

IU SOCCER

FOUR TO

By **Jeremy Shere** photography by **Paul Riley**

WATCH



John Mellencamp



Brad Ring



Ofori Sarkodie



Chay Cain

The continued success of the IU soccer program—perhaps the country’s best—will in large part rest on the shoulders of four key players. Opposing teams and pro scouts will be watching them. So should you.

Ask the average Bloomingtonian to name IU’s most successful sports program, and chances are he or she would say basketball. And he or she would be wrong. The winningest IU sport, by far, is men’s soccer. Since making the leap from club to varsity sport in 1973, the soccer team has won 7 NCAA championships and 11 Big Ten titles in the 16 seasons since the conference officially recognized soccer as a varsity sport. More than 100 former players have gone on to play professionally in the U.S. and abroad, cementing IU soccer’s reputation as one of the country’s premier programs.

What’s the secret to IU soccer’s consistent excellence? Head Coach Mike Freitag is quick to credit his predecessor and the team’s founder, legendary coach Jerry Yeagley.

“Coach Yeagley is a soccer genius,” says Freitag, who starred at IU in the 1970s and was an assistant coach before taking over the top spot upon Yeagley’s retirement after the 2003 season. “He built this program from nothing to one of the nation’s best, and it’s my job to carry on the tradition of winning and success.”

Yeagley’s son, Todd, a former IU standout who played professionally and is now an assistant under Freitag, adds that “the players we bring in also feel that responsibility. We expect to win, and players expect it, too, and feel they have to rise to the challenge. That’s one of our biggest strengths.”

Last year IU men’s soccer won the Big Ten regular season and the Big Ten championship and made it to the third round of the NCAA Tournament, earning Freitag the Big Ten Coach of the Year award. The team ended the season ranked ninth overall in the National Soccer Coaches Association of America poll—a success by almost any measure. But judged by the program’s lofty expectations, anything less than an NCAA championship is considered a disappointment by the coaches and players.

Freitag and Yeagley look forward to the upcoming season as a chance to return the team to championship form. With a talented incoming class and an experienced roster of returning upperclassmen, the coaches feel good about their chances. Although every player is expected to compete and sacrifice at the highest level, Freitag and Yeagley will be counting especially on four players: goalkeeper Chay Cain, midfielders Brad Ring and John Mellencamp, and back (defender) Ofori Sarkodie.

“Chay, Brad, John, and Ofori are all very talented players and team leaders,” says Freitag. “I expect them to have a great season and to take us where we want to go—and I know they expect that of themselves.”

Cain, Ring, Sarkodie, and Mellencamp, four of IU soccer’s brightest stars, come from a variety of backgrounds and bring different skills to the game. What they share is an intense desire to succeed as individuals and, especially, as a team. If IU men’s soccer is to win an unparalleled eighth NCAA championship, it will depend heavily on these four.

GOAL





It's a war out there. John Mellencamp uses his head, beating two Northern Illinois Huskies to the ball. IU won the game 1-0.

MELLENCAMP

#11

John Mellencamp, Midfielder

Whether he likes it or not, and for obvious reasons, IU midfielder John Mellencamp will always be associated with his rock-star uncle of the same name. But it's not his uncle's fame and success that drives him.

"I'm proud of my uncle, but I'm motivated more by my internal drive to be the best at whatever I'm doing," says Mellencamp, who was named one of the top 100 college freshman to watch by *College Soccer News* in 2004.

Growing up in Cincinnati, Mellencamp got into soccer at the age of four as a way to channel his abundant energy. "I liked playing because it was fun," he says. "I could run around and be a wild man without getting into trouble with my parents."

Combined with natural talent, Mellencamp's wild-man approach to the game earned him a role as a four-year starter on his high school team and, eventually, sparked the interest of Coach Freitag and his staff. Mellencamp's freshman season in 2005 (after being "red-shirted" and not playing in 2004) got off to a rough start. Besides battling several injuries that kept him off the field, Mellencamp's drive to succeed caused him to dwell on mistakes and lose concentration during games. In 2006,

though, Mellencamp broke through as one of the team's top players.

"John's really grown up and learned to put mistakes behind him and just keep playing," says Freitag. "He's a smart player with a great engine and I expect him to have a great year in 2007."

