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11-22-2023

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Recommended Citation

Ali, Qasim, "2023-11-22 Redhawks Men's Soccer Looks to the Future After First Round Exit" (2023). *The Spectator Online*. 1124.

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The Spectator • November 22, 2023 • <https://seattlespectator.com/2023/11/22/redhawks-mens-soccer-looks-to-the-future-after-first-round-exit/>

Redhawks Men's Soccer Looks to the Future After First Round Exit

Qasim Ali, Sports & Opinion Editor

Seattle University Men's Soccer, fresh off a historic regular season, returned to the NCAA Tournament Nov. 16 at Oregon State University (OSU) in the opening round. After a back-and-forth affair that would go to overtime, Seattle U would ultimately fall 2-1—eliminating the team from further playoff contention.

Having lost their first matchup against the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) in the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) Tournament the week prior, the loss to OSU marked the only time the Redhawks lost two consecutive games in the entire season.

OSU would go on to defeat the No. 11 University of Portland 3-0 Nov. 19, establishing themselves as a dark horse contender going forward. Seattle U had defeated OSU 2-1 at home earlier in the season, 2-1, en route to a Division I program record No. 9 rank in the country by season's end. But, the Beavers proved overwhelming on the road for the Redhawks this time.

Junior forward Jeremy Opong and Senior forward James Morris sat down with The Spectator to recount the loss, in which Seattle U was outshot 23-3—the largest deficit of the season for the team.

"[OSU was] probably the best college team I've played since I've been here, honestly," Opong said. "They're a very good team, I think they're going to go very deep into the tournament... so 2-1 in double overtime, I don't think, is as bad."



Sean Alexander

The Beavers would strike a 31st-minute goal to take an early lead, marking the third straight game where the Redhawks allowed the opening score. Junior midfielder Mo Mohamed would equalize the matchup in the second half, but that would be the extent of the offensive success for the team on the night.

Head coach Nate Daligcon noted how volatile tournament games can be. Playing catch-up from the outset was certainly not in the plans for his team.

"We just didn't get into a groove quick enough and they came out of the gates pretty fast," Daligcon said. "They did a good job inside the boxes and that was kind of the end of it."

Still, the Redhawks competed until the final whistle. Despite those 23 shots, few were on target as Seattle U continued to be disruptive defensively. But the Beavers would cash in the game-winner in the 92nd minute, capping a second straight heartbreaker for Seattle U in overtime.

Although the loss was deflating, Daligcon sees the experience in the tournament as a point of growth for a team with many returning players.

"We learned some things in terms of how thin the margins are between winning and losing, especially when you get into tournament play," Daligcon said.

But after all the acclaim and success of the 2023 season wears off, implementing those lessons and starting from square one may seem overwhelming in 2024. For Opong, having seen what it takes and what this team has accomplished, this season may have just been a starting point.

"This team was a very special team, but I think if we're all focused and locked in like we were this year, we could do the same thing next year or even better," Opong said.

Morris, ready to be a fan of this program after graduating this year, pushed his teammate further.

"Definitely better," Morris emphasized, grinning at Opong.

The two laughed and recounted the memories. A win over the University of Washington with a record crowd in attendance, and a comeback road win over the University of California Davis while being down a player highlighted the conversation.

"No one expected us to do this well, outside of the program... going into the season we were ranked fourth in the WAC," Morris said—the Redhawks went undefeated in the WAC regular season. "I'm excited to see where this team goes."

As players like Morris, Graduate Student defender Kotaro Hirokawa, Senior defender Habib Famuditimi and others graduate and leave the team, Daligcon praised their efforts in cementing the culture.

"[The graduating class has] provided excellent leadership to the group, probably one of the best groups of leaders I've seen since I've been here in terms of how they held the standards high," Daligcon said. "Now we'll need new leaders, and a new group of leaders to step up as well."

Extending that success and creating those positive memories requires a year-round effort. Daligcon and his staff will begin making trips to recruit new players as early as next week.

"We have a great nucleus coming back and a great culture within the team," Daligcon said "Now it's just figuring out some of the pieces to the puzzle moving forward."

In the aftermath of an unforgettable season, the Redhawks are continuing with business as usual—fulfilling the demands of their continued standard of excellence.