

Rebuilding all the way up to undefeated conference champions

Lakeland girls' soccer proved they weren't one-hit wonders

Brett LaBore

OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

A trip to state was the highlight of the Lakeland girls' soccer 2022 team. Losing eight seniors and four first team all-conference players, it was unclear as to how good Lakeland would be in 2023. The 2023 Thunderbirds showed that last year was no fluke by becoming undefeated conference champions.

The Thunderbirds won the Great Northern Conference title for the second straight season. They finished a perfect 10-0 in the conference, 15-2 overall. They scored 43 total goals (2.5 per game) while allowing just nine goals (0.5 per game).

Here is a look at the 2023 season by the numbers.

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Lakeland had two Thunderbirds win a GNC Player of the Year award, both of them senior captains.

Callie Ullius won the Defensive Player of the Year. She was the leader of a Lakeland defense that stifled oppo-



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In this April 27, 2023 file photo, Maya Savel steps up towards the ball in the first half vs. Rhinelander at IncredibleBank Field in Minocqua.

nents. Her communication from the backline helped the Thunderbirds get organized and be in the right spot at the right time.

"Callie had an unbelievable season for only playing in high school for two years. She was a key player to have on the team as a leader. Having a leader as strong as her on the team made the season run smoothly and helped the players learn on the field. She is an overall one-of-a-kind person and player," coach Stephanie Hartzheim said. "She be-

came very confident with her skills on the field to help us with some great saves in the back. She had incredible speed and knew where to be on the field to help win the ball in the back. In conference we did not allow any goals except a PK. This shows how strong Callie and the rest of the defense was. Callie was very deserving of first team and all-conference for defensive."

Maria Gironella was co-Offensive Player of the Year with Rhinelander's Ava

Lamers (GNC leader in goals and points). Gironella totaled five goals and two assists for 12 points. All stats are from the conference season.

Gironella came up clutch during the season with the game-tying goal vs. Mosinee on April 13 and the game-winning goals vs. Northland Pines on April 20 and Medford on May 16.

"Maria was a positive leader that will be missed on and off the field next year," Hartzheim said. "I do not know anyone that

laughs so much while playing in an intense game."

Additionally, Gironella was also awarded Wisconsin Soccer Coaches Association (WSCA) Academic All-State honorable mention for her achievements in the classroom.

"Maria is a very bright and talented student. The credentials are very challenging for many students to achieve. Maria knocked all of the credentials out of the park," Hartzheim said. "She is an excellent example of a student athlete. She works extremely hard in school and in her extracurricular activities. I am very proud of all of her accomplishments."

8

A total of eight Thunderbirds were named to the GNC's three all-conference teams. Ullius and Gironella were both unanimous first team players.

Junior Josie Wentland received first team all-conference honors, the third Thunderbird to make the first team.

"Josie stepped it up this year to fill some big shoes from last year. She is someone that will never give up and that is hard to come by these days," Hartzheim said. "She will battle and fight out every ball until that final whistle blows. This

helped Josie control the middle of the field and create many scoring opportunities. I know when Josie was shooting that other players did not want to be in her way with her strong shot."

Senior Alyson Lazaroff, junior Taylor Heleniak and freshman Ava Evenhouse were named second team all-conference. It was Lazaroff's third time making an all-conference team and the first for Heleniak and Evenhouse. Evenhouse was the only freshman to make the all-conference teams.

Sophomore Cale Quade and junior Charley Cleveland were both named honorable mention all-conference, their first time making an all-conference team.

10

The Thunderbirds went a perfect 10-0 in the GNC to win their second straight conference title. It is the first time ever that Lakeland has gone undefeated in GNC girls' soccer.

"We had lost many seniors last year, but that did not stop this group from being determined to be conference champs again. This year we were undefeated, which might of not been expected of this group,"

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Lakeland track and field teams experienced success from conference to state

Brett LaBore

OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Conference and regional championships and individual trips to state highlighted another successful season for the Lakeland track and field teams.

Coach of the Year

Stephanie Strasburg took over as head coach for the Thunderbirds' track and field teams. In a season full of emotion, she learned what it took to be a head coach. She was named Great Northern Conference Coach of the Year for the boys after leading them to a conference championship.

"My first year was a mixing pot of emotions. From frightening, overwhelming, challenging, frustrating, exhausting, humbling, motivating and exciting," she said. "Overall, I felt pure joy and was thankful for the experiences, the memories and all of the help along the way. It was easy to make connections with the kids."

More important than her own award, coach Strasburg is proud of what the boys accomplished as they bought home their first GNC title in five years.

"I never knew about the 'Coach of the Year' award so

it was a complete surprise and very much an honor," she said. "However, I'm still more excited for the boys on winning the conference meet vs. my award. Although, getting dumped on with the tub of water was pretty awesome."

