

Crusaders confident heading into nationals thanks to camaraderie and hometown hospitality

Holy Cross Kirby Group are no strangers to the national soccer scene having won nine of the past 11 provincial titles. The Crusaders have dominated the last decade of soccer in Newfoundland and Labrador largely under head coach Jake Stanford. The last time the nationals took place in St. John's in 2016 was one of the two campaigns since 2009 where Cross surprisingly failed to secure a spot. Veteran defender Jeff Slaney said his side wasn't about to let 2019 be a repeat of three years ago.

"We were disappointed last time to miss out so we had it marked that this was a year for sure we wanted to get back in," said Slaney.

While Slaney admits the missed opportunity from 2016 was disappointing, he believes Holy Cross has more recent and positive memories to use as added motivation heading into this year's tournament: "Last year we were in the bronze medal game (2018 Nationals) so I think that's probably burning a little bit more in the back of our heads than 2016."

Fresh off a fourth-place finish, Holy Cross will be hoping home field advantage and a healthy squad gives them an opportunity to improve on last year's efforts. After missing out on the tournament through injury in 2018, Jacob Grant is healthy and coming off an impressive 16-goal Challenge Cup campaign in 2019. Despite scoring 11 more goals than any of his teammates, Grant was quick to give a shout out to his teammates who he's confident will help him carry the load in the goal department.

"There's definitely a bit of pressure," said Grant. "Last season, I had a bit of a breakout and scored 16 so I think I'm starting to learn how to handle the pressure, so I hope I'll at least be a good scoring option for the team alongside Jake Warren, Tyler Kirby, Kyle Williams, and all the other forwards."

For newcomer Mike O'Brien, the togetherness of the Cross group and the home-field advantage has him feeling comfortable ahead of what will be his first national tournament at the senior level.

"Playing in front of people at home definitely gets you up for a game... and even if there's no crowd you're still hoping to bring your best for the guys on this team," said O'Brien.

Holy Cross remains the only N.L. club to have ever won the national title, having done so back in 1988. The following year, the Crusaders finished runners-up here in St. John's. While the current squad is well-aware of the club's decorated past, captain Andrew Stanford says his side need look no further than the present for motivation to win.

“We’re definitely quite familiar with the older Holy Cross guys’ teams who had success back then... but we have our own motivations, having our family and friends here this year and obviously with the fresh wounds having lost in the Bronze medal game last year,” Stanford said.

The support for Holy Cross will likely extend beyond the pitch as the team anticipates the stands to be filled with Crusaders red for each match.

“I’ve spoken to a lot of people, we’re hoping to have big numbers... I think the crowd can make a difference for us from an adrenaline standpoint,” said Stanford.

With regards to the advantages off the field in hosting the tournament, it’s about the little details for Stanford and co. “You get to sleep in your own bed and eat your own food. Small stuff like that can all add up over the course of a week.”

Holy Cross opens its quest for a national title on Wednesday against Edmonton Scottish 6pm at King George V. The remainder of their schedule is as follows:

October 10th, 6:00 pm vs. Central City Breakers (BC) @ KGV

October 11th, 6:00 pm vs. Winnipeg Lions (MB) @ Topsail Field

October 13th, 9:30 am vs. Fredericton Picaroons Reds (NB) @ Topsail Field