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McClatchy Beat Story 4

McClatchy High has won the Metro League soccer crown for 10 years running.

That's in big part thanks to the efforts of Coach Izzy Ramirez and his commitment to not only good on-field play, but also raising up the profile of his players as academic students on and off the field.

McClatchy is entering the 2023-24 winter season with 14 seniors. That's a considerable jump from just eight last year when the No. 14-ranked Lions upset No. 3-ranked Inderkum in the Division I Sac-Joaquin Section playoffs.

They went on to lose in the second round to No. 6 Central Valley, but Ramirez said that last year was a step in the right direction.

"I thought we did well last year," Ramirez said. "With the amount of seniors we have now, we should only get better. Already in practice and these first few games I have seen improvements. This group really wants to win."

The team began preseason conditioning in October and full practice in November. Ramirez said everyone who made the team was required to attend.

"The expectation is for them to set the tone early," Ramirez said. "Just because the strength of schedule does matter in high school. Wins and losses do matter. With all these seniors the expectation is high."

Ramirez noted the importance of academic growth as his main focus while coaching this team. He's also the safety officer on campus.

"One of my main things is for these guys to walk away with life skills," Ramirez said. "It's not just about soccer, it's about life skills in high school play. It's about how hard you have to work in life to achieve those goals that you put yourself into. That's really the ultimate goal is for these guys to understand what working hard really means."

Ramirez discussed how he didn't go to college right out of high school and wants to give his players the guidance he lacked at their age.

"I want them to see the opportunities they have," Ramirez said. "A lot of these kids don't understand it. I tell them you've got to work smart so you're not just working hard like me. I'm going back to school now at 32. I just want them to have the knowledge to make smart decisions."

Not only does Ramirez coach at McClatchy, but he also helps the soccer program at California Middle School which is directly next to McClatchy. Ramirez coaches a lot of the same McClatchy players in club at the Sacramento Soccer Alliance.

The mission for Ramirez is to help these students grow into respectable young men. Ramirez began coaching for the Lions 10 years ago when he was spotted by then-coach Vaughn Boyce.

“It’s actually a funny story,” Ramirez said. “When I played at Luther Burbank, we beat McClatchy in the section final. This was back in 2008. When Vaughn saw me working on campus, he told me I was going to coach too.”

Ramirez became the head coach in 2022.

Former FC Elk Grove club soccer coach Mike Kraemer praised Ramirez for his teaching ways.

“That’s how high school should be coached,” Kraemer said. “I love to see when a coach takes his players under his wing and really helps them on and off the field. Club soccer is where you’ll learn technique, but high school is made to be an extension of the classroom. It’s awesome to see a coach like that excelling.”

Ramirez still wants to get victories though. He said this senior class puts them in pole position to make it to the section titles.

Senior defender Collin Freer believes in the team.

“I feel solid,” Freer said. “With all these seniors, we’re kind of the same group. I felt like we played really well last year and maybe this group can just make it over the top. I think we’ve done really well in practice so far and just continue to improve.”

Ramirez said he encourages the players to hang out away from soccer to build camaraderie. He’s seen it first hand even with the junior varsity sitting with the varsity athletes at lunch.

The Lions have only played a few games and are undefeated in their last three including a big win against Sheldon. Ramirez is confident that his team will make it over the hump.

“With all these seniors, this group is special,” Ramirez said. “It’s their last year of school, why wouldn’t they want to go all out and take the section crown?”