

2009 HIGH SCHOOL LACROSSE PREVIEW



PETER BLASL PHOTO

Kaitlyn Suarez may not score a goal this year, but her impact has been far reaching for Shoreham-Wading River, the two-time defending state champions. Suarez, who is battling Hodgkin's lymphoma, joined the team this year at the suggestion of several players and has been an immediate inspiration.

## State titles aside, SWR girls rally around newest teammate

BY JOE WERKMEISTER | SPORTS EDITOR

An unintended result of winning back-to-back state titles is days like Friday.

On the first warm, calm day of spring, the 24 members of the Shoreham-Wading River girls lacrosse team hiked their way through a wooded trail to the northwest field where they practice, just like any other day. And that's when things deviated from normal.

Coach Bob Vlahakis and the team's eight seniors followed a photographer down to the football field for a photo shoot to accompany an upcoming magazine feature. Back on the practice field, assistant coach J.M. Jackson set up his own photo shoot for head shots of the underclassmen before the remaining players came back for

a team photo.

Throw in a newspaper reporter and it was the unofficial media day for the defending champs, who are in high demand in the publicity department.

### Read more on SWR

For additional coverage of the two-time defending state champs, turn to page 42.

By the time the players switched out of their game jerseys, stretched, ran a few warm-up laps and were finally ready to practice, nearly an hour and a half had passed.

But that was OK with Vlahakis, the two-time Suffolk Coach of the Year who has helped mold Shoreham into the preeminent girls lacrosse program in Suffolk County. It's not that he loves the attention; in fact he'd prefer to stay out of the lime-light if possible.

It's an understanding that sometimes it's OK to give up a practice. Sometimes a team needs to do something other than rehearse plays all day.

And when Vlahakis speaks of the 2009 season, a season in which the Wildcats could very well add another state title, he begins not with lacrosse at all.

He begins with a trip to Stony Brook Medical Center the day earlier when the Wildcats visited their newest teammate, Kaitlyn Suarez, and began training for a program that they'll take part in over the course of the season.

In groups of four this spring the Wildcats will visit children with cancer in the hospital, lending a hand and voice however possible. For three straight weekends beginning April 18, the Wildcats will practice short of a full roster so a group, each of which includes a senior, can do its community service.

"We've taken time out and really considered this very important," Vlahakis said. "Yesterday we spent the whole day. We came back to my house

and they did a little discussion and planning."

Suarez, a Shoreham sophomore battling Hodgkin's lymphoma, has been the inspiration for the Wildcats' endeavor. Nearly a year ago Suarez discovered she had cancer when a doctor examined a large lump that had formed on her neck. She underwent three rounds of chemotherapy but the cancer returned from remission. She began radiation treatment in November and it finally ended last week.

Before the cancer struck last year Suarez had just started to play lacrosse. Before this season began sophomores Codi Mullen and Corinne Wiederkehr offered the idea of adopting Suarez and letting her come to some of the varsity team's games.

Vlahakis said why not just put her on the team.

## SUAREZ

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"They let me get a jersey and practice when I can with them," she said.

The addition of Suarez brought the total roster to 24 players, just how Vlahakis likes it.

"Twenty-four has been my lucky number so we're going with it," he said. "You don't want to change too many things."

At one point during the team photos Friday Vlahakis had to decide what group of position players for Suarez to join. He settled on attack.

The defensive players disagreed.

"Defense because she fights," argued senior Julie Hudecek.

"All right," Vlahakis conceded.

"Yeah!" they yelled.

And so No. 7 joined her teammates on defense.

"She's been a tremendous motivation to the whole team and to me," Vlahakis said. "Just her whole approach and attitude."

Suarez has remained upbeat throughout her entire ordeal, an optimistic attitude that can only spread to her teammates.

While Friday was only her third day with the team at practice, she had already made an impression on her teammates.

"I think she's the backbone of the team," said senior Michelle Verbeek, who had met Suarez through Natural Helpers, a peer-helping program in

the school.

Suarez was nominated, which allowed her classmates a chance to get to know her through the program.

"She's always saying hi or slapping your hand," said senior Sara Bates. "She's always upbeat and making our practice less serious."

Suarez wonders herself sometimes how she manages to stay upbeat.

**'Twenty-four has been my lucky number.'**

Bob Vlahakis,  
SWR coach

"I ask myself every day," she said. "Just basically from knowing everyone's out there rooting for me to keep going, it just gives me so much of an uplift."

The Wildcats will visit the hospital in two sessions, starting with the "Breakfast Club" from 9:30 a.m. to 11. Another session will run from 11 to 12:30 p.m. The groups of four will split and two girls will work with little kids and the other two will work in the teen center with older kids.

Verbeek and Bates said the players are really excited for the opportunity. And by looking at Suarez, they can already see the good that they can do.

"Honestly, people would come to visit and I didn't even know who they were," Suarez said. "But just being able to talk to them, get out of the room and get my mind off it, it was like the greatest thing. I'm so pumped. I can't wait for this."

She also can't wait to start playing some lacrosse. She hopes to get on the field as soon as her body feels up to it.

"Being on the team, that's all I'm happy for," she said.

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## WILDCATS

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fensively. As a sophomore two years ago, he was mostly a feeder and finished the season with a team-high 51 assists. Last year he became a bigger focal point of opposing teams' defenses and was relied on to score more.

"He's worked hard and now he's taking on that whole leadership role," Rotanz said.

While the Wildcats lost a few key players from last year's team, like Mike Delia and Kevin DeFranco, the core of their team returns with a lot of experience. Mahoney was a long pole on the state championship team, Lustgarten started on attack, Longo as a defensive middle, Sopko started and Perdie played on the second midfield line.

As the top seed in Division II, the Wildcats enter the season as the favorite, but Rotanz knows there isn't much difference among any of the top five seeds.

The advantage of the top seed comes with the power points. If the Wildcats have the same record as the team seeded fifth, they would have the advantage in power points. For that reason, Rotanz said he always hopes for the highest seed.

"If you're going to play everyone anyway, why not be the one seed?" Rotanz said.

The preseason has been busy for the Wildcats with scrimmages. They've faced Cold Spring Harbor, Bay Shore, Ward Melville and Smithtown East. Last weekend they traveled to Darien, Conn., and faced Darien, Fairfield Prep and West Islip.

"There's just so much to do," Rotanz said. "I don't know how people play this early."

The Wildcats will play their first non-league game Monday in Syosset. They'll open the league season Wednesday against Mount Sinai and then take on Mountain Lakes from New Jersey April 11.

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## PANTHERS

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Killeen and Deanna Molinelli can all score.

Danielle Citro is one of the few seniors on the team and she'll play in the midfield.

Splitting time in the goal will be juniors Allie Yezarski and Lauren Altinok. Both saw time in goal last year as well.

The Panthers open the league season April 15 when they travel to Bayport-Blue Point to face a talented Phantoms team. With a lower seeding the Panthers do get to avoid facing the top teams in Division II like Shoreham and Rocky Point. But they'll still face top competition late in the season against Mount Sinai (May 13) and Hauppauge (May 18).

• JOE WERKMEISTER

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