense this year, and Rocha is a big reason why.

"He's a fierce competitor back there. It just proves it with him coming back from a bad knee injury," Ross said. "Every practice he's working hard and he makes some ridiculous saves. He's a great leader out there. I can't say enough about him. I'm glad to have him behind me."

Rocha is one of 23 first-year players on the team compared to just six returners. Sixth-year coach Paolo Carbone said he's excited about the new recruits and expects the team to compete for the Coast Conference Central Division title. The



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Goalie Cesar Rocha and the Seahawks are aiming to win the Coast Conference title.

Seahawks finished second in the division at 6-7-1 last year [6-14-1 overall] behind 12-1-1 West Valley, according to California Community College Soccer News. Cabrillo last made the postseason in 2008.

Carbone said his team's goal every year is to make it to the state final four, something the Seahawks have done twice in his tenure.

"I think we are going to have good speed on the wings, which is important for the way we want to play," Carbone said. "It's hard to say because it's early, but I think we have a team that can play good soccer, good possession. They have

a good understanding of the game."

The Seahawks will rely on midfielders Cesar Garcia and Miguel Acero, both Watsonville grads, to control the ball. Cabrillo features nine former Wildcatz on the roster and 21 players from Santa Cruz County.

"This year we have a lot more speed in general and a lot of guys with a good sense for the goal. So hopefully this year we can crank out some goals," Ross said. "We kind of improved a little bit everywhere. Our midfield was good and I think it's just as good. We've added some great strikers and great goalie."