Conference champs

On May 16, the Thunderbirds won the GNC Meet with 184 points, 34 more than the second place Medford Raiders.

"Our conference meet was about bringing in the most points, especially when we knew we could with the group of boys we had. Any new school records would certainly have been a bonus. If every one of our athletes performed at PRs, we could've gained another 20-plus points," coach Strasburg said. "As it was, we were 34 points ahead of the second place team. That just proves how much talent came out and stayed with the team this season. It was the perfect stage to showcase our depth of talent and especially on home field territory."

The Thunderbirds won a total of 10 events, including seven out of the eight individual running events.

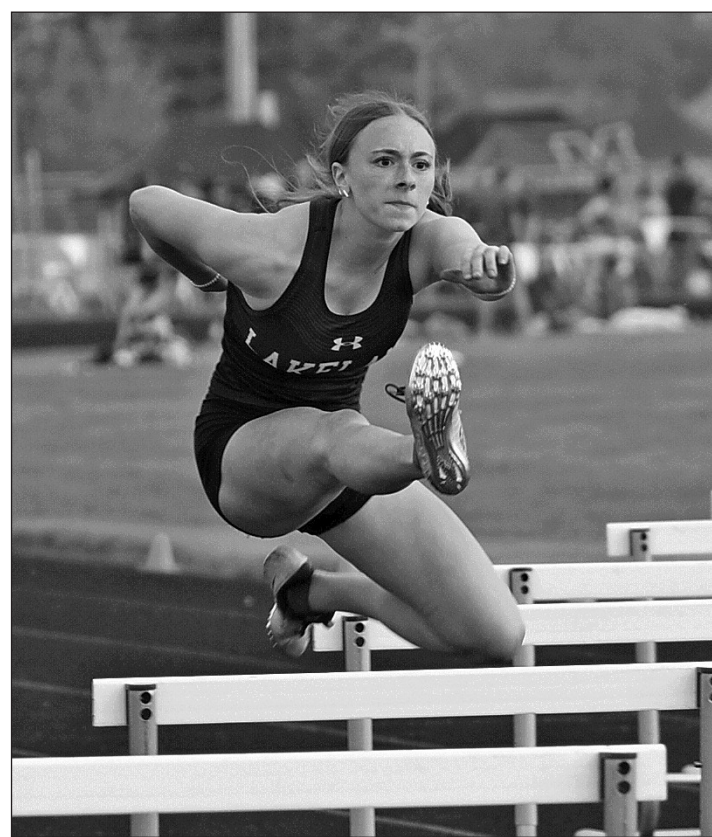
"There was a lot of thought and analysis that went into

making the points happen for that meet on the boys' side," coach Strasburg said. "With so much talent, it was a juggling act on where to place our athletes in the best events to bring in the most points. Relays were again being juggled around to allow other athletes to compete and win points in individual events."

Several Thunderbirds won two or more conference championships. Junior Owen Clark won the 800-, 1,600- and 3,200-meter runs. First place took home first team all-conference, second place second team all-conference and third place honorable mention. He ended up as the boys' GNC Runner of the Year.

Senior Max Masayeva joined the track and field team several weeks into the season. It paid off as he won conference championships in both the 100- and 200-meter dash.

Freshman Erik Anderson had a standout campaign in his first season on the team. As an individual, he took home a conference crown in the 400-meter dash. He was also a part of the winning 4x400-meter relay team that included sophomore Ethan Gonzalez, senior Sean Gardner and senior Casey Van Hefty.



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In this May 22, 2023 file photo, Norah Strasburg leaps over the hurdle in the 300-meter hurdles during a WIAA Division 2 regional meet at Colby High School.

Maverick Metzger, a senior, shined in the field events for Lakeland. He placed first team all-conference in both the high jump and discus.

Junior Talon Haling won a conference championship in the 300-meter hurdles. In ad-

dition, Haling finished second in the 100-meter dash for second team all-conference.

Gonzalez displayed his speed with runner-up finishes in both the 200- and 400-

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Softball

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the Thunderbirds this season. When it came to the championship game, it was all Kemnitz.

"They're both extremely reliable and

good, this year pitching a lot faster and a lot more accurate than they did last year," Awker said. "But they're both awesome pitchers, and they're only going to keep getting better and be really good in 14U

and high school."

Lakeland outscored their opponents 148-16 this season on their way to their third straight championship. The future is bright for Lakeland softball.

"Just happy overall

for Lakeland youth softball. This is the third and fourth year overall the numbers have grown, girls coming back to play, girls looking forward to playing next year," Awker said. "Overall the program

has grown so much.

