

## FEATURE

## AQ, Mercy soccer stars strengthen ESG lineup

By Mike Latona  
Staff Writer

How well respected are the girls' soccer programs at Aquinas Institute and Our Lady of Mercy? One glance at this year's Empire State Games roster answers that question decisively.

The Western Region women's scholastic squad pools some of the finest talent from the Rochester and Buffalo area. Of the 16 athletes who made this year's team, five are students at Aquinas and Mercy. This quality quintet consists of forward Christina DiTucci (Mercy); defender Sarah Elnicky (Aquinas); forward Jackie Lacek (Aquinas); midfielder Erin McConnell (Aquinas); and defender Ashley Squires (Mercy).

Jackie originally made the ESG team as an alternate, but was pressed into action after yet another Aquinas star, Lindsay Bach, had to drop out because she is attempting to qualify for a national-level team.

This group competed over July 27-30 at the 2000 Empire State Games, held at Binghamton University. The Western team split its four contests, losing 2-0 to Long Island July 27, then winning 4-0 over New York

City July 28 and 2-0 over Hudson Valley July 29 to reach the July 30 bronze-medal game. Western came up short in that contest, falling 1-0 to Adirondack.

Aquinas and Mercy are long-standing foes from the Private-Parochial League—a league, Christina said, that is noted for its high level of play.

"Everybody in our league is really competitive," remarked Christina, who scored a goal in the win over New York City. Sarah, also, netted a goal against New York City.

"Over the years, (Aquinas and Mercy) have always been very consistent and competitive," said Doug Kircher, the Western Region women's scholastic coach since 1991. "Every year there's always kids to look for from those programs."

Practices for the high-school season begin later this month, and AQ and Mercy will be looking to extend their success from the 1990s. The Little Irish have won four straight Section 5 Class BB titles, and also reached the state Class B finals in 1998 and 1999. Meanwhile, Mercy advanced to the Section 5 Class A semifinals in 1999. The Monarch program generated numerous sectional titles earlier last decade.



John Powell/Photo intern

**Christina DiTucci, No. 11 from Western, kicks the ball past Jen Schlasser of Hudson Valley, during the Girls Scholastic Soccer Game on July 29 in Binghamton. The Western team won, 2-0.**

Playing in the Empire State Games gave the Aquinas and Mercy students a chance to be teammates for a week. They claimed that it's not difficult to make this transition, saying they remain friends even during the high-school season.

"It's fun to play against people you know," Sarah said.

"Off the field there's a lot less tension. We're just teenage girls," Ashley added.

Erin, Ashley, Jackie and Christina were all first-time ESG players. Sarah competed on the 1999 team that brought home a gold medal for the Western Region.

Kircher said his club was quite young this year, but more than held its own. He noted that the Saturday win enabled Western to play for the bronze medal, while also preventing a strong Hudson Valley team from qualifying for the gold-medal game.

"We only had two returning players. But they worked hard and did well, I thought," Kircher said.

To qualify for the Empire State Games, players go through tryouts and are then selected by a panel of coaches. They practice for two weeks prior to the games. Erin said she welcomed the challenge of jelling with stars from other high schools, remarking that the team got "better and better" during each ESG game in Binghamton.

Christina observed that teams from other regions play "a lot more aggressive" style of soccer. Another distinct element of the Empire State Games is the presence of college coaches, looking to acquire some star performers for their programs.

"We know they're here; we see them," Erin said, but added "I don't think we really think about it. We just play our game."

Jackie said college coaches realize that play will not always be crisp, due to the fact that ESG teams don't have much time to practice as a unit. "We're not expected to be awesome," she commented.

Even if Erin, Ashley, Jackie, Sarah and Christina don't gain scholarships based on their soccer ability, they all appear to be in line for academic scholarships. All five possess high class rankings—an impressive feat considering that they play soccer most of the year. All but Ashley compete in other scholastic sports as well.

Despite having limited free time, the ESG stars claimed that their intense schedules work in their favor.

"During soccer season I actually do better in school," Sarah said. "You're more on a schedule."

"Your work ethic carries over," Ashley added. "You don't settle for anything under your standards."



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

### They sing once more

The "von Trapp children," from left, Brigitta (Vanessa Barigelli), Marta (Kristin Fess), Kurt (Chris Solimano) and Gretl (Alyse DiCenzo), giggle at the introduction of their new governess during "The Sound of Music" at Nazareth Academy on April 2.

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