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#PollWeek: 2x Defending Champ Saint Francis U Edges FDU In NEC Women's Soccer Poll

Somerset, NJ -- After 110 scoreless minutes of play, it took an additional five rounds of penalty kicks before Saint Francis U prevailed over perennial rival Fairleigh Dickinson for the 2017 Northeast Conference (NEC) women's soccer crown.

Heading into the 2018 season, only one first-place vote separated the two teams in the preseason coaches' poll, where four teams received first-place nods.

The Red Flash landed at the top of the preseason rankings, earning four first-place votes among nine teams in the conference. Saint Francis U is the two-time defending NEC Tournament champion, and has earned a share of the regular season title in five of the last seven seasons, including the previous two.

Fairleigh Dickinson was edged out by Saint Francis U and arrived at the number two position, tallying three first-place votes. The Knights also staked a claim in the 2017 regular season title, finishing the conference season 6-1-1.

Central Connecticut and Bryant each grabbed one of the two final first-place votes, and are ranked third and fourth in the pre-season poll, respectively. Both teams also earned NEC Tournament bids last fall.

Sacred Heart comes into the 2018 season sitting at the number five spot in the preseason poll, and Robert Morris finds itself at sixth.

Empire City foes LIU Brooklyn and Wagner finished the poll at seventh and eighth, respectively, and Mount St. Mary's rounded out the poll in ninth place.

The NEC Tournament will be held at the venue of the highest seed on November 2 and 4.

Looking to keep its foot on the gas pedal, the Red Flash are looking to separate from the pack in 2018. Returning to Loretto, PA is standout junior forward and NEC Offensive Player of the Year **Alyssa McGhee (Altoona, PA/Bishop Guilfoyle)**, who led the conference in goals (10), assists (10) and total points (30). Along with McGhee, seven starters return to the pitch, including All-NEC second teamers **Aubrey Suydam (Lancaster, PA/Manheim Township)**, a sophomore defender, and senior midfielder **Sarah Suler (Hermitage, PA/Hickory)**, a two-time all-NEC honoree.

2018 NEC Women's Soccer Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Saint Francis U (4)
2. Fairleigh Dickinson (3)
3. Central Connecticut (1)
4. Bryant (1)
5. Sacred Heart
6. Robert Morris
7. LIU Brooklyn
8. Wagner
9. Mount St. Mary's

First place votes in parentheses

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Bryant University • Central Connecticut State University • Fairleigh Dickinson University • LIU Brooklyn
Mount St. Mary's University • Robert Morris University • Sacred Heart University
St. Francis Brooklyn • Saint Francis University • Wagner College

The Red Flash were red-hot facing NEC foes a year ago and finished the regular season undefeated at home. Saint Francis earned its fourth NEC Championship under head coach Brenda van Stralen, who will be on the sidelines for her 15th season.

SFU will be challenged once again by FDU however, which was the top seed in last season's NEC Tournament. Freshman forward **Sofia Albertsson (Stockholm, Sweden/Bromma Gymnasium)** turned heads in 2017, scoring nine goals and adding four assists in her first collegiate season to earn NEC Rookie of the Year honors. The Knights' offense was one of the best in the conference, as FDU posted marks of first in shots per game, tied for first in goals per game and second in points and assists per game.

In addition to Albertsson, FDU returns two all-conference selections – junior defender **Samantha Roff (Canberra, Australia/Radford College)** and junior goalkeeper **Amanda Fitzgerald (Holbrook, NY/Sachem East)**, as well as fifth-year head coach Eric Teepe, who took home the NEC Coach of the Year award in 2017.

Central Connecticut will be without defensive stalwart Jennifer Cafferky, who became the first player to win the NEC Defensive Player of the Year award for four consecutive seasons. The Blue Devils will still have defensive prowess, however, as senior goalkeeper and reigning NEC Goalkeeper of the Year **Ashley Cavanaugh (Belchertown, MA/Belchertown)** will be back in the net for the blue and white. She led the NEC with nine shutouts, which also put her in the top-20 nationally in that category.

Bryant tallied a school Division I record 11 overall wins in its 2017 campaign. The Bulldogs had one of the stingiest defenses last season, tying with CCSU for the least amount of goals allowed per game, at 0.83 and just 15 throughout the entire season. Sophomore defender **Jamie Irwin (Succasunna, NJ/Roxbury)** was an all-NEC First Team selection, and will return to Smithfield to lead the Bryant back line.

NEC-toids

* One of the top attackers in the NEC from last season will return to the pitch in 2018. Robert Morris forward **Kristina Kelley (Halifax, PA/Halifax)**, an all-NEC first teamer and ranked second in the league in goals (9) and points (25), and third in assists (7).

* A total of 13 all-conference selections will be back for their respective programs this season, including six first-teamers and seven second-teamers. Saint Francis leads the way with five all-stars in the fold.

* Sacred Heart returns senior forward **Melanie DaSilva (Bristol, RI/La Salle Academy)**, a two-time all-NEC selection who also ranked in conference top-ten in total points with 12 (five goals, two assists).

* St. Francis Brooklyn will begin sponsoring women's soccer in the Fall of 2019 to become the tenth team in the conference, as all schools will be represented.

* Bryant, Mount St. Mary's, Robert Morris and Wagner will be seeking their first conference title in program history in 2018.

About The Northeast Conference

Now in its 38th year, the Northeast Conference is an NCAA Division I collegiate athletic association consisting of 10 institutions of higher learning located throughout six states. Media coverage of the NEC extends to four of the largest markets in the United States - New York (#1), Pittsburgh (#22), Baltimore (#26), and Hartford/New Haven (#30). Founded in 1981 as the basketball-only ECAC Metro Conference, the NEC has grown to sponsor 22 championship sports for men and women and now enjoys automatic access to 14 different NCAA Championships. NEC member institutions include Bryant, Central Connecticut, Fairleigh Dickinson, LIU Brooklyn, Mount St. Mary's, Robert Morris, Sacred Heart, St. Francis Brooklyn, Saint Francis U and Wagner. For more information on the NEC, visit the league's official website (www.northeastconference.org) and digital network (www.necfrontrow.com), or follow the league on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat, all @NECsports.