Despite loss of all-state player, Grafton girls' soccer team has plenty of veteran talent in quest for top honors

It's not unusual for a soccer team that went 24-2-4, won a conference title and reached the semifinals of a state tournament to have a tough time replicating its success the next season.

Talent lost to graduation simply has a way of toughening the road to repeat success.

But don't count the Grafton High School girls' team among the typical cases. After developing into one of the state's elite squads last year, the Black Hawks aren't about to relinquish their lofty status easily.

Although Grafton will be missing a small handful of last year's regular players, it has plenty of firepower to make another run to the top.

"Our roster is pretty much the same, and we've got a lot of depth," said coach Don Arnold, who guided the Hawks to a North Shore Conference co-championship and the final four in the WIAA Division 2 state playoffs.

"I'm excited to see what this team can achieve."

Grafton, whose 5-1-1 league mark was good enough for a share of the title with Homestead, lost only one regular player — defender Cassey Patula — to graduation.

However, the Hawks will also be missing senior Hannah Eichler, an all-state and first-team all-conference forward who chose to forego her final soccer season. She plans to pursue a college career in basketball, joining the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay program this fall.

Even so, Grafton has more than a dozen returning varsity players. Topping the list are six seniors — forward Carley Pfannerstill, midfielders Emma Fatla and Tess Safstrom, defenders Hannah Knauer and Gabi Kuester and goalkeeper Alissa Viste.

Fatla, Knauer and Viste earned All-NSC first-team honors last season, and Pfannerstill and Safstrom received honorable mention. Fatla has signed a letter of intent to play soccer at UW-Milwaukee next year.

The Hawks' other returnees include eight juniors — forwards Angie Mann and Haley Orlowski, midfielders Alyssa Arnold, Maddy Huibregste and Abby Freeland, defenders Audrey Dickmann and Alli Demerath and keeper Morgan Kretlow — and sophomore forward Zoie Bauer.

Pfannerstill, who had 12 goals and nine assists last year, should help spark Grafton's attack. In addition, the Hawks have firepower in the midfield, where Safstrom had 16 goals and seven assists, and Fatla had 13 goals and 13 assists.

"Carley has great offensive skills and is going to be a big-time player for us," Arnold said. "There are a lot of girls who can play midfield and forward. Tess Safstrom, Emma Fatla and Alyssa Arnold are playmakers who can create a lot of things."

Grafton's stalwart defense, which posted 18 shutouts last season, is likely to be anchored again by Knauer at stopper, Dickmann at sweeper and Viste in net, where she allowed just 16 goals.

"Hannah Knauer can play defense and midfield for us and is a monster," Arnold said. "She can break things up on defense and has one of the strongest shots."

Arnold is pleased with his team's talent and experience, which give the Hawks a serious arsenal for title contention in the conference and beyond.

"I think the biggest challenge will be getting the chemistry again that we had last year," he said.

Arnold wasn't about to make any predictions about this year's title favorites in the North Shore, where Homestead, Cedarburg, Whitefish Bay and Germantown are again expected to field strong teams.

"A lot of our games last year could have swung the other way," he said. "You have to be ready for every game because our conference is probably the best in the state."

This week, the Hawks opened the season with a Tuesday game against Plymouth and will travel to UW-Milwaukee on Thursday for a 5 p.m. game against Wauwatosa West.

Grafton will start NSC play April 3 with a 7 p.m. match at Cedarburg, which handed the Hawks their only conference loss last year.

Image Information: MIDFIELDER EMMA FATLA is back to help lead the Grafton girls' soccer team again this season. Press file photo