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BYU mens soccer beats Fiji, looks strong  
for 2007

**JARED LLOYD** - Daily Herald

BYU men's soccer head coach Chris Watkins believes he has a very good team right now heading into the 2007 season, a squad that would be top 10 in NCAA competition.

Not to mention resilient, at least if Friday night's exhibition against the Fiji National team was any indication.

Cougar starting keeper Ben Walunas received a red card in the 15th minute after colliding with a Fiji player that had gotten behind the BYU defense. After the visitors pounded home the free kick, Cougars looked to be in trouble, trailing and down a man.

But BYU dominated most of the rest of the game, scoring twice in the first half and once more in the second to get the 3-1 win.

"That (the red card) was the buzzer in the morning for us," Watkins said. "It's a shame that it had to take that long but it worked out okay for us."

One of the keys was getting back in the game quickly. The Cougars answered the call in the 23rd minute, using a quick restart near midfield to get the ball to defender Hugh VanWagenen deep into Fiji territory. His cross sliced through the defense to where midfielder Justin Norton was coming in hard to put it away for the equalizer.

The two squads traded possessions for much of the half before former Spanish Fork star David Clark stepped up. Reading a Fiji back-line pass perfectly with just a minute left in the half, he took it the other way for a breakaway, sliding it smoothly past the diving keeper to put BYU in front for good.

The last goal came on another great cross, this time in the 79th minute. Norton was the server this time, sending it to ex-Timpview forward Toni Nicoli who slid to deflect it into the back of the net.

Though the altitude and having played game almost every day for the past week certainly had its affect on the Fijians, the Cougars dominated possession and were able to control the tempo.

"I like that we have a lot of skill and that wherever we go we can get out of traffic," Watkins said. "We can maintain and combine and do good things to get into space and keep working toward the goal. We have the skills and the composure to really get out of tricky situations."

That has Watkins excited about the upcoming Premier Development League season.

"We're developing quite well," he explained. "We're really deep and quite good."

The goal is for the team to win the Northwest division -- something they missed by a single point last year -- but the head coach knows they've still got to get better to do that.

"Our defense was a bit disjointed," Watkins said. "We also need to be able to play our lone forward in our 4-5-1 formation and then go from strong side to weak side. If we can do that, it will be something special."

The team has a number of leaders, including VanWagenen and midfielders Brock Trejo and Steve Magleby, but Watkins said he likes what he's seeing so far from Nicoli.

"He's unbelievable," he said. "A year ago he was a good player but nothing that we were interested in. He's developed so well."

The team also has a good recruiting class, including three Utah Valley players (Mountain View forward Mike Moreno and midfielder Dustin Graham and Springville keeper Easton Folster) that will join the team as soon as they graduate from high school.

Nicoli and Clark, as well as Dustin's brother Curt who also played at Mountain View, are the other local players on the squad.

Overall, Watkins likes the talent he's getting to come play for BYU.

"Our future is good," he said. "Before we had to rely on experience and hard work whereas now we're bringing in players that are already at the level."

The team will get another opportunity to experience the international flavor of the sport before beginning U.S. Open Cup and PDL play. It plays Colo Colo, a talented soccer club from Santiago, Chile in Chile on May 1 in Monumental stadium, the biggest stadium in country.

"We should have 20 or 25,000 people there," Watkins said. "We'll definitely be overmatched but it will be a great experience."

The next home game isn't until May 25, when the Cougars host the Abbotsford Rangers from Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada.

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