Where Science Rules, but Soccer Thrives

By JACK BELL

HOBOKEN, N.J. — The Stevens Institute of Technology men's soccer team embraces the small-college ideal from its campus perch above the Hudson River. The goalkeeper, Zach Carr, traveled here from Indiana to study biomedical engineering. The top scorer, Terrence Johnson, left Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. One of the top defenders, Chris Faustino, has played for the Red Bulls under-20 academy team. With their teammates, they have a collective 3.8 grade-point average. But they are proving to be just as sharp on the field.

On Friday, Stevens (18-3-4) will face Amherst (15-3-1) in the N.C.A.A. men's Division III national semifinals in Greensboro, N.C. Messiah College (20-2-2) of Grantham, Pa., will play Loras (20-4-1) of Dubuque, Iowa, for the second spot in Saturday's final.

"We have high-level players who are here for the academics," Stevens Coach Tim O'Donohue said after his team's training session during a strict two-hour non-academic window Monday evening. "Academically, they go on to medical, dental and law school or become engineers. The average starting salary out of Stevens is $60,000. They take soccer seriously as anybody. But they come here knowing that they're not going to miss any lab time because of a road game. There is no accommodation."

Stevens has an enrollment of 1,906, O'Donohue said, and a graduation rate of 100 percent. Carr is a sophomore who recorded 13 shutouts this season and led the Ducks to the semifinals with shootout victories over Johns Hopkins and Middlebury, the defending national champions.

"I love soccer, but I was also looking for a great education," he said. "I know I'll look back on this as one of my greatest experiences."

Carr chose Stevens rather than Case Western Reserve, Boston University or the Rochester Institute of Technology because he said he was drawn to Stevens's history in technical fields dating to the college's founding in 1871. The institute gets its name from the Stevens family, which traces its roots to John Stevens, a Revolutionary War colonel who was a pioneer in the development of the steamboat and designed the first American-built steam locomotive. Two of his sons, Edwin and John Cox (the first commodore of the New York Yacht Club), were on the yacht America when it defeated English boats in 1851 to win a trophy that became known as the America's Cup. The campus is on the site of the Stevens's summer estate.

That long-term dedication to science has enabled O'Donohue to recruit nationally, as well as close to home. Johnson, a 6-foot-1 junior striker, is a two-time all-American and the Ducks' top scorer with 14 goals and 7 assists. He said he had to flee St. Petersburg, Russia, north of New Orleans, with his brothers after Katrina. They moved in with relatives in Pemberton, N.J.

"It was hard at first, moving and all," said Johnson, who had never heard of Stevens until O'Donohue came calling. "But it was worse for my parents at home — no electricity for a month."

Johnson somehow avoided the football frenzy in Louisiana, talking up soccer to the surprise of his parents. "I scored three goals in my first game when I was 9," he said. "The coach said that we had something special. I love the rush of scoring goals. Sure there was pressure to play football, but I just enjoy soccer more."

O'Donohue, who is making his first trip to the national semifinals in his eighth year at Stevens, puts a quick and technically gifted team on the field. He said the players were comfortable playing a 4-4-2 formation (code-named Arsenal). When Stevens needs a bit more offense, O'Donohue shifts the fly to a 4-3-3 (code-named Chelsea). That usually pushes the junior Todd Sheridan, from Galloway Township, N.J., forward as a third striker. He has scored 11 goals.

"I wasn't sure about what I had at the beginning of the year," O'Donohue said. "But these guys have a lot of fight in them, and I'm proud of all this young talent."