

Norman ready for the Challenge 10/9/02

By JOHN BROWNE

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Rudy Norman is fit as a fiddle and focused on being one of the torch bearers for the St. Lawrence Laurentian soccer players who have something to prove on home turf.

The forward, who can dash to daylight and strike with power, knows he will be one of the players counted on to lead the Newfoundland representatives into Thursday's opening match of the 2002 Challenge Cup soccer tournament.

St. Lawrence opens against highly rated British Columbia 7:15 p.m. Thursday and plays Quebec 7 p.m. Friday at King George V Field.

However, the Laurentians aren't looking past B.C., which finished runner-up last season.

That doesn't mean the provincial reps are intimidated by the west coast powers. B.C. needed a late goal to beat St. Lawrence 1-0 last year.

Although the Laurentians finished last in the tournament, Norman said it was the best team effort in the last eight nationals his squad has participated in.

"We haven't been as close to winning it all as we were last year despite our 10th-place finish," said Norman.

"We're more fit than any other nationals we've gone to and we expect to get a lift from the fans. I don't even think fitness will be a factor, because we'll have the crowd behind us and they'll pick us up.

"But we definitely have to produce," Norman said of teammate and fellow striker Richard Kelly. "Even if we don't score, we have to create scoring chances and maybe leave some rebounds."

Will need a team effort

Needless to say, it will take a team effort to produce a medal winner and Norman is quick to point out there are plenty of talented players on the team who will obviously contribute.

And then there are the intangibles.

"The players on this team are good friends on and off the field and that's what pulls us through when the pressure is on," Norman noted.

Still national level play is a higher calibre than the local league and Newfoundland teams have to adjust.

What separates provincial and national play, according to Norman, is the overall speed of the mainland teams.

"In the provincial league, you may be up against two or three fast players and there are others you know you can take on one-on-one, but at the national level you've got to be smart. You've got to know what you are doing. Everything has to be timed perfectly, with a pass or run. We're not going to be walking around anybody.

"Everything you get at the national level, you have to work for and fight for."

The 5-foot-11, eight-year Laurentian veteran has had his share of personal honours over the years. He's been an all-star five out of the past seven years. He took the MVP honours in 2000 and 2001 and was named provincial player of the year two seasons ago.

Norman was on the 1999 Laurentian team which won a national bronze medal.

"He's a key man for them," said Feildians head coach Jim Hamlyn of Norman.

"He's big and strong and at the top of his game. When you combine him with Richard Kelly, it's tough to stop St. Lawrence. Those two players are both threats to score every time they touch the ball."

Both players also have a knack for scoring big goals. It was Norman's breakaway marker in overtime that beat Holy Cross in the provincial final and gave the Laurentians another shot at the national championship.

Norman missed a few games this season with an injured foot, but he stayed off it for a month after the provincial final and says he's "100 per cent"

He still managed to score 11 goals, two less than teammate Kelly, who won the scoring crown.

Norman practised a few nights ago and said his foot responded well to both shooting and running drills.

It wouldn't matter even if he wasn't fully recovered, he says.

"We had a team meeting the other night and everybody was on the same page. We all agreed that we're ready to put everything on the line. If you've got to take a smack or play hurt, you do whatever it takes. We're willing to do anything," he said

"This is it for a lot of older guys. We looked up to those players over the years and they taught us so much. They took us under their wing and now it's our turn to give back to them by putting everything into it and giving the older guys that gold medal they've always wanted and what we all want now," he said.

Norman says "It's going to make a world of difference" playing at home this year, so it couldn't be a better time to win it all.

"When you are competing out west it takes time to get your playing legs and even the plane ride takes something out of you, but that won't be a problem this time.

"It's a bit of an advantage playing a west coast team first," he said of the match against the B.C. squad which has already had a warm-up in St. John's.

"We know something about them from last year and, hopefully, we can get a jump on them this time and change a few things," he added.

"They probably don't remember us. We were just a stepping stone for them on the way to the final and we were on the way out. But we remember them."