

9-1-2005

Coming on strong

Ron Wagner '93

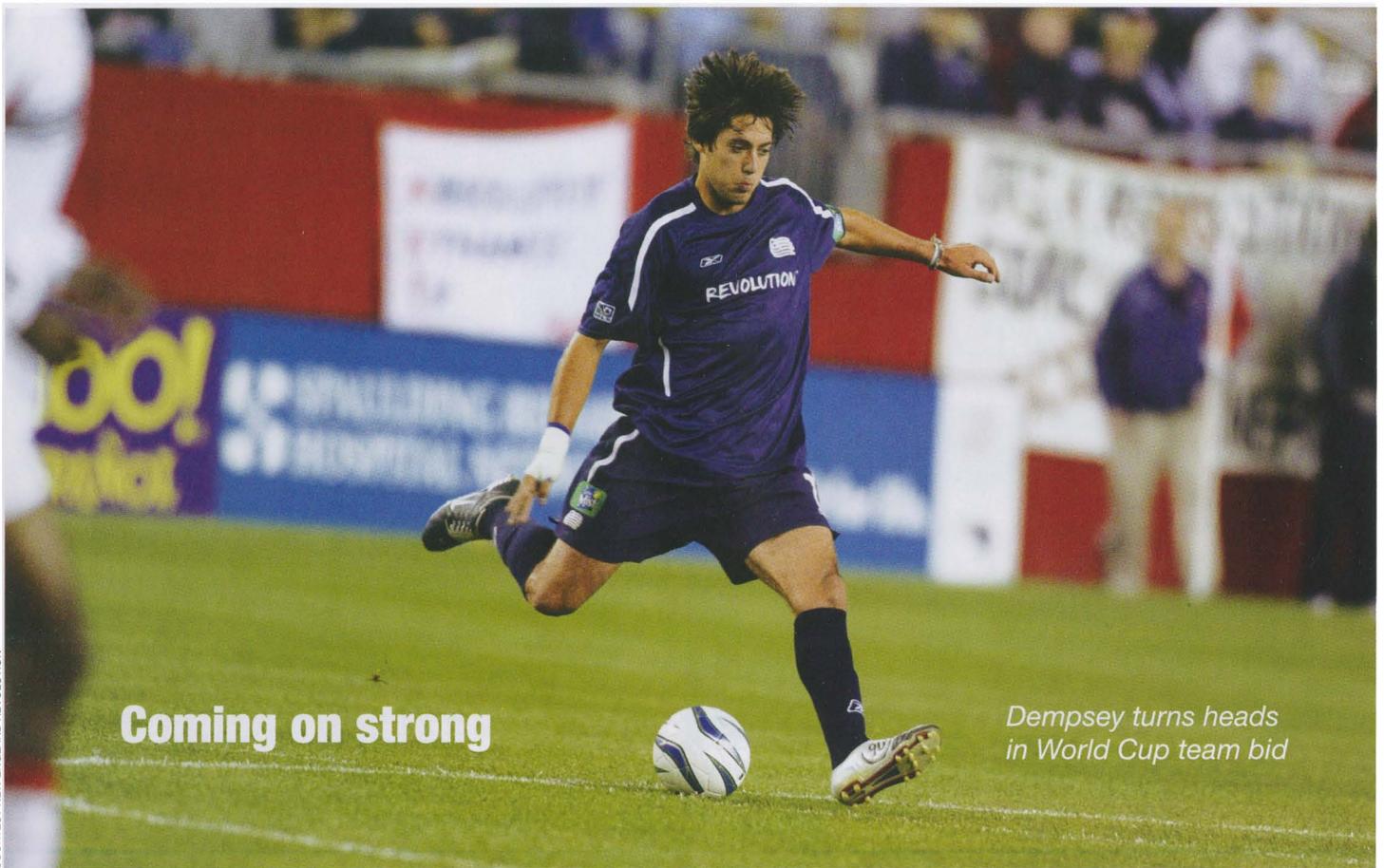
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Recommended Citation

Wagner, Ron '93 (2005) "Coming on strong," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 3 , Article 25.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol48/iss3/25>

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Furmanathletics



Coming on strong

Dempsey turns heads in World Cup team bid

COURTESY NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION

In spite of its small size and relatively meager budget, Furman has produced a remarkable number of successful professional athletes.

