

SPORTS

Powers of the Pitch

Two young stars have helped put Harvard soccer atop the Ivies.

DEEP INTO the second half of the NCAA soccer playoff game against SUNY Binghamton last fall, with the score tied 1-1, Harvard forward André

Akpan '10 took a pass from fellow freshman Chey Im at the top of the Binghamton penalty area. Loosely guarded for once, Akpan turned and sprinted onto goal, but as a defender closed down to his left, and

the goalie covered the severe angle, the scoring chance appeared to be lost. But Akpan wheeled quickly, shot low and hard, and the ball found its way beneath the defender, past the goalie's hand and foot, to carom off the far post and into the net: 2-1, Harvard. Six feet tall, with an ebullient head of hair, Akpan trotted up the sideline in a long victory run, arms spread wide, grinning broadly at the ecstatic Harvard fans and a suddenly silent contingent from upstate New York.

Several minutes later, a Binghamton forward appeared poised to level the score, with only the goalie to beat from 12 yards out. But Kwaku Nyamekye '10 came up swiftly from behind to knock the ball out of bounds and the Binghamton forward to earth, ensuring a Harvard victory. It was the Crimson's first NCAA playoff win since 2001, sending the team to southern California—where they lost, 3-0, to UCLA, the eventual runner-ups for the national title.

During the 2006 season, in the centennial year for men's soccer at Harvard, the Crimson captured its first Ivy League Championship in a decade, and the first one for coach John Kerr, now in his ninth year at the helm. Harvard was the top-ranked offense in the country during the regular season, averaging 2.58 goals per game, and had the three highest scorers in the Ivy League, as league Player of the Year Charles Altchek '07, Akpan, and speedy playmaker Mike Fucito '09 combined for 32 goals. Freshmen Nyamekye and Akpan were standouts, two of only four players to start all 19 games. "I think the new guys [the eight freshmen] integrated really well," says Nyamekye, "And that showed on the field and really produced good results."

This year, despite having lost six seniors, including Altchek, to graduation, the team nonetheless looks well-equipped to defend. Akpan and Nyamekye will rejoin Fucito, midfielder John Stamatidis '09, and senior co-captains Matt Hoff, a forward, and goalkeeper Adam Hahn.

Nyamekye grew up in Geneva, Swit-

Ivy League Rookie
of the Year
André Akpan



zerland, where his parents, Kwado Nyamekye and Gertrude Nimako-Boateng, had moved from Ghana to work for the United Nations, his father in the human-rights division and his mother for the international service. The youngest of eight children, he played for the International School of Switzerland and a club team, C.S. Chênois. Nyamekye sent his highlight CD—a staple for aspiring collegiate athletes—to Kerr who, in turn, dispatched a scout to watch him play in a tournament in England. The report was favorable.

On the field, Nyamekye appears taller than his listed height of six feet, one inch, perhaps because he wins so many head balls, out-leaping and out-timing opponents. “He is a great reader of the game, and rarely fouls anyone when he goes into challenges,” says Kerr. “He also passes the ball out of the back with great precision.” In fact, Nyamekye came to Harvard as a center forward, but when the team needed stability in defense against Maine, Kerr tried him out at center back. “I recognized Kwaku’s sense of the game and his incredible heading ability,” Kerr says. “Within five minutes, I knew we had a dominant center back who would solidify our defense right away.” And when he needs to punch up the Crimson attack, Kerr now has a secret weapon.

“Coach uses me as an offensive player from time to time,” Nyamekye says, with characteristic understatement. “Whenever we’re down, he moves me forward and we play with three in the back, and three up front.” Down by a goal with minutes left against Fairfield, Nyamekye joined the offense and, with an assist from Akpan, scored the tying goal. Harvard went on to win in overtime.

Nyamekye’s three goals with five assists during the season are high totals for a defender. “He’s one of the most athletic players I’ve ever played with,” says his friend Akpan. “There’s no one who’s going to beat him one-on-one. He just comes out of nowhere.”

