

LTCC soccer program netting more than goals



Midfielder Hector Hernandez, No. 15., goes for the ball Sept. 15 at LTCC. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

By Jessie Marchesseau

Lake Tahoe Community College kicked off the 2014-15 school year with a new mascot, the coyote, and two new soccer teams to wear it on their jerseys.

LTCC has been devoid of an intercollegiate athletic team since it did away with Nordic skiing in 2001. Volleyball and cross country running were discontinued a few years before that. More than a decade later, re-entering the collegiate athletic field was no snap decision. The new soccer program has been years in the making, with numerous proposals, discussions and studies along the way.

Ultimately, LTCC President Kindred Murillo believes the addition of a soccer team fit perfectly into the college's new vision and goals for increased enrollment.

"It started out of our desire to reach into local high schools, and expanded into fitting our desire to be a destination college," she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Murillo sees the soccer team as a way for LTCC to meet its goal of attracting more students from local and nearby high schools by offering athletes a means to continue playing soccer without having to travel far away.

She also pointed out how students and young adults often come to Lake Tahoe from other areas because they enjoy a variety of outdoor sports. By offering the opportunity to play intercollegiate soccer Murillo hopes the college can tap into the supply of potential students already considering a move to Lake Tahoe.

And so far, it seems to be working.

"I believe we hired the coaches that will bring this program to the forefront of California community college soccer and bring student athletes to the program," said Tim Johnson, LTCC physical education and health department chair, who originally proposed the idea of a soccer team to the school's administration.

The head coach for the women's team, Chris DeLeon, coached at South Tahoe High from 2001 to 2013. With such deep-rooted connections in the local soccer community, it is no surprise that 15 of the 21 players on the women's roster hail from South Lake Tahoe.

"One of our biggest goals for starting teams was giving local flavor a chance to play," DeLeon told *Lake Tahoe News*.

On the men's side, head coach Benjamin Wade came to LTCC from

Lassen Community College in Susanville. He brought 12 players from Lassen with him, chose a handful more at tryouts and used his web of international soccer connections to fill out the men's team with 18 international players originating from Europe, Australia and South America.

The athletes, no matter where they come from, are not eligible for athletic scholarships, a variation from four-year institutions. This means every new player results in additional tuition dollars for the school.

In all, DeLeon said the soccer program brought in more than 50 students this year. About 20 of those were from other countries.

The unexpected influx of international students for the teams even influenced LTCC to implement an international student program. These international students are a welcome addition to the school for more reasons than one.

First of all, Johnson said, they bring different cultures and a more worldly air to the campus. In addition, they pay a significant amount of tuition to the school.

But, still, Murillo said she would like to see more local players and students.

"I think it's surprising to local students how rigorous your life is going to be being involved in a college sport," she said.

Many potential players struggled with balancing work and school schedules. Murillo said they are learning as they go, and the school may make some changes for next year to encourage more local athlete involvement.

Overall, the program has exceeded the expectations of pretty much everyone involved. From the turnout of more than 150 spectators at the first women's home game, to the men's team

being ranked as high as No. 1 in the state in recent weeks, LTCC Coyotes soccer is off to a running start.

“It opens that door to the possibility of exploring another sport,” Johnson said.

This may happen sooner rather than later. Murillo indicated they are not leaning toward one sport or another, but the administration may begin exploring other intercollegiate athletic options as early as this winter.

The next Coyote soccer home game is Oct. 3. Team schedules are online.