

Unsworth makes the grade with soccer team

Third year rookie got the call when it was least expected

By Bruce Denis
Sports Editor

His friends amicably refer to him as 'The Bum'. The type that lies on his couch sipping a Moose Dry every night while consuming the hockey highlights on TSN's *Sportsdesk*. But to Varsity Reds soccer coach Gary Brown, Neil Unsworth may be one of the missing links to success.

After sitting in the stands at varsity soccer games for two years, Unsworth came to campus in September determined to find a place on the team. It didn't come easy.

"Looking back, I wasn't in the greatest shape when I arrived and I was an unknown to Gary. He hadn't seen me play at all. But I knew I had a good shot at making the team."

He certainly didn't arrive unprepared. Unsworth has a 17 year history in the sport going back to his days with his native Two Mountains, Quebec intercity team. He polished his midfield game with the John Abbott Islanders of the CEGEP AAA league for two years before enrolling at UNB and kept in shape over the summer with Dollard Des Ormeaux in the Montreal Senior A Metro League.

Staying with the varsity program was the first step accomplished for Unsworth, but making the A team was to be a tougher one. "I just kept going out to prac-

tice and played with the B team. As the season went along, Gary made hints to me to keep trying because I was going to crack the line-up sooner than later."

The season began well for the team and a certain Gray Zurheide was leading the charge. It seemed unlikely Unsworth would find his elusive spot on the team. Coming out of Thanksgiving weekend, with only three very important games remaining in the season, he had yet to play and the disappointment began to set in.

"It was a low point for me. I owe a lot to our assistant coach Dave Rouse, he supported me a lot. He liked the way I played and kept my confidence up when I was down. Also, I talked to Gray one night and he told me he had put a good word in to the coach for me and that I was playing him hard in practice. Coming from one of the top players in the CIAU, it was a major confidence booster. He told me that if I kept at it, I was going to get my chance. I really appreciated that."

Indeed the chance arrived for the affable halfback. Just prior to a weekend of must-win games against Acadia and Dalhousie, Unsworth got the call.

Coach Brown says "We dressed Neil to give him some experience for next year. Once things began to fall apart for us that weekend we decided to look ahead and begin preparations. As it turns out, Neil filled in for us nicely."

For Unsworth, the experience was one he'll never forget. "I was just happy to dress, I didn't expect to play. When Gary told me I was



Rookie Neil Unsworth holds off a Memorial Seahawks attacker. Photo by Kevin G. Porter.

going in towards the end of the first half against Dalhousie, I don't think I was ever so nervous in my life. I tried to warm up but when I got on I was still cold. I had to run up and down the field once when I got on and I had a hard time breathing. I did a good play at the end of the half that got my confidence up so I was ready for the second half."

Despite being blown out in both games that weekend, he felt it was a positive experience. So did Brown as Unsworth got to start the following weekend against Memorial. The team fared a little better by garnering a tie. "I felt pretty good about myself after that game. I played very hard. It was a

big load off my back after the disastrous weekend before."

Looking to next year, Brown is confident that Unsworth will fill a more important role. "He'll be a defensive halfback. Neil is a big, stocky player who will intimidate. His tackling is tenacious and he should be winning the midfield for us."

"Neil worked hard with our B team. He got fitter and stronger before moving nicely into the varsity program. He is a classic example of how effective our B team program is."

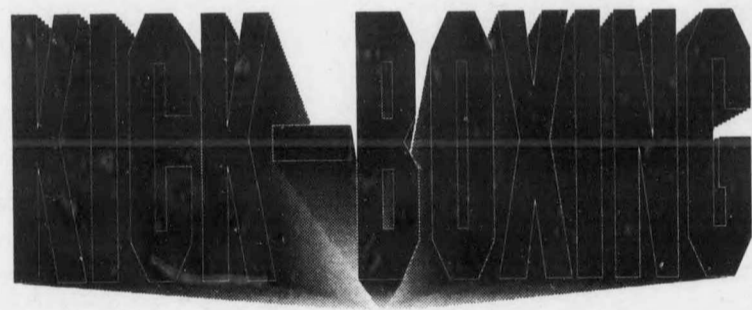
In hindsight, Unsworth hopes he found a permanent place on the team. "I hope after the way I

played against Memorial that the guys have confidence in me for next year and Gary has confidence in me."

Now that the season is a distant memory, Unsworth has committed himself to staying in shape for next year. He plans to play intramural indoor soccer and is currently a star forward with the Red Army team in intramural hockey.

"My personal goal in the off season is to get in good enough shape so that I can play at 100 percent for a full game. You can't play a half game in this league. You can't be half-assed."

One thing is for sure, this bum isn't half-assed.



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