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**For Immediate Release
August 18, 2014**

Saint Francis U Earns Top Ranking In Northeast Conference Women's Soccer Preseason Poll

Somerset, NJ -- The Northeast Conference (NEC) women's soccer coaches have tabbed Saint Francis U to defend its championship title. Despite being the preseason favorite for the past four seasons, the Red Flash are predicted to be challenged by last year's Tournament field.

A near perfect season and an NCAA appearance later, reigning NEC Coach of the Year Brenda van Stralen's Red Flash received three first place votes as the preseason favorite to win their third title in five years.

LIU Brooklyn, which has appeared in the past four NEC Championship games and won the league crown in 2011 and 2012, earned second place in the poll, receiving two first place nods.

Central Connecticut and Fairleigh Dickinson, both of which appeared in the 2013 NEC Tournament, occupied the third and fourth place spots, receiving three first place votes and one first place vote, respectively.

Wagner was slotted fifth followed by Sacred Heart in sixth, and Bryant in seventh. Robert Morris and Mount St. Mary's rounded out the nine-team poll.

All nine teams will start their season Friday, August 22. League favorite Saint Francis U travels to Queens, NY to take on St. John's, which made the second round of the 2013 NCAA Tournament. October 3rd will mark the first NEC weekend of the 2014 season.

The 2014 NEC Championship will be November 7 & 9, on the campus of the top seeded team. The top four finishers, based on Conference winning percentage will compete in a two-day, single-elimination tournament.

NEC Front Row, the league's cutting edge digital network, will air over 50 women's soccer matches live this season. Games can be viewed on your computer or mobile device, and for the first time will be available in HD. All matches are free of charge and feature one-click access to watch. For a schedule of available games, visit necfrontrow.com

2014 Northeast Conference Women's Soccer Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Saint Francis U (3)
2. LIU Brooklyn (2)
3. Central Connecticut (3)
4. Fairleigh Dickinson (1)
5. Wagner
6. Sacred Heart
7. Bryant
8. Robert Morris
9. Mount St. Mary's

(First place votes in parentheses)

Points of #NECPride

The Red Flash will regroup after graduating six key players from the dominant 2013 squad, including **Tesa McKibben**, the four time NEC Women's Soccer Player of the Year. She was the first four-time conference MVP in NCAA Division I history.

Saint Francis U has posted an unprecedented conference record over the past four years. In that span, the Red Flash are 54-23-8 overall and 33-4-1 in league play, a bar that has been set by no other team in NEC history.

The Blackbirds will fly in a different direction this season under the guidance of new head coach **Jim Robbins**. Robbins comes to LIU after serving as head women's soccer coach at LaGrange College in LaGrange, Ga. for five seasons. He led the Panthers into the championship match of the Great South Athletic Conference Tournament for the first time in the program's history in 2011.

LIU Brooklyn returns nine veterans to the 2014 squad, including NEC Rookie of the Year **Jenn Peters (Slate Hill, NY/ Minisink Valley)**. Peters led Blackbirds in goals (7), assists (3) and points (17). Peters was also the 2014 NEC Women's Lacrosse Rookie of the Year.

Central Connecticut hopes to replicate the success of last year when the Blue Devils returned to the NEC Tournament for the first time since 2010.

CCSU had four student-athletes lead the CFC Passion to the National Semifinals of the Women's Premier Soccer League over the summer. Returning seniors **Julie Lavoie (Waterford, CT / Waterford)**, **Christina Boucher (Cromwell, CT/ Cromwell)** and **Alex DeCaro (Wethersfield, CT/Wethersfield)**, as well as junior **Cailynn Harding (Cheshire, CT/ Cheshire)** saw action for the Passion throughout the team's final four run.

Fairleigh Dickinson made its fourth NEC Tournament appearance in 2013, returning to the Conference playoffs for the first time since 2008. The Knights will look to build upon one of their most successful seasons in program history after finishing the season 8-8-4, (4-1-3 NEC). FDU finished in a tie for second place and earned the second seed in the conference tournament.

The Knights are now under the direction of **Eric Teepe**. Teepe comes to FDU after completing his second tour of duty as an assistant coach at Stony Brook, where he rejoined the Seawolves' staff prior to the 2011 season. At Stony Brook, Teepe helped guide the Seawolves to the 2012 NCAA Tournament and a return trip to the America East Conference championship match in 2013.

Wagner returns 21 letterwinners from the 2013 squad that recorded the best season in program history. The Seahawks hunt for a spot in the tournament field right through the last weekend of NEC action. Wagner was predicted to finish last in the 2013 preseason poll, but garnered an 11-5-2 overall and a 4-3-1 NEC record.

Sacred Heart returns senior **Kristin Verrette (Saugus, MA/Bishop Fenwick)**. Verrette has been one of the Pioneers' most consistent players over her three years at Sacred Heart. Verrette led Sacred Heart in total points the last two seasons and last year led the club with four assists and tied a team-high with five goals.

Bryant, which finished 5-13-1 overall last season, will look to make its run at a spot in the NEC Tournament for the first time in program history in 2014. The Bulldogs return All-NEC defender **Allison DeBenedictis (Norwell, MA/Norwell)**.

Robert Morris will look to replace two All-NEC selections in the 2014 season but returns junior forward **Kristie Hamilton (Pittsburgh, PA/Shaler)**. Hamilton led the Colonials with 13 points.

Mount St. Mary's returns junior goalkeeper **Rachel Bourne (Baltimore, MD/Mercy)**, who led the NEC with an .831 save percentage. Bourne made 54 saves and only allowed 11 goals in 2013.

Two former NEC standouts have signed professionally for the upcoming season. **Tesa McKibben (SFU)** has signed with Germany's ETSV Wurzburg. **Shino Kunisaway (LIU)**, an All-NEC First Teamer, signed the first professional contract of her career with AC Nagano Parceiro Ladies of Japan's Challenge League.

About The Northeast Conference

Now entering its 34th year, the Northeast Conference is an NCAA Division I collegiate athletic association consisting of 10 institutions of higher learning located throughout six states. Media coverage of the NEC extends to four of the largest markets in the United States - New York (#1), Pittsburgh (#23), Baltimore (#27), and Hartford/New Haven (#30). Founded in 1981 as the basketball-only ECAC Metro Conference, the NEC has grown to sponsor 22 championship sports for men and women and now enjoys automatic access to 14 different NCAA Championships. NEC member institutions include Bryant, Central Connecticut, Fairleigh Dickinson, LIU Brooklyn, Mount St. Mary's, Robert Morris, Sacred Heart, St. Francis Brooklyn, Saint Francis U and Wagner. For more information on the NEC, visit the league's official website (www.northeastconference.org) and digital network (www.necfrontrow.com), or follow the league on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Google+, all @NECsports.