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Stellar college career propels Leathers onto international scene

It's pretty clear that Furman senior Jon Leathers was the best soccer player in the Southern Conference in 2007. But the best in the country? Now that's just crazy talk.

Or is it?

No, Leathers wasn't bestowed such an honor by any of the organizations that recognize such things. The only defender twice named Southern Conference Player of the Year, however, was also the only college player selected by coach Peter Nowak to be a member of the Under-23 national team that recently played two exhibition matches in China in preparation for this summer's Olympic Games.

That's pretty compelling evidence, even without a big trophy to make it official. At the very least, Leathers' name is now firmly entrenched in the annals of Furman athletics, and it's looking as if the Athens, Ga., native is on the same track that elevated the likes of Clint Dempsey '05, Ricardo Clark '05 and John Barry Nusum '02 into national and even world soccer prominence.

"[The national team] was always a dream. It was just kind of a shock when it came. It came sooner than expected, I guess," Leathers says. "I found out the day before Thanksgiving I was on the final roster. I was ecstatic."

That was shortly before the Paladins' outstanding 2007 season ended in the second round of the NCAA tournament with a loss to eventual national champion Wake Forest. At the time, the match in Winston-Salem was the biggest Leathers had been a part of. But not for long.

"The last game that we played was, like, maybe 4,000 fans, and the first game in China the stadium was pretty much full and there were around 40,000 fans," Leathers says. "I was, like, wow, this is crazy. I was pretty much overwhelmed by it. But it was a great experience."

Leathers did not play in a 0-0 tie December 13, but he was on the field for the entire second half of a dramatic 3-3 draw December 16 in which the United States blew a 3-0 lead — with the capper being a dubious penalty kick awarded to the Chinese with no time left on the clock.

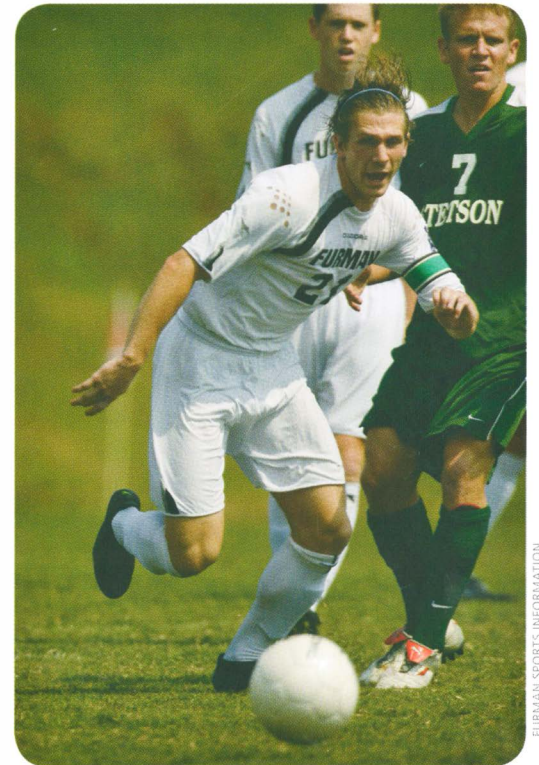
The experience left Leathers, a *College Soccer News* first-team All-American, with just a taste of the emotion that comes with major international play, and he's hungry to be part of it again. But nothing is guaranteed because in the world of international soccer, rosters can change dramatically from day to day.

The CONCACAF (Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football) championships will be held March 11-23, with the two finalists from the eight-team tournament qualifying for the Summer Olympics. Leathers could make the U.S. CONCACAF team or the U.S. Olympic team — or neither. But if Nowak calls him, he'll play.

With Nowak's blessing, Leathers missed a U-23 national team training camp January 6-20 so that he could concentrate on two things: the Major League Soccer combine January 11-15, after which he was drafted by Kansas City (and teammate Shea Salinas '08 was chosen by San Jose), and on graduating with his class in May. A business administration major, Leathers says that completing his degree will be possible thanks to independent study and the "phenomenal" flexibility of his professors.

Furman coach Doug Allison has no doubt that Leathers has what it takes to follow former Paladins Dempsey and Clark to the national team and into the professional ranks.

"Jon is a different position and he is a different kind of player, but the similarities are that they are very, very tough," says Allison. "And they all train equally as hard. That's why Clint



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and Ricardo are good pros. Jon's got that attribute of being a good pro. If he keeps his nose clean and rolls his sleeves up and does the job that he's done here, there's no question that he can make it."

If, indeed, Leathers' success comes down to work, it looks like the battle's already won.

"I think every time I go out and train and play I feel I have to prove myself. I don't think there's ever going to be a time where I feel like I'm it," Leathers says. "Complacency, it never allows you to progress. I don't even want to be in that situation."

— RON WAGNER '93

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