

MEN'S SOCCER TEAM REACHES THE PINNACLE



The Eastern Connecticut State University men's soccer program reached the 'pinnacle of success' in the 2018-19 academic year when it shared the United Soccer Coaches' Team Pinnacle Award with one other men's program. The award was presented for the first time that year to recognize on-field success, sportsmanship and academic excellence.

In 2019-20, the Warriors repeated their achievement, but this time they stand alone. While nine college programs qualified for the Pinnacle Award, eight were women's teams; Eastern was the only men's team to receive the award, which honors teams at the Division I, II and III levels.

"The Team Pinnacle Award is aptly named, as it recognizes elite soccer teams achieving at the highest

level in academics, sportsmanship and competitive success," noted Lori Runksmeier, Eastern's director of athletics. "The men's soccer team, led by Coach Greg DeVito, embodies excellence. Receiving the Team Pinnacle Award is a deserved recognition of that success. Coach DeVito has tirelessly built an exceptional program with a national reputation. We are so proud of the team's accomplishments."

To qualify for the Team Pinnacle Award, soccer programs must have received the Team Ethics and Sportsmanship Award, based upon the percentage of yellow cards received during the year; achieved recognition in the classroom as a recipient of the Team Academic Award (minimum team GPA of 3.00); and recorded a winning percentage of at least .750.

On the field in the fall of 2019, Eastern won 17 of 20 games (85 percent) and repeated as the LEC regular-season champion. As it has virtually every season under DeVito, the Warriors were the least-penalized team – by a wide margin – in the Little East. In 2019, Eastern was awarded the Team Ethics and Sportsmanship Award for the sixth time in the last eight years. In the classroom, the Warriors qualified for a USC Team Academic Award for the eighth straight year.

"My philosophy is to develop our guys to be the best athletes, students and, most importantly, people that they can be," said DeVito. "This award exemplifies the commitment to hard work and integrity that our players possess."

Cross-Country Teams Run to Top Honors

The Eastern men's and women's teams captured the Little East Conference's 2020 Virtual Cross-Country Invitational this fall with outstanding team and individual performances. Each team ran a 5,000-meter course of its choice over a two-week period, with Eastern runners primarily using nearby Hop River Trail on Oct. 23.

Led by individual winner Ryan Escoda of Newtown, CT, the men featured the three fastest times in a field of 42 runners to pile up a 19-point victory over runner-up University of Southern Maine.

Behind senior Lauren Bresson of Roxbury, CT, and sophomore Kelsey Zator of Scotland, CT, who shared third place in a field of 37, the women were 15 points better than runner-up Rhode Island College. Despite returning only four of 13 competitors from last year's LEC race – losing their top six finishers – the women again took top honors this year after claiming the "conventional title" in two of the previous three years.

Pictured left to right: Kelsey Zator, Lauren Bresson and Ryan Escoda



Runksmeier Assumes National Leadership Role



Following two years as vice president, Eastern's Director of Athletics Lori Runksmeier began a two-year term this past fall as president of the National Association of Division III Athletic Administrators (NADIIIAA).

"I want to thank Keri Luchowski, who has provided me an excellent springboard to carry on her leadership

and serve the membership of NADIIIAA," noted Runksmeier, a 30-year veteran of athletic administration who joined Eastern in fall 2015 following 16 years at New England College.

In five years under Runksmeier, Eastern has won the Little East Conference's Presidents' Cup for academic excellence three times and has also claimed the Commissioner's Cup for LEC athletic supremacy in each of the past four years. Under Runksmeier, Eastern also has expanded its intercollegiate athletics offerings from 17 to 19 sports, with the addition of men's swimming and men's golf.

Prior to working at New England College, Runksmeier previously held athletic administrative positions at College of Saint Benedict, St. Cloud State University and Minnesota State University, Mankato. A native of Ledyard, Iowa, Runksmeier holds a B.S. Degree in Physical Education and English and an M.A. degree in Athletic Administration from Mankato.

Inclusion: A First-Hand Account

Tristan Kijak '21 was captain of the Eastern Connecticut State University women's lacrosse program in 2020. A biology major with a minor in Spanish, she is considering graduate school opportunities to prepare for a career as an oncology pediatric nurse practitioner.

One of Kijak's passions – in addition to nursing, her family, soccer and lacrosse – is raising awareness about racial equality and social justice. "I had the privilege of growing up in Windsor, CT, where less

than half of my high school colleagues were White. I always had friends who were African American, Hispanic, Indian and Chinese. Living in a diverse town really influenced my mindset into thinking that the world always accepted anyone of any race. I loved growing up around people with different backgrounds, because it taught me so much about the world around me. I have also been fascinated by different cultures, and different outlooks on what's going on in the world.

"One of my best friends since I was four years old is African American, and it's interesting and insightful to hear her opinions and views, especially with what's going on in our country right now. I am always amazed at the audacity and ignorance some people have when it comes to racism. I have often been in situations with my friends of color who have received racist comments right in front of my eyes, and they have always handled the situation with grace.

Golfers Ace in Their First Season

Eastern's men's golf team celebrated its return to varsity competition after a 38-year layoff by winning the 2020 Little East Conference Virtual Men's Golf Invitational on Oct. 17.

Freshmen Ashton Lewis (right) of Fairfield, CT, and Jonah Dupuis of Hampton, CT, finished first and second to power the Warriors to the title. All five participating teams played at their respective home courses; Eastern's team played at The Windham Club.

The University's top four golfers finished a combined six-over-par – good enough for a nine-stroke win over runner-up University of Southern Maine. Golfers from Rhode Island College, Castleton University, and Western Connecticut State University also competed.

On the par-72, 6,435-yard layout, Lewis was five-under-par 67 to secure medalist honors, with Dupuis two strokes back at three-under-par 69. They were two of only three players in the 29-person field to break par and two of only three freshmen among the top 10. In all, Eastern featured five of the top 16 scorers.

With the coronavirus wiping out the fall season, which included the Little East Championship and New England Intercollegiate Golf Association (NEIGA) Championship, Coach Chris Wojcik hopes to resume competition during the spring 2021 season, which would conclude with the NCAA Division III national championships in May.



"One of the best experiences that I had at my previous college was living in the study dorm on campus with international students. One of my neighbors was from China, and we would have late-night chats about the differences in school systems, cultures and family dynamics. We would have stimulating conversations about our differences and I learned so much about the world and about people who were different from me. Regularly my friends in the dorm would cook different types of food to share – Jamaican, Indian, Chinese and Dominican.

"How can college students make a change? We are all figuring out our paths and preparing for careers that we hope will last a lifetime. To this end, we must bring an open, diverse and inclusive mind into that workplace. We must influence people in a positive way and show that everyone – regardless of how they look, the language they speak, or their economic background – is important and should always be respected."

