

Soccer goes on the offensive

Red Wolves focus on creating chances

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The Arkansas State women's soccer team kicks off its season Sunday at the University of Central Arkansas and dives into the new season with great squad depth and a real shot at the Sun Belt Conference title.

Last year the Red Wolves competed in their best ever season, boasting an 11-6-4 record including a third place finish in the league and a trip to the SBC Championship game before falling to South Alabama.

A-State received one vote to finish in first place in this year's SBC preseason coaches' poll, but ultimately the Red Wolves were selected to finish third in the league. Last year's champions, South Alabama, received nine first place votes with Troy wedged in the middle of the Jags and Red Wolves also receiving one first place vote.

"It's hard to carry any kind of momentum into this season because we don't really know what to expect," A-State head soccer coach Brian Dooley said. "But I do know that the attitude in training and just in the preseason has had a different intensity to it. I think as far as momentum, all the momentum ended when we lost in the final."

Despite being selected to finish third in the SBC, Dooley said his team is preparing for the season just like any other season. In the recent past the team carried some expectations with them into a new season and A-State did not live up to them.

The Red Wolves only have to live up to their own expectations and so far the leaders on the team have done a good job of transmitting that to the 10 new players joining the squad this season.

"Having 10 new players on the roster also helps deal with that because those players weren't part of what we did last year," Dooley said. "Those players are just jumping in as our leadership has established the mentality. They only know the intensity that we've developed to this point."

Last season the Red Wolves put on a defensive clinic in a majority of their games. A-State allowed one goal or fewer in 16 of their matches last year. Of those 16 games, nine were clean sheets.

The Red Wolves fielded a



COURTESY OF ARKANSAS STATE ATHLETICS

Arkansas State soccer rally together in a huddle before a matchup.

stellar center back partnership of Julianna Coates and Dana O'Boye and the duo kept opposing strikers in their back pocket week in, week out. As Coates enters her senior season, she will be without her partner O'Boye who graduated after last year.

However, A-State has multiple options at the back, including almost the perfect replacement.

"What we've done is in the recruiting process we've recruited Rachel Kutella," Dooley said. "Rachel comes from the same club that Dana played on. The Eclipse Select out of the Chicago area. She also plays the same exact position that Dana played. So we're expecting Rachel to come in and develop into that position that Dana has established."

A-State boasts depth across the back line, including exciting options at left and right back. With a change in mentality in the back with the development of certain players, A-State can use its wing backs in a more offensive role.

Junior right back Haley Husted not only holds a defensive appetite, but her ability to get forward adds an extra bite and dynamic to the Red Wolves' attack.

"She started to develop a confidence in going forward and getting into the attack," Dooley said. "We've really been trying to exploit that now. She just loves to go forward."

The ever two-footed

Hannah Maupin can play in the center or on the outside, and freshmen Lauren Shah, Hailey Cloud, Tara Lee and Darby Stotts add depth to the outside back position.

Despite multiple great defensive performances last season, the Red Wolves struggled to score in some of their matches with 1-0 and 0-0 results scattered throughout the year.

Dooley pointed out soccer is traditionally a low scoring game, and he said A-State had a good conversion rate last season, they just did not create as many quality chances as they can.

This season the Red Wolves look to change their shape as the team transitions into a 4-2-3-1 formation.

"(The formation change) will allow us to attack more regularly with at least four players as opposed to last year where it was two and then three," Dooley said. "So we're adding players that have more attacking roles and with our outside backs being able to roll up and join the attack, we feel that we'll be able to create more quality chances."

If the Red Wolves can maintain their conversion rate while creating more quality chances, SBC defenses could be in for a tough time against an A-State squad riddled with attacking talent.

Perhaps no attacking talent stands out more than senior Preseason SBC Offensive Player of the Year Sarah Sodoma. The St. Louis native stands two goals

away from being A-State's all time leading goal scorer, she currently has 22 to her name, and a combination of explosive pace and finishing ability sets her apart.

"She's one of those players," Dooley said, "that you think she's going fast then she turns it into another gear."

In the past Sodoma usually played only on the left wing, but teams in the league adapted and tried to shut her down. This season, the senior will play as the "one" in the 4-2-3-1 up top for A-State, but will also transition to play as a wide player as the game progresses.

When Sodoma makes that transition to the left, that leaves room for a hold-up forward like Maggie Ertl to come into the mix.