For his part, Mellencamp says the injuries and lack of playing time ultimately helped by making him a tougher, more focused player. Now a starter with the ability to play on both offense and defense—an unusual skill set among soccer players—Mellencamp looks forward to 2007 as a chance to push himself and the team to the next level.

"When you come here you want and expect to not only win but to win championships, so if you don't, something's wrong and you better get it back in gear," Mellencamp says.

A business major, Mellencamp has given a lot of thought to life after IU soccer. He might pursue a career in business and has considered joining the military. But while Mellencamp is not certain that he'll go on to play soccer at the pro level, he knows that the game will always be a part of his life.

"I've met so many great people through being on the team, from coaches to players, and every single one has ended up being close, like family."



#5 RING

“This isn’t a place for guys who like soccer and want to get some exercise and have a good time; this is serious business, and the players and coaches keep it professional.” — Brad Ring, center midfielder

Brad Ring, Center Midfielder

When he got a recruiting call from IU soccer in 2004, Brad Ring was surprised, to put it mildly.

“I didn’t recognize the area code on my cell phone, so I had no idea who it was,” said Ring, 20, entering his junior season. “Of course I knew about the winning tradition at IU and that they were one of the best programs in the country, but I didn’t know they were interested in me.”

IU was interested in Ring, and for good reason. Ever since taking up soccer at the age of 5, Ring has excelled on the field. An energetic kid, he took to the game’s constant action.

“Even when the ball goes out of bounds you have to be moving, positioning yourself for the next play,” says Ring, who was named the fall season StudentSportsSoccer.com high school National Player of the Year in 2004 and State Player of the Year by the Illinois High

School Soccer Coaches Association the same year. “It’s the ultimate team game, with eleven players on the field all having to work together to advance the ball and defend your goal.”

Ring’s high school success continued during his first year at IU, where he earned Big Ten All-Freshman team honors. Coaches Freitag and Yeagley were immediately impressed by Ring’s competitive edge.

“Brad is an aggressive, tough kid who can win the ball,” says Freitag. “Every team needs the kind of player that loves to get in tussles and almost always wins. He energizes the team with his talent and attitude.”

As a midfielder, it’s Ring’s job to control the middle of the field and, like a middle linebacker in football, make sure that everyone is on the same page.

“I’ve worked really hard at being a better communicator on the field,” Ring says. “It’s my

job to make sure that there aren’t too many players on one side of the field, which opens gaps for the opposing offense.”

Ring’s coaches expect him to emerge as one of the nation’s best college players this season—a challenge that Ring welcomes.

“This isn’t a place for guys who like soccer and want to get some exercise and have a good time; this is serious business, and the players and coaches keep it professional,” says Ring, a legal studies major. “You’re here to get a job done, and that job is competing for and winning titles. Every time you put the IU jersey on, you see those seven stars for the seven championships, and there’s no better motivator than wanting to live up to that tradition. I’m proud to wear the uniform.”



(opposite page) IU's Brad Ring fights past a University of Connecticut Husky in a 1-1 game.

(this page) Hoosier Ofori Sarkodie battles a Northwestern Wildcat for the ball in a game won by IU, 1-0.

Ofori Sarkodie, Back

Ofori Sarkodie is a prince of a soccer player. Literally. Ofori's grandmother is Queen Mother of the Kumasi, an Ashanti tribe in Ghana. Which makes Sarkodie a tribal prince. And although he grew up in Ohio and has never been to Ghana, Sarkodie values his royal lineage.

"It defines who I am in a sense; it's important to me to know where I come from."

Only 19, Sarkodie has the talent and self-aware demeanor of a seasoned pro. "Ofori is an old soul, someone that can hold a conversation with anyone," says assistant coach Yeagley. "Drop him into a pro locker room and you'd think he's the veteran."

Indeed, Sarkodie seems to be on the fast track to starring in one of soccer's professional leagues. A standout at the IMG Academy in Florida (a private school for elite, pro-bound young athletes), Sarkodie was named the 2005

NSCAA/Adidas National Youth Player of the Year. That same year he started and played every minute for the U.S. Under-17 National Team, leading the squad to a fifth place finish.