In addition to legends Frank Selvy '54 and Stanford Jennings '84, Betsy King '77, Beth Daniel '78 and Dottie Pepper '87 have a combined 84 wins and almost \$23 million in career earnings on the LPGA tour. Brad Faxon '83 won his eighth PGA tournament at the Buick Championship in August. Rushia Brown '94 has had a decade-long professional basketball career both in Europe and the Women's National Basketball Association. Cam Newton '05 was activated in September by the Atlanta Falcons, joining Orlando Ruff '99 of the Cleveland Browns in the National Football League.

A pretty impressive list — which makes it all the more impressive that Clint Dempsey's name may be about to top it.

Two years after he last donned Paladin purple at Eugene E. Stone III Stadium, Dempsey is one of 35 finalists for a spot on the 24-man United States soccer team that will represent the country next summer at the World Cup in Germany. U.S. coach Bruce Arena must have his final list turned in to FIFA, the international soccer governing body, no later than 14 days before the first match, scheduled for June 9.

If Dempsey's name is on it, count Furman soccer coach Doug Allison as one who thinks he will have surpassed any other athlete in the school's history — including Angel Myers Martino '90, who competed on two American Olympic swim teams in the 1990s.

"I guess American people can relate to an Olympic Games-

type thing, but I honestly believe [the World Cup] is bigger than that," Allison says. "It is some accomplishment to be one of the top 23 or 24 players in your country, especially a country of this size."

Allison would know. A native of Bath, England, where the passion for soccer dwarfs even the most rabid following of a Southeastern Conference football team, Allison has felt the intense pain and joy the sport brings overseas. In fact, Dempsey gave him a taste of both back in May.

Playing for the United States in an exhibition match against England before a crowd of more than 47,000 at Chicago's Soldier Field, Dempsey registered the Americans' only goal in a 2-1 loss. The shot put the midfielder on the map.

"Scoring against England is probably one of the biggest things a Furman athlete has ever done," Allison says. "I wasn't happy at the time because England is my team, but I think I cheered the loudest and jumped the highest. My parents were like, 'Isn't that your kid who scored against us?' It was everywhere in the world that day."

The splash was one of a stream of cannonballs that Dempsey has been responsible for since the New England Revolution took him eighth overall in the 2004 Major League Soccer draft. He would go on to be named the MLS Rookie of the Year, and this season he has emerged as one of the league's best players — and as a potentially dangerous weapon at the international level.

A gifted offensive talent known for athleticism and creativity, Dempsey scored a goal against Cuba in the Gold Cup in July and started and had an assist for the MLS All-Stars in a shocking 4-1 win over Fulham of the English Premier League later that month. He and another former Furman player, Ricardo Clark '05 (see accompanying story), were also part of a select group of MLS players that tangled in Spain with superstars Ronaldo and David Beckham of Real Madrid in August.

In between, Arena played Dempsey in three of the team's first six World Cup qualifying matches, starting him against Guatemala on September 7 two days after the Americans clinched a trip to Germany by beating Mexico 2-0. Dempsey's audition continued October 12 in Foxborough, Mass., against Panama, but Allison doesn't think his former player has anything left to prove.

"He's done enough to deserve it. Someone like Clint can be very unpredictable, because he doesn't get intimidated by the crowds and by the big stage," Allison says. "Some people think he's good enough, and I can tell you he's good enough. It's just a matter of what Coach Arena needs."