Sodoma will also have the help of Olivia Smith up top. In the past, Smith built a reputation as a powerful defender playing with an unmatched intensity. A-State looks to transfer that intensity to the attacking third of the field to offer more support.

"Olivia brings an intensity to the game," Dooley said. "She is one of the most physical players that we have. She certainly probably ranks among one of the more physical players I've had the fortune to coach. But Olivia has a lot of unique abilities outside of defending."

While in the past players might have tried to body Sodoma more or go in for harder tackles to throw her off her rhythm, Smith will

now be up top reciprocating some of that physicality and she will be a handful for defenders.

Junior Sophia Restrepo returned from a devastating injury she picked up her freshman year and glued the midfield together last season. This year, as the team transitions to the 4-2-3-1, the Florida native's role in the midfield is set to change.

The "three" in the 4-2-3-1 consists of three forward midfielders, one on the right, one on the left and one playmaker in the middle. Restrepo, a player who held more defensive responsibility last season and really connected the backline to the front, now turns more creative as that attacking playmaker.

"She covers so much ground in a game," Dooley said. "Our GPS data says she's above seven or eight miles in a game. What we're trying to do with her now is I really want her to reduce that amount of miles covered so that she can be a little more productive."

With five midfielders in the center of the pitch, the two holding midfielders behind Restrepo (the "two") will be more restrained and give Restrepo the license to be more creative.

Freshman Abigail Miller is set to replace the ever-energetic Lindsey Brochu in one of the holding midfielder spots and experienced senior Victoria MacIntosh will slot in with Miller.

"Victoria MacIntosh is a

seasoned veteran who has incredible distribution skills, leadership skills on the field, controlling her midfield and directing things," Dooley said. "She's like a field general out there. I think she's going to have a big season for us as well."

The Red Wolves boast five different keepers on the roster and A-State's No. 1, senior Megan McClure, earned selection to the SBC preseason All-Conference team.

In a season where COVID-19 could lead to a player having to sit out due to testing or contact tracing, goalkeeper depth is a luxury Dooley said.

With sophomore keepers Noel Miller and Olivia Luther pushing McClure week in, week out, more playing time could be on the cards.

"I would say Megan is still our No. 1, but going into the season our goal is to really provide more opportunities for the players underneath her," Dooley said. "Last year we didn't do that. This year we feel we can because those players underneath her have continued to develop."

The Red Wolves start their season against in-state foe UCA Sunday and the game against the Bears marks the only non-conference game for A-State before Sun Belt play begins.

"I think you would really like to have more (non-conference games)," Dooley said. "We had other games scheduled but with everything going on they just fell apart on us. We had a very challenging schedule set up for us. We tried to push some things into next year."

A-State has had to make the most of intrasquad scrimmages and even though those scrimmages are not the same as real matches, the Red Wolves really have not had a choice.

"UCA will be a great opportunity for us to kind of see where we are and we are just looking good in training or can we translate it to competition," Dooley said.

Last season the Red Wolves took down the Bears 3-1 in Jonesboro. Kick off from Conway is set for 6 p.m.

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Red Wolves face another tough road test

Kansas State host A-State for first time since 1980

ALEX GALBRAITH

SPORTS WRITER

The Kansas State Wildcats and the Arkansas State Red Wolves will face off in Manhattan, Kansas for the first time since 1980 on Saturday afternoon. It will be the season opener for the

Wildcats following a surprising 8-5 season under first year head coach Chris Klieman.

A-State will look to rebound after a tough 37-24 opening loss to the reigning American Athletic Conference champion Memphis Tigers, a game where the Red Wolves uncharacteristically turned the ball over three times, but ultimately was not too far off from Memphis offensively, trailing the Tigers in total yards, 424-502.

In most power five versus group of five matchups, the power five program is usually the heavy favorite. That will not be the case in Saturday's matchup.

Arkansas State may actually own the offensive edge if the Red Wolves can continue productivity on the ground and

clean up costly drops that cost them majorly against the Tigers.

The Red Wolves' defense also is a cause for concern, after allowing over 500 total yards and being blasted on social media by experts for "socially distancing" from Memphis wide receivers in the end zone.

