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Web exclusive: East Bay girls soccer notebook and rankings

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Any quality soccer coach knows that it's not just hard work and big dreaming that drives a team to a higher level. It also takes great competition.

And so not surprisingly, the East Bay Athletic League is the pre-eminent girls soccer league in Northern California, if not the state.

EBAL players evolve from tremendous club programs, which puts them on the map with major college recruiters, plus the players _ coaches, too _ know that if they take one backward step, a local rival from Danville or Pleasanton, San Ramon or Livermore, is ready, willing and able to take them down.

The whole of it always makes for an entertaining race for EBAL, and North Coast Section, supremacy.

With the addition of long-respected Carondelet to the EBAL, the league is tougher still.

Call it the League of Death (in the World Cup the "Group of Death" is so powerful that a quality team might not survive), if you will, but the action couldn't really be any more lively.

San Ramon Valley has notched the past three North Coast Section 3A titles, and Monte Vista has won the past four EBAL crowns. But this could be the year of the Falcons, Foothill Falcons, that is. Foothill was runner-up to San Ramon Valley at NCS last season and has 15 returners, among them an impressive 10

players who have oral commitments to Division I schools.

Foothill reeled off two league wins last week to get a jump on the local competition, but things are just now heating up, even as a cold snap has the East Bay in its grip.

Outside the EBAL, Castro Valley boasts one of the section's elite girls squads. Others not far back are Bishop O'Dowd, Berkeley, Clayton Valley, which beat Monte Vista 1-0 in nonleague action last week, Washington, and College Park.

Some of this will sort itself out during the Tri-Valley Classic Thursday through Monday (Dec. 18-22), a prestigious 49-team event hosted by Monte Vista, San Ramon Valley and Las Lomas. Defending champion Torrey Pines, one of the nation's elite programs, will be back, and a team from Iolani, Hawaii is also competing. Speaking of the Group of Death, the Tri-Valley Classic "Invitational IB division" will feature Torrey Pines, Foothill, Carondelet, and Hayward Area Athletic League power Bishop O'Dowd. Good luck, Dragons

Moreover, crosstown rivals Monte Vista and San Ramon Valley will square off at 3:30 p.m. at the Mustang Soccer Complex to open "Invitational IA Bracket" play in the Classic. Also in the "IA bracket" are Castro Valley and Santa Cruz. California is in the "Gold GEA" group along with Clayton Valley, College Park, Liberty and Berean Christian. Amador Valley is in "Gold GEB" along with Berkeley, Arroyo, Cleveland of Reseda, and Scotts Valley.

For more complete Tri-Valley Classic information check the tournament web site at trivalleyclassic.com

Even with back-to-back losses heading into this week, Monte Vista, which graduated 11 seniors from

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last year's Tri-Valley Classic runner-up squad, figures to give the Wolves a royal battle. But there is an awkward side to the meeting.

"We always try to avoid each other before league at all costs," San Ramon Valley coach Mark Jones said Monday. "We're very nervously excited, if that's grammatically correct. I think it's going to be a great match."

The Wolves appear well-stocked for another run at an NCS crown with four seniors, eight juniors and three sophomores. Leading the way are University of California-bound senior center striker Amanda Glass and last year's top scorer, junior Grace Leer, a blazer who either scores or creates chances for others. Senior midfielder/forward Hillary Harvey is another speedster who's bound for San Diego State.

"We'll be solid, but we're not Foothill, though," Jones assured.

As for Amador Valley, the Dons feature another strong team after advancing to the second round of NCS last season and falling to Castro Valley. The Dons feature national under-16 player in junior Kaitlyn Fitzpatrick, senior striker Katie Boss, who had four goals entering the week. She played as a freshman then took two years off to focus on horseback riding and cross country and track and field. She brings a lot of confidence and athleticism, said Amador assistant coach Mary Scavone.

Even though Cal lost 5-0 to Foothill last week, the Grizzlies too should not be overlooked. They finished tied for second last season with a nucleus of sophomores. Coach Jones expects Livermore and Granada to be the spoilers. "We tied Granada twice last year, these EBAL matches take on their own little flair."

Here are my early season East Bay girls top-10

soccer rankings:

1. Foothill
2. San Ramon Valley
3. Carondelet
4. Castro Valley
5. Amador Valley
6. Clayton Valley
7. Monte Vista
8. California
9. Bishop O'Dowd
10. Granada

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