Allison has known Dempsey was something special since he spotted him playing club ball out of Nacogdoches, Texas. He stole him away from larger programs, and Dempsey rewarded him with 17 goals and 19 assists during his three years at Furman (2001-03).

But even with that success, Allison had no idea that Dempsey's skills would continue to blossom the way they have.

"No one knows when they get into the pros if they're going to be a good pro, and he has become a very good pro already at such a young age," the coach said. "His temperament lends him to being a good pro. He's very humble."

Except when he's attacking the goal. Then, Dempsey becomes a beast that is often unstoppable.

"His vision is good. He can beat a man very easily," Allison said. "He's got so many different moves for a big guy [6-1, 175 pounds]. His feet are so soft. You wouldn't think he can do what he does. He was always a good finisher, and he's become an even better finisher."

Allison's current players got a look at the new-and-improved Dempsey in September when the Paladins stopped by a Revolution workout while they were in Massachusetts competing in a tournament at Harvard. Dempsey and the Paladins exchanged jerseys, with Dempsey jumping at the chance to add to his purple collection. "He loves to represent the school," Allison says. "He's still wearing his Furman stuff."

Dempsey remembers his days as a Paladin fondly and hasn't ruled out returning to Furman to finish his health and exercise science degree, which New England would pay for provided he does it by the year 2014. "I had good times there [at Furman]," he says. "There are definitely people there I would like to see."

In the meantime, there's a much better chance you'll be seeing him somewhere else first. He hopes it will be on June 9, 2006, in a rocking German stadium.

"Growing up, the thing I envisioned was playing in front of a big crowd in a big stadium in an important game," he says. "Throughout my whole life I'd tell people the same thing: I'm going to be a professional soccer player."

"Some of them were like, yeah, sure, whatever, but the most important thing is I believed in myself."

— Ron Wagner '93

The author is sports editor of the Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News.



JOHN TODD/SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES



COURTESY PHILADELPHIA KIXX

Standout seasons

Clark, Nusum also spreading Furman name

While Clint Dempsey has received substantial press for his performance in recent months, including a lengthy profile in *USA Today* in late July, other former Paladin booters are also making a name for themselves in pro soccer.

Dempsey's fellow member of the Class of '05, Ricardo Clark (top left) of the San Jose Earthquakes, was named Major League Soccer's Player of the Month in July — an award Dempsey had earned earlier in the season. Clark joined Dempsey on the MLS Select team that traveled to Spain in August to face Real Madrid and was on the U.S. roster for the final two World Cup qualifiers in October, against Costa Rica and Panama.

San Jose compiled the best record in MLS this season and earned the Western Conference's top seed for the league play-offs, which culminated November 13 with the title game. (For results, visit www.mlsnet.com.)

During his two years at Furman, Clark garnered All-America honors while helping the Paladins to two Southern Conference titles and a 36-8-1 record. He was the second choice in the 2002 MLS draft by the New York/New Jersey MetroStars and played with them for two years before moving to San Jose.

Clark was a finalist for the 2003 MLS Gatorade Rookie of the Year award and a member of the United States Under-23 national team in 2004.

John Barry Nusum '02, a Bermuda native who completed his college career in 2001 as Furman's all-time leader in goals (61) and points (161), received two major honors earlier this year. He was named the Major Indoor Soccer League's Rookie of the Year and was elected Bermuda's 2004 Male Athlete of the Year.

Nusum, a forward for the Philadelphia Kixx, tallied 28 goals and 17 assists as the Kixx finished third in the regular-season standings and advanced to the semifinals of the MISL Championship Series. After finishing his season with the Kixx, Nusum spent the summer with the Virginia Beach Mariners of the United Soccer League and was named the team's most valuable offensive player.

A three-time All-America selection at Furman, Nusum was selected by the Columbus Crew in the Major League Soccer 2002 Super Draft but signed with the USL's Atlanta Silverbacks. He was the Silverbacks' leading scorer in 2003 with seven goals before playing the next season with the Toronto Lynx.