

Publication: The Virginian-Pilot; Date: Mar 12, 2013; Section: Sports; Page: C6

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW THIS SEASON

Noted absences Several players who would have been key area returners won't see varsity action after being selected as candidates for the U.S. Soccer Development Academy. Players for the first time this year had to make a choice between the academy's busy training regimen or playing for their high schools. Just how the loss of these players affects the caliber of play remains to be seen.

Standing Pat First Colonial captured its first Eastern Region title last year with a 2-0 victory over Grassfield. But the Patriots' journey into state competition ended quickly with a 3-2 quarterfinal loss to Colonial Forge. First Colonial lost Eastern Region Player of the Year Brian Davidson to graduation, but is hoping to stay on top with seniors Brooks Nopper (9 goals), Tyler McArde (8 goals) and goal keeper Alex Lally.

Can Falcons rebound? New Cox coach Eric Blackmore welcomes six seniors – including Division I signees Ryan Albiston and Adam Newcomb (Ferrum) – who were part of the Falcons' dominance during their freshmen and sophomore seasons. Last year's 6-3-1 Beach District effort likely left a bad taste in their mouths.

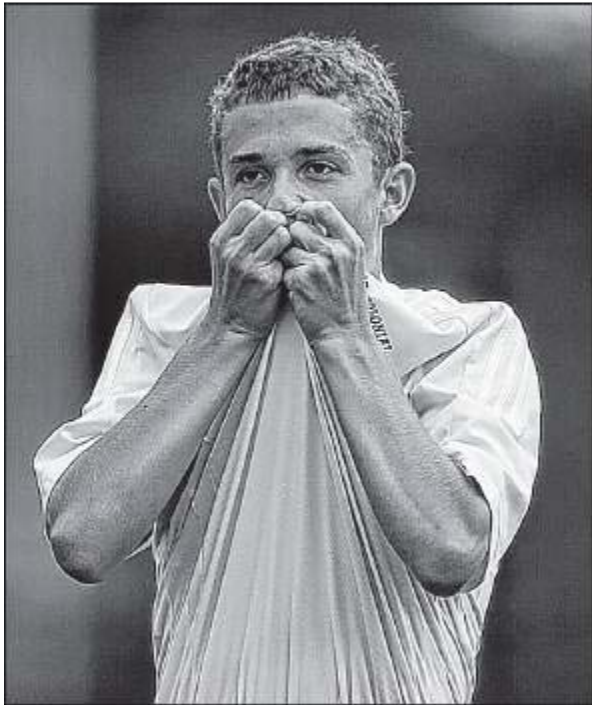
Elsewhere in the Beach District Ocean Lakes also is a strong contender just on the presence of Justin Trout (14 goals, 8 assists), one of the leading returning scorers in the area. Wes Hendrix also is a threat. The two will benefit from a young but skilled midfield headed by freshman Jack Monroe and Belgian sophomore Johann DePicker, who recently moved to the United States. Kellam will look to strengthen its defense after the graduation of keeper Jake Burch (Virginia Wesleyan). David Feane will get help from Adam Vaughan, who is returning after an early-season injury. Kempsville is another squad hurt by graduation. But seniors Blake Laibstain, Jan Brennick, Josh Hopkins and Nick Clayton return. Landstown's Austin McKenzie is a junior who has yet to play a complete season because of injuries. Garrett Walke (9 goals, 3 assists) and Kyle Fisher (5 goals, 5 assists) lead what might be the area's most experienced returning lineup. Princess Anne will look to Joseph Thames under first-year coach Nick Marchland, a former Hickory assistant. Bayside features a host of returners led by Mickias Tesfamariam (5 goals), Kendall McIntosh (4 goals, 4 assists) and Colton Watson (4 goals, 3 assists). Salem returns Chadler Hershberger and six other starters. Noah Beardsley is solid in goal.

Can Comets stay on top? Granby wrestled the Eastern District title from the powerful grip of Maury last year and is hoping for a lengthy stay on top. Defense shouldn't be a problem since keeper David Field returns. Alex Rivera (5 goals, 3 assists) and Ryan Gillooly (5 goals, 5 assists) will play key roles in the midfield.

Elsewhere in the Eastern District Alex Cady, Chaz Church and Brandon Sweeney are four-year starters who are looking to get Maury back on top. Churchland looks to improve with the likes of goalkeeper Christian Coulson (4 shutouts), forward Nicholas Taylor (11 goals, 9 assists) and returning midfielder Antonio Sorbello. A nice addition comes from foreign exchange student Barzane Osman, a Syrian whose family fled to Denmark. Graduation and an injury to returning all-district firstteamer Jhevaughno Anderson leave Norview in a tough position. After a third-place finish in the district, Wilson is starting over with head coach Bill O'Donnell – an assistant for the last four years after the dismissal of Daryl Fischer. Travis Brown (10 goals, 3 assists) leads the way for the Presidents.

Grizzlies still loaded Grassfield loses Michael Abraham and Nathan Berning to the U.S. Soccer Development Academy this year. Max Dinsmore (12 goals) returns as one of the leading returning scorer in South Hampton Roads. Grassfield advanced to the state tournament last season for the first time, losing 1-0 to eventual state champion Albemarle. Leading the charge with Dinsmore will be senior Christian McBride, juniors Cameron Shaw and Logan Woodcock, and freshman Chase Quinn.

Elsewhere in the Southeastern District Hickory and Indian River are the biggest threats to a Grassfield repeat. The Hawks are led by Region 1 ODP team member Marshall MacCartney, fellow junior Brandon Gehin-Scott and seniors Mark Ferguson and Dillon Thompson. The Braves feature the lethal foot of Eaton (14 goals). Fellow senior Brian Slade (8 goals) is teamed with juniors Tripp Ivey (3 goals), Matt Russell (3 goals) and Kyle Latusa on a team hoping to gain consistency. Great Bridge could jump into contention on the strength of six returning starters led by seniors Ryan Cooney, Campbell Bishop, Kenta Yoshimura and Mike Starks. Seniors Parker Black and Alex Taylor have Deep Creek hoping to improve on last year's one-win season. Seniors Colin Rice, Kyler Sparks, Kyle Jones, Devin Winslow and Kyle Jones give hope for a Lakeland improvement. Gabe Everett (10 goals, 6 assists) spearheads Nansemond River, getting help from Zach Thomas (5 goals, 4 assists).



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Tyler McArdle returns for a First Colonial team that won its first Eastern Region title.

by the numbers

2 Years since a South Hampton Roads team won a state championship. Cox won in 2009 and 2010 to end what had been an 11-year drought.

4 Overtimes it took First Colonial to beat Granby in last year's Eastern Region semifinals.

5 First-year coaches this season – Wilson's Bill O'Donnell , Princess Anne's Nick Marchland, Mike Gyori at Hickory, Lakeland's Nizar Arfaoui and Cox's Eric Blackmore . Blackmore was a long-time coach at Hickory.

13 Goals scored by Eastern Region quarterfinal winners, against only three allowed. Things got really tight after that, with only one outcome decided by more than a goal.