After graduating from IMG at age 16 with international experience under his belt, Sarkodie considered going pro. Instead he chose college as a chance to learn more about himself as a player and as a person.

"Coming to IU was hard at first because I wasn't starting right away, and I was used to always being the best player on any team, so that was an eye-opener," Sarkodie says. "I learned that no matter how good you are, at each level you have to compete and learn from the coaching staff and land a starting spot."

Since his freshman season last year, Sarkodie has broken through as one of the country's best young defenders. This year he was one of only a few college players named to the U.S.

Under-20 roster for the 2007 FIFA U-20 World Cup (played from June 20-July 22 in Canada) where he played alongside professionals including Major League Soccer superstar Freddy Adu.

"It's a great honor and I'm really excited to be on the team," he says. "Playing with Freddy Adu and other professional players is a great opportunity and a challenge that I know will make me a better player."

Being part of the IU soccer tradition, too, has helped Sarkodie reach his potential.

"Being part of this team is a great experience because everyone here has a professional, winning attitude," he says. "The coaches are able to combine our different talents and skills and mold them into a winning mentality, and when you have that, good things tend to happen."



Goalie Chay Cain dives across the goalmouth on the way to a save. He ranked eighth in the nation with a 0.57 goals against average.

#0

CAIN

Chay Cain, Goalkeeper

To win at the highest level of NCAA soccer, teams need an explosive offense and stalwart defense. But even the most talented teams stand no chance without a top-flight goalie. Although at 5'11" Chay Cain, 20, is undersized for an elite goalkeeper, last year he emerged as one of the nation's best, posting 11 shutouts and a 0.57 goals against average, ranking him eighth in the nation.

"Chay's major strength is his confidence," Freitag says. "His teammates know that he's always focused and that he's going to make the right play in every situation. Chay doesn't make mistakes—it's going to take a really good shot to beat him."

Cain began playing soccer in his hometown of Aurora, Illinois when he was three years old and quickly fell in love with the sport. Starting out as a midfielder, Cain switched to goalie at age ten when the regular keeper on his youth team didn't show up for a game. Excellent

hand-eye coordination and an intuitive sense of how to communicate with his teammates made Cain a natural for the position. What especially appeals to Cain about playing in goal, and about soccer generally, are the game's cerebral aspects.

"There are no time outs in soccer, no coaches telling you what to do on every play," says Cain, who was named a second-team Academic All-American by *ESPN the Magazine* in 2006. "Everything comes down to your own decision-making and testing to see if you can figure out the other team's strategy. It's a great mental challenge."

Cain was recruited by IU after being ranked as the top goalie and 15th best high school player in the country by StudentSportsSoccer.com. Getting the call from Coach Freitag, he says, was one of the high points of his life.

"Every really good high school player I've met around the country had IU high on their list, so when they wanted me it was basically a dream come true."

Like most players who starred in high school, Cain took some time to adjust at the next level during his freshman year in 2005. Suddenly being around so many great players was unsettling, as was accepting a backup role. However difficult, Cain says that the experience helped him become a better player. Focused on improving his skills, Cain also excelled in the classroom as a double major in accounting and finance and impressed Freitag enough to earn significant playing time in 2006.

Looking ahead to the upcoming season, during which he'll anchor the team as its starting goalkeeper, Cain relishes the challenge of taking IU soccer back to the final four and, hopefully, bringing home a championship.

"The best thing about being a part of IU soccer is the legacy," Cain says. "All those championships motivate us to work hard and give us the will to win. Being part of the IU tradition is what I love." ✨



A RECORD OF UNPARALLELED SUCCESS

All-time Record:
576-108-52 (.818)

NCAA Championships:
7 ('82, '83, '88, '98, '99, '03, '04)

College Cup
Appearances: **17**

NCAA Tournament
Appearances: **30**

Big Ten
Championships: **10**

Big Ten Regular
Season Titles: **11**

Former IU players who
have played in the MLS
(Major League Soccer): **19**

Former IU players who
have played in other U.S.
professional soccer leagues: **95**

Former IU players who
have played overseas: **5**

John Mellencamp, #11, embraces team-
mate Brian Ackley who had just scored
the winning goal in a 1-0 game against
Kentucky. Mellencamp assisted.