Akpan grew up in Grand Prairie, Texas, not far from Dallas, where the hard, sun-baked earth is fertile ground for raising soccer players. His father, Rockey Akpan, had emigrated from his native Nigeria to Wisconsin to attend the University of Wisconsin at Au Claire,

and later moved with his American wife, Bette, to Texas to raise their sons, André and Adrian. There, under their father’s guidance, the two boys learned the game. (Adrian went on to play at Bowling Green State University.)

“My dad owns an indoor soccer arena and, when I was younger, he would set up boxes as defenders, and I would dribble in and out, shooting,” Akpan says. “Unless there was someone to play goalie, I would just take shots from different angles. As a forward, I practiced finishing [scoring] all day.”

He scored 111 goals—including three in his last game—for Oakridge High School, and starred for the Dallas Texans soccer club, which won two national championships. “We had a pretty solid team,” Akpan says: they also won the Dallas Cup, beating the under-19 teams of Manchester United and Real Madrid, two of the strongest sides in the world.

The Greater Dallas area is home to a diverse international community with a large population of Mexicans, Nigerians, and other recent immigrants, and its style of soccer play is dictated, in part, by the climate. “It’s very dry, very hard, so you keep the ball on the ground a lot” because it’s easier to control that way, Akpan says. It’s a style that requires short, precise passes to players’ feet, rather than the long, aerial attacks of many English and American teams. “Coach Kerr is one of the few coaches who play that [short passing] way,” Akpan notes. Compared to Texas style, that of the Ivy League is “more physical, and more long-ball,” he says. “I think because the grass grows much thicker up here, so there’s not as much [play] on the ground.”

On the pitch, Akpan evokes his favorite player, French star Thierry Henry—com-



Kwaku Nyamekye,
a force on both defense
and the attack

binning great skill with speed and power, drifting and gliding with the play, making angled runs and receiving passes with a soft touch, and then moving onto goal with effortless acceleration, looking to shoot or pass back for midfielders. “André can make chances for himself and for others, hence his 11 goals and 12 assists,” says Kerr. “He also has the ability to hold the ball in critical situations and allow other teammates into the final third [the offensive end] of the field. He has the uncanny ability to be calm under pressure when there’s a lot of chaos in front of goal.”

National team coaches have taken note, inviting Akpan to try out for the U.S. under-20 team. Not only was he the fastest player at last January’s tryouts in Florida, running the 40-yard dash in 4.6 seconds, but he scored three goals in his first game, against Haiti. Later, he took two Harvard final exams in Panama. “It was a tough semester,” Akpan says, with a self-deprecating smile, but his schedule has hardly lightened; this past summer’s “job” involved playing in the under-20 World Cup

in Canada. (The U.S. team beat Poland, Brazil, and Uruguay before losing to Austria in the quarterfinals, 2-1.) There also looms the possibility of turning professional before his college career is over. But Akpan and his family value his education highly, and it would have to be something "very special" to lure him away from Ohiri Field (named for Chris Ohiri '64, the Harvard soccer and track star who, like Ak-

pan's father, immigrated to the United States from Nigeria to attend university).

Akpan's personal highlights for the season? Winning the Ivy League title, of course, plus his two goals against Yale and the game-winner against Binghamton. As he remembers it, "There was a cross, and the ball was headed out, and Chey passed it in to me in the right side of the box. I took it in too far, but I shot it 'far post' and it went

in off the post. I guess it was more of a prayer shot than anything else. I just kind of got lucky." Perhaps not: with great scorers, prayer shots have a sublime way of coming to a peaceful rest in the back of the net.

~DAVID UPDIKE

David Updike '79, who played soccer at Harvard from 1975 to 1977, teaches English at Roxbury Community College in Boston.