What Kansas State lacks in explosive firepower, they make up for with an experienced senior quarterback in Skylar Thompson. The Wildcats ranked 103rd nationally in total offense and Thompson carried the team with 2,720 total yards and 23 total touchdowns. Thompson has his work cut out for him yet again this season, as the

Wildcats lose all five offensive linemen from 2019, running back James Gilbert,

and leading wide receiver Dalton Schoen. A slow offensive start may be in store for Kansas State. A start that might allow Arkansas State to jump out to an early lead and quiet the expected crowd of just under 15,000.

Defensively, Kansas State owns the clear advantage as that side of the ball will bail out any offensive



COURTESY OF MEMPHIS ATHLETICS

A-State running back Isaiah Azubuike faces off with a Memphis defender.

struggles they may endure. The Wildcats return seven defensive starters after ranking 44th nationally and allowing just 21.4 points per game in 2019. Kansas State returns all of its leaders from last season including sack leader Wyatt Hubert at defensive end, tackle

leader Elijah Sullivan at linebacker, and interception leader AJ Parker at cornerback. A-State's offense will have their hands full against Chris Klieman's defensive game plan, one that he used to lead North Dakota State to four FCS national titles. When the Wildcats

and Red Wolves take the field on Saturday, it will certainly be under unusual circumstances. Despite these circumstances, it will provide each team with a great opportunity early in the season. A-State will have a chance to claim their first win over a Power Five

opponent since 2008, while Kansas State will have a chance to start strong following a heartbreaking Liberty Bowl defeat to Navy. A game that was never supposed to happen may turn out to be one of the most underrated games of the weekend.

Athletics share seating plans for 2020 football season

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SPORTS EDITOR

Plans of how Centennial Bank Stadium will host fans this fall for A-State football games have been cemented, as Arkansas State Athletics released an article on its websites detailing what fans can expect this year.

Centennial Bank Stadium has a maximum capacity of 30,964, and will be using almost 40% of that capacity this year, limiting attendance to 12,000 fans in order to provide socially distant and safe seating. The plan from A-State athletics has already been approved by the Arkansas Department of Health.

Beginning with the student section, seating blocks will be limited to six seats a piece. Students should arrive at the stadium with their groups, and will need to bring their A-State student ID to Gate 15 for entry. It is requested that these seating blocks keep three seats between themselves in order to properly social distance. Another major change is that seating on even numbered rows will not be available.

The change that even numbered rows will not be available this year will be



PHOTO BY | HANNAH RISKER

Centennial Bank Stadium will not be empty this football season, sporting a maximum capacity of 12,000 fans.

applied to non-student fans as well. The rows will be blocked off and will be used to separate each social bubble using the odd numbered rows.

Social bubbles will be enforced and are limited to groups of 12 people per row, and these people can be friends and family members that you are comfortable being somewhat close to.

Face coverings will be required at all times while inside the stadium, due to the fact that cheering and

yelling can release respiratory droplets. Naturally, a face covering can be removed when a fan is consuming food or a drink, but the covering should be immediately re-applied after the fan is finished.

For parents looking to attend games with their children, those under the age of ten are exempt from the requirement of wearing face coverings, but are strongly encouraged to do so, especially if the child is older

than the age of two.

Tailgating and partying before the game will not be allowed on university property, which means popular activities such as Greek Life at the Pines and grilling will not be a part of the 2020 Arkansas State football experience.

The stadium will open its gates to fans two hours before kickoff, and parking will be permitted an hour before that. It is encouraged that fans arrive earlier than perhaps

usual in order to spread out the influx of people into the stadium, making it easier to socially distance while fans wait to present their tickets to enter. There will be markers on the ground for fans to follow to make sure they are staying six-feet apart.

If you are a fan with access to club seating, elevator usage will be limited to those in social bubbles. Each elevator will be assigned to a specific floor, so the Woodard McAllister Family Club on

floor one will be accessible by the south elevator. The Suite Level One will be accessible by the north elevator, and the media elevator will serve its same purpose as usual, only allowing entrance to the press box areas on the third floor.

It's recommended that fans in all club seating keep windows and doors open in their rooms in order to create more airflow. Food options will remain the same as years past, but will no longer be in the form of a self-serve buffet. Sodexo employees will plate every meal, and any other snack or beverage will be pre-packaged. Suites will no longer need to have food ordered ahead of time, and will still be served in a buffet style with food offerings similar to years past. Outside food will not be permitted.

A lot of changes needed to be made in order to hold a season of football at Centennial Bank Stadium. If there is a guideline that you are wondering about that might not have been covered in this story, visit astatedwolves.com for more information.