

IT ALL BEGINS SATURDAY



The 2004 United Soccer Leagues season kicks off Saturday in Provo, Utah with the first regular season match of the year. The first match of the 2004 USL season features two clubs looking to turn around disappointing 2003 seasons with the PSL's San Diego Gauchos visiting the PDL's BYU Cougars Saturday. Game time is 9:30 pm ET.

The Gauchos are looking to reverse last season's 3-16-1 mark with the return of former star forward Herculez Gomez. Gomez led the team to a 10-7-3 inaugural season record and the playoffs in his rookie 2002 season with 17 goals and 36 points, which ranked second and third in the league, respectively.

The All-League forward and Rookie of the Year finalist went on to join the Los Angeles Galaxy after the Gauchos exited the playoffs and spent last season on loan from LA to the A-League's Seattle Sounders.

"Herculez is very important to us because he can score, he can score," said head coach Bob Maruca. "He's a lot better now than when we had him when he was 19."

Maruca feels he will have a pretty good team this season and is looking to win the league title.

"That is why we signed Herculez."

"There are a few guys returning, but we have really redone the whole team. We had a lot of problems last year. More than I've ever had in my 30 years of coaching," said Maruca. "We don't talk about last year's season - it never existed."

Among those returning are Akbar Zareh and Brandon Hearron. Zareh was a late addition to the team last year, scoring three goals in nine games. Hearron played every minute in goal in 2003, but will be tested for the starting spot by former San Diego State goalkeeper Tim Edwards.

Other newcomers who could have an impact according to Maruca are Noel Musicha of Malawia in Africa, Shea Travis, who has spent the last few years in the Swedish first division and Stephen Pedicini, who Maruca feels will be a key defensive player.

Unlike the Gauchos, the BYU Cougars struggled in their first season last year, finishing 2-15-1. Dominant in the collegiate club ranks with five national championships, the team found the level of play in the Premier Development League a challenge.

"It was a challenge to say the least," said head coach Chris Watkins. "Having coached at BYU for the previous nine seasons and only losing 18 games during that time, winning six club National Championships really had us feeling like world beaters."

"By the third game last season we had gone from being sky-high to about as low as any team could be. We fought hard to get better and clearly we were playing our best soccer at the end of the season. Our win against the Boulder Rapids Reserves late in the season was one of the most gratifying of my career."

Watkins will have some fresh faces such as Gilbert Gartner and Josh Robbing of George Mason and the University of Portland, but still admits that the team will have difficulties as it continues to grow.

"We have some better players that we have recruited, graduating high school seniors that will join us in June, and several Division I transfers that have been admitted to the University - so we will be getting better."

"But with all of our players serving Mormon missions and our graduating seniors, it is going to take some time before we start adding to our trophy case."

"Right now we are preparing for our first match against the San Diego Gauchos, who I noticed signed Hercules Gomez who played for the LA Galaxy. In contrast, I signed six high school players who cannot join us until June."

"We will win more games, but we are treating this as a long-term building process."