

move into the adult teams. It's very exciting to do something like this in Eugene because now the kids have something they can look up to."

Ruckaberle explains that Azul presents a unique opportunity for female soccer players in the region, women athletes who would otherwise be shut out from soccer at a competitive level after college. Since Women's Professional Soccer has folded, due to a lack of funding, young women who want to play soccer at a fast-paced highly competitive level have even fewer options.

So something like the Women's Premier Soccer League could actually turn out to be the equivalent of what minor league baseball would be, were the majors to go under — except that the WPSL players are not paid athletes.

"This is entirely new for women in our Eugene community," says team coordinator Evon Smith, "whereas men have always had layers and layers of men's leagues that they can play in."

With sponsors including Market of Choice, Adidas and EW, Azul is set to take over the Eugene summer nights of

2012. The team's home games will be hosted at South Eugene High School's relatively new turf field, and the competition is set to be fierce.

"South Eugene is a great location for these games because people can bike to it, and it's more central," Smith says.

SLIDETACKLES AND SHIN GUARDS

Soccer fans can expect to see an aggressive and spirited team represent Eugene. Azul is loaded with fiery young women hungry to further establish this level of play here at home.

"There are a great deal of very accomplished players on this team," Ruckaberle says. "Many have already committed to playing at Division 1 schools in the fall."

Ruckaberle and assistant coaches Dave Peterson, Jen Davin and Joe Beeler oversee the Azul practices with a tactical attention to team cohesion. Cohesion that's occurring pretty naturally, according to Azul goalkeeper and former UO player Lindsey Parlee.

"We're lucky because most of these girls have grown up playing in Eugene, with and against each other and under these coaches before," Parlee says.

The age difference among some of the Azul players poses an interesting challenge for the team, given that it ranges from 19 to about 24. But forward Jen Stoltenberg, who is the Azul's marquee player — having been a standout at UO who was then drafted by Women's Professional Soccer to play for the Philadelphia Independence, — has a distinctly positive outlook on this.

"The creative dynamic of the team is enhanced by the age difference," Stoltenberg says. "I think it makes us even better and more competitive."

And competitive may prove an understatement when it comes to the Azul players. Words like aggressive, tenacious or gutsy may better describe the team's overall personality.

Azul plays its first home game Sunday, May 20, against Oregon Rush. Be there.

For more info on Azul, go to www.emfc.org. Follow Azul results in EW & in real time on Twitter @eugeneweekly



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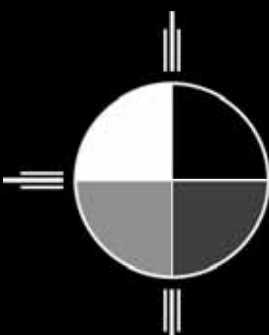
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