Rugger Mothers

The muddy, bloody, glorious origins of rugby at Radcliffe

I WAS A HOOKER at Harvard. It wasn't what I expected from college, but I fell in with a crowd of foul-mouthed girls who spent Saturdays brawling and trying to score. In September 2002, I joined the Radcliffe Rugby Football Club, playing prop, flanker, and finally, hooker—the player who taps the ball to her team's side of the scrum. It was an opportunity I owed to the 1982 Radcliffe team.

This year, Radcliffe rugby celebrates its silver anniversary, which encouraged me to look up some of its founding mothers. The idea was actually conceived on the sidelines of a men's game in 1981. "I got frustrated that women couldn't play, because it looked like such a fun game," says Ingrid Jacobson Pinter '83. "I was moaning on the sidelines to a friend, and he said, 'Since when did you take no for an answer?'"

The friend was tutor Paul Erickson,

Ph.D. '84, a graduate student in English and a rugby player. Jacobson Pinter, soon to be Radcliffe Rugby's first president, drafted Erickson as faculty sponsor and then posterized the campus with flyers promising free beer to interested athletes. Louy Meacham '85 recalls, "Word was out on the street that they were looking for people who had one or two screws loose." Meacham says they drew "people who were a little off the beaten track, but with an incredibly fierce competitive instinct." Merry Ann Moore '84 recalls, "People were interested in women's athletics, and stretching the limits of what women's athletics meant." Funded in part by Radcliffe and eager not to be seen as (in Jacobson Pinter's words) the "Ladies Auxiliary of the men's team," they wore Radcliffe red and black.

Most had never touched a rugby ball. Mindy Fener of the local Beantown club

became the coach and assigned positions, designating a "pack" of contact-hungry forwards and a "line" of speedy, evasive backs. In rugby, forwards attempt to win possession by forming a "ruck" and driving opponents off the ball, or by securing the ball in a knot of players called a "maul." The "scrumhalf" directs traffic in the pack and sends the ball out to the back line. The backs then try to gain territory by "skipping" the ball out wide, "crashing" back inside, changing direction with switches, and faking their defenders with dummy passes. It is often said that the forwards decide who wins, while the backs decide by how much.

Jeanne Demers '83, who grew up playing full-contact games like "murderball" with her brothers, was eager to play a tackle sport. "Some women didn't know how strong they could be," she says. While the backs practiced dummies and switches, long "skip" passes and on-the-run pop kicks, forwards fine-tuned their scrum, a formation in which opposing packs "bind" (hold tightly to teammates in order to hit and push as a unit), crouch, and hit one another to win a clean ball. With spring thaw, the team took the pitch, and on April 17, 1982, Radcliffe was surprised to win its first match, defeating MIT 10 to 6.

Louy Meacham credits coach Fener with the winning "try" (score) versus Tufts the following week. "We had no idea what we were doing, but we were faking it pretty well," Meacham recalls. "Mindy was refing. We were all the way down, practically in the try zone. The pack was rucking the ball, basically moving it right up to the line. Mindy was staring at me, and I realized she was saying something out of the corner of her

Fall Preview

Women's Soccer

New head coach Ray Leone, who came to Harvard from Arizona State, leads the women booters into their fall season; he is the third head coach in three years, with predecessors Stephanie Erickson leaving after one season and Erica Walsh departing after a single, dreadful, 3-13-1 campaign last fall. But Walsh left Leone some gifted young players, including the Ivy League Rookie of the Year, Lauren Mann '10, a goalkeeper, and Lizzy

Nichols '10, an all-Ivy defender who can also shoot. The Crimson also boasts perhaps the best crop of new recruits in the Ivies.

Football

Despite the departure of record-breaking running back Clifton Dawson '07, the footballers remain sturdy. Much of last year's stingy defense returns, including all-Ivy cornerbacks Steven Williams '08 and Andrew Berry '09. The *College Sporting News* service has named Berry a preseason all-America candidate.