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“I just keep telling people that the ball is bouncing my way.”

— Connor Hallisey

M. SOCCER

into the SPOTLIGHT

Senior midfielder Connor Hallisey has burst onto the scene as a star player this season

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It was another muggy August night in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Cal midfielder Connor Hallisey could feel the pressure creeping upward with the temperature.

His team was 0-1, thanks to a heartbreaking loss fewer than 48 hours before to then-No. 22 North Carolina, to open the season. Hallisey had chances in that game against the Tar Heels — now missed opportunities that swirled in the back of the senior's mind as he sprinted down the left wing against the Demon Deacons.

“We were coming off a loss where we played well but didn't finish our chances,” Hallisey says. “I had some (chances) in that game that I could have finished and should have and probably could have changed the game. So going into the next game, I thought I felt a lot of pressure.”

In the 15th minute, Hallisey found himself open on a cross pass from fellow midfielder Max Oldham. He was not going to let this opportunity escape. Hallisey sent the ball sailing into the net, lifting his team to its first lead of the season. The early goal would not be the senior's last contribution, and Hallisey would go on to tally two assists in Cal's 4-1 rout over Wake Forest on Aug. 31.

“I felt like I had kind of helped the team out in a way I should be,” Hallisey says. “So I would say that's probably my best and most relieving experience so far.”

It was the Bears' first win of the season and the beginning of Hallisey's journey to becoming one of the top-performing players in the nation.

Only two short months ago, Hallisey was not on many fans' radar.

With only three goals and seven assists in his previous three years at Cal, Hallisey had been an important, but never central, part of the Cal men's soccer team. Although he started in all 21 games as a junior, Hallisey was almost always eclipsed in the headlines by some of his higher-scoring teammates.

Heading into this year's season, college soccer scouting websites, such as TopDrawerSoccer.com, failed to mention Hallisey, instead deciding to focus on other Cal seniors.

No one saw his offensive outbreak coming.

Fast forward seven games after that first goal against Wake Forest, and the 5-foot-10 senior from Granite Bay, California, has been putting up the kind of numbers about which most players could only dream.

In just nine games, Hallisey has tallied a remarkable seven goals and seven assists. He has helped lead the Bears to a 6-3-0 start and now leads the Pac-12 in points per game.

To put that into better perspective, the ever-alluded Steve Birnbaum — Cal's former leading goal scorer and second overall draft pick in the 2014 Major League Soccer SuperDraft — tallied 21 points in his entire season last year, totaled from 10 goals and