This year, first time we've had an 8U team, never had an 8U team and started that with 17 girls on it. It's only going to keep growing which is awesome. There wasn't even youth softball

five or six years ago.

That's awesome that this program can grow that much."

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Champions

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Hartzheim said. "We talked about rebuilding our team this year. We had to use our talent to reorganize a lineup that would make us the most successful team. These ladies would battle out to the end of each game."

After not having won conference since 2011, the Thunderbirds have now won two straight GNC championships with the latest one being undefeated.

12

This is the number of times the Thunderbirds shut out their opponent this season. Of their 15 wins, 12 came when they allowed zero goals. In fact, Lakeland had a streak of five straight shutouts from April 20-May 2, including a shutout of Rhinelander on April 27.

Evenhouse became the Thunderbirds' new goalie this season. She had never played goalie prior to the 2023 campaign. As the season went on, Evenhouse improved and became one of the best goalies in the GNC.

"Ava is such a great person to work with. She is very coachable and willing to learn and take on new challenges. She was able to step up this year and wants to learn a new position that is one of the most difficult ones on the field," Hartzheim said. "She grew so much this season, and we know she will continue to grow over the next three years to get her to the next level."

Evenhouse led the GNC in save percentage at .964 and goals against average at 0.13. She allowed just one goal to get by her in conference play.

1

This is the number of goals the Thunderbirds allowed in conference play. The lone goal came from Mosinee's Kaitlyn Selle on a penalty kick on April 13.

Lakeland's defense of Ullius, Quade, Cleveland, senior Noley Guthrie and sophomore Landry Lenz were a big part of Lakeland's success. Even though Lakeland only returned Ullius on defense from last year's state team, the Thunderbirds quickly rose to the challenge to become one of the best defensive groups in the GNC.

"Our defense really stepped up to not allow goals to be scored. Callie controlled the backline to make sure that any balls close to the goal were not going in," Hartzheim said. "The entire defensive line worked well together and did not let the other team turn to create offensive opportunities."

In their playoff game vs. Rhinelander, freshman Molly Jorgensen started at defense in her first career varsity start.

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The Thunderbirds' offense

had big shoes to fill when Leah Wolfe, Sophia Myshchysyn and Olivia Melka, among others, graduated. Different players stepped up throughout the season to help fill the void.

After allowing a goal to Mosinee in Lakeland's first conference game, the Thunderbirds proceeded to score 31 consecutive goals in conference play without allowing a goal.

Wentland led the Thunderbirds in goals (11) and points (27). Those marks ranked third in the Great Northern Conference. Moving from outside wing to the midfield, Wentland became one of Lakeland's top offensive threats.

Lazaroff scored four goals and had six assists for 14 total points. Her six assists were tops for the Thunderbirds and third in conference. The 14 points ranked second for Lakeland. Lazaroff moved from defense to midfield this season. It paid off in a big way. She had the assist on Heleniak's game-winning goal vs. Rhinelander on April 27. Lazaroff also had the winning goal vs. Rhinelander on May 19.

Later this week, Lazaroff will compete in the WSCA High School Senior Girls' All-Star Game on Saturday, July 29 at Breese Stevens Stadium in Madison.

"Alyson has worked hard in her soccer career to get the point she is at. She has traveled to the states to gain her skills in soccer to be able to play at the college level," Hartzheim said. "She is a hard working player that deserves to be able to play in this game that recognizes the talent we have all over the state of Wisconsin."

Heleniak totaled 10 points on three goals and four assists. Sophomore Bobbi Lee had six points on two goals and two assists. Heleniak and Lee moved around the field throughout the season, playing whatever role was needed.

13

This was the number of consecutive games the Thunderbirds won this season. They won 13 straight games from April 20-June 1. During this stretch, Lakeland outscored their opponents 35-2.

The 13-game win streak is the longest streak Hartzheim has seen in her time as head coach of the Thunderbirds.

Even with players that were injured or out, Lakeland found a way to win.

"We played some tough games and some games we're missing players, but the entire team stepped up to make this happen," Hartzheim said. "We played games that were 1-0 and left everything on the field to get these wins."

3

Mike Webster Stadium in Rhinelander became the Thunderbirds' home away from home. They went 3-0 in games played there.



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In this April 11, 2023 file photo, Mercedes Thoms runs up the field in the second half of the season opener vs. Wausau East at Mike Webster Stadium in Rhinelander.

Lakeland's season opener vs. non-conference Wausau East took place April 11 in Rhinelander due to snow at IncredibleBank Field. The Thunderbirds won 3-0.

Then on April 20, Lakeland and Northland Pine's game had to be relocated to Mike Webster Stadium due to both teams' fields being unplayable. Lakeland won that game 1-0.

The final game at Mike Webster Stadium came in a traditional road game vs. the Hodags on May 19. The Thunderbirds used a first half goal to win that game 1-0.

Regardless of the location or opponent, the Thunderbirds worked together to maximize their talent.

"We have been using our entire team to successfully get the wins," Hartzheim said after a May 9 win over Mosinee. "We have been moving the girls around based on the team we are playing to get the most out of each player. It's like a puzzle each game to see what works."

20

Coming into their playoff game to Rhinelander, Lakeland had won 20 straight games that started at IncredibleBank Field. The streak started June 10, 2021 and lasted until Lakeland's playoff loss to Rhinelander on June 3. The Thunderbirds showed the importance of home games.

"Each team's field is unique in its own way. We get used to how the ball rolls, bounces and the way the field layout is with the width and the set up," Hartzheim said. "Having your fans fill the stands also helps motivate the team. It has been so much fun to have so many home field playoff games."

16

Lakeland had scored at least one goal in 16 straight games. Coming into their playoff match vs. Rhinelander, the Thunderbirds hadn't been shut out since their WIAA Division 3

state semifinal playoff game vs. New Berlin Eisenhower in June 2022. New Berlin Eisenhower ended up winning the state championship that year.

A total of 10 Thunderbirds scored at least one goal during the conference season. Junior Rylie Wise, senior Mya Solis, Quade, Ullius and Guthrie all scored in conference play. Junior Elsa Shockley also came up big during the season especially with injuries to senior Mercedes Thoms and sophomore Maya Savel.

Lakeland's lone goal against Washburn on April 24 came on a penalty kick by Lazaroff in the second half. Lazaroff went a perfect 3/3 on penalty kicks during the season.

"Every game (Alyson) would be so close to scoring a goal, but would always go a little over until we needed it most. She stepped up and finished in the Rhinelander game to get us a win and to create an opportunity to get a win," Hartzheim said. "She knows how to use her body to create the opportunities that we needed to win games by controlling the middle of the field."

One of the most important goals came courtesy of sophomore Jenna Klappa on May 6 vs. Barron/Cumberland. Down 0-1, Klappa's goal tied the game at 1-1 in the second half. Lakeland went on to win the game 3-1.

3

Lakeland came into 2023 with three straight regional championships (2019, 2021, 2022). That streak all came to an end in Lakeland's June 3 playoff game vs. Rhinelander.

After sweeping Rhinelander during the regular season, the Thunderbirds earned the two-seed with Rhinelander being the three-seed. The regional final game took place at IncredibleBank Field in Minocqua.

Lamers scored a goal late in the second half that proved to be the difference. For the first time all season, the Thunder-

birds were unable to find the back of the net.

"We pushed through some really close games all season and battled until the end. Losing the game in playoffs to Rhinelander was heartbreaking," Hartzheim said. "A 1-0 game in the playoffs vs. a team we beat twice 1-0 was a tough lose. All three games were great games by both teams."

In just one game, Rhinelander snapped Lakeland's three-season regional title streak, their 16-game goal streak, their 13-game win streak and their 20-game IncredibleBank Field win streak.

16

This is the current win streak the Thunderbirds have against GNC opponents in the regular season. The streak started on May 3, 2022 and is currently ongoing thanks to Lakeland going a perfect 10-0 during the conference regular season. This included two 1-0 shutout wins vs. Rhinelander.

"Rhinelander has always been our rival team," Hartzheim said. "The team supported each other all over the field to prevent them from getting a win. These truly were team efforts to make it happen."

Lakeland's last regular season conference loss came to the hands of the Hodags on April 28, 2022.

2024

This isn't so much a number as it is a year. The Thunderbirds' quest for three straight GNC titles continues in 2024.

The Thunderbirds will have key players to replace once again. Senior captains Ullius and Gironella both graduated. Lazaroff also graduated, one of the key pieces to Lakeland's offense.

"We will miss all of the seniors and the impact they made on this team," Hartzheim said. "We had made many memories and accomplishments together and that is what we will all remember after they leave."

Lakeland can return five of their eight all-conference players. Wentland will be the focus of the offense with Heleniak, Lee, Wise, Shockley and Savel returning.

The continuity of Lakeland's defense figures to be a strength with Quade and Cleveland (all-conference players) returning, as well as Lenz and Jorgensen. Goalie Evenhouse can return as well.

The Thunderbirds will look for more players to step up as they start a brand new win streak.

"Losing seniors each year always makes an impact on the team. The younger players have done a great job stepping up to fill those positions," Hartzheim said. "The off-season workouts and open gyms have made a huge difference for many of the girls in the past. The more girls put in, the more the program succeeds. We are looking forward to another successful year next year."