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Just One of the Boys: Recent College Graduate Adjusts to Life as TSA Soccer Coach

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Sharon — Zach Elmore feels like a player-coach.

He's approaching his first season as head coach of the Sharon Academy boys soccer team from two angles. On the one hand, Elmore is coming off of a four-year career with Colby-Sawyer College men's soccer team that ended with his graduation in May. On the other, the 22-year-old is suddenly an authority figure for high school student-athletes, many of whom are only a little more than four years younger than him.

The age gap — or lack thereof — has helped him adjust to a new role, Elmore said after Sharon's 6-1 loss to Rivendell Academy on Tuesday in the Phoenix' home opener.

"They've been good about it so far, they've given me respect," Elmore said. "It's weird to be out here playing around with them. Every once in a while, I'll mix it up a little bit and just play. You kind of forget that you're supposed to be coaching.

"I just take the things that I struggled with, that I know can be hard, and bring it to this kind of level and try to teach them."

For his players, it helps having a coach who can speak their language.

"It's great," Sharon junior Olly Skeet-Browning said. "He played at a super-high level very recently, so it's fresh in his mind. He knows what it's like to play, he knows tactics."

Elmore took the program over from Rob Stainton, who stepped down last fall after a 9-5-2 campaign. Stainton coached the Phoenix for 12 seasons and amassed a 158-38-8 record over that span, taking Sharon to five VPA Division IV championship games, which all ended in losses. The Phoenix also made

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10 D-IV semifinal appearances in Stainton's tenure. Last year's quarterfinal loss to Rivendell was the program's earliest departure from the D-IV tournament in nine years.

For a replacement, Sharon athletic director Blake Fabrikant turned to Elmore — a Berlin, Vt., native and former soccer standout at U-32 High. He is the youngest varsity coach in the school's 17-year history.

"It's been different, going from the college level to high school," Elmore said. "Having not played high school in a while, it was definitely a little bit different. But I think I've adjusted pretty well. I'm getting used to it."

The biggest adjustment so far? "The level of play and being on the sidelines," he said. "I've got to first take a breath, then realize that I can't expect things I could expect a few months ago on my college team, understanding that the level is different."

Tuesday's matchup against Rivendell, the reigning D-IV champions, was tough sledding for the youthful Phoenix.

The Raptors (3-1) scored three goals in each half for the victory. Sophomore forward Luke Senn got Rivendell on the board four minutes in, cleaning up a rebound off of Sharon goalkeeper Ben Rodis. Senn added to the lead 12 minutes later with a turn-around shot just outside the box for his second of the game. Johnny Vogelien made it 3-0 in the 38th minute after cleaning up a loose ball that escaped from Rodis' reach.

"They're starting to remind me of last year's (championship-winning) team, a little bit," Raptors veteran head coach Bob Thatcher said.

Skeet-Browning got Sharon on the board just before halftime with a lob over Rivendell keeper Zach Dexter's head that caught the senior too far off the goal line to stop. The Raptors led, 3-1, at halftime.

"I knew we had kind of been lacking chances," Skeet-Browning said. "I turned and saw that I had a little bit of space and I just hit it as best I could. I kind of just stood there and watch it go over him.

"We didn't do a great job playing into feet. That possession piece was missing, a little bit," he added. "But it's a work in progress. It's the beginning of the season with a young team. We've just got to keep working."

Rodis kept the Phoenix in the game during second half, as he made seven of his 10 saves after halftime. Rivendell's Zach Gould broke through in the 65th minute by burying a loose ball inside the box. Dylan Ricker and Calvin Bosner netted insurance goals before the final horn.

"It's always tough to lose, 6-1," Elmore said. "But we had some solid individual performances, so that's good going forward."

Elmore admitted his team still has some work to do. The squad is young this fall — only seven of his 20 athletes are seniors or juniors this year. For Skeet-Browning, a new coach has injected some energy into the team.

"It's been a lot more aggressive and a lot more tactical-minded, which I'm liking," Skeet-Browning said. "I feel like Rob had a bit more of a possession-type approach, which is great. It's hard to compare. We basically got a whole new team in.

"I think we're getting, not so much a (college soccer) education, but more of that mindset, that ideology. That's really great because at the end of the day that's one step higher than this. If we can get our game to look even close to that, that's a huge step."

Sharon (0-2) will try for its first win of the season on Thursday at Blue Mountain. Rivendell hosts Blue Mountain on Friday.

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