

Chill look to tame Lions

By Emmanuel Moutsatsos

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Chill coach Tony Colistro talks to his players during practice Thursday. The Chronicle-Journal/Brent Linton

Beyond the field that's festooned with daffodils and blowing-in-the-wind dandelions, the Thunder Bay Chill are in the warmup stages of their afternoon practice.

Some players are lounging, others stretching their sore quads while the rest are tapping the ball back-and-forth to each other. Anthony Putrus, one of the team's co-captains, yells some words and the collection start jogging in two tight lines making them look like soldiers getting ready for battle. And a battle is what they're in for.

It'll unfold today and Saturday with Chapples Park serving as the setting and 7:30 p.m. being when the duels begin. Their opponents? The St. Louis Lions, as in the top team in the Heartland Division with a 4-0-2 record – a division remember, the 2-1-1 Chill are the reigning champs of. Put simply: Big games, two really big games.

"Biggest games this season I think," explains local product Adam Augruso, a solid midfielder for the club.

"For sure, this could make or break the season and I think all the guys are pumped to play, especially after last weekend."

Last weekend was a good one for the home team. Though the storm clouds followed them to Springfield raining out Friday's contest, they won on Saturday by a narrow 2-1 margin. A one-goal decision over a team that's still winless (Springfield) isn't a feat to drool over, but pummeling the Kansas City Brass – one of the top teams in the division – the next day 5-0 certainly was cause for celebration.

"We got going and you couldn't stop us," Augruso says.

Collecting four goals in the opening 25 minutes alone, they pounded the Brass with the precise rhythm of a seasoned New Orleans jazz band. And for good measure, they pocketed another score in the final minute to solidify a point: They're opening weekend effort was weak and they've gotten stronger since.

"Apparently," begins Jeremy Gold, who scored twice against the Brass, "they're one of the teams that a lot of the other teams don't like to play or go to.

"They put us in a bad hotel and in a bad area and a lot of the guys took exception to that," he says with a sly smile.

Adds Tony Colistro, the team's head coach: "We just don't like those guys."

But shabby hotel conditions wasn't Thunder Bay's only motivation to beat Kansas City. "They needed those two wins," Colistro explains. Thunder Bay's first two games with the Des Moines Menace were sloppy and authored a 0-0 draw and a disheartening 3-1 loss, so team morale was low, doubts were circling like vultures over a carcass.

"You start to question yourself," Colistro comments, "are we really just good on paper and that kind of stuff." But questions were replaced with answers. They got their hearts broken in their opening weekend, but rebounded nicely like a Hollywood actor after a nasty high-profile breakup. Yes, we are good they were able to say to themselves with more authority because they proved it. Yes, they can score. Yes, they can defend. Yes, they can win.

"We were able to show that," Augruso says.

But a question lingers: Can they do it again? And then again? And again after that as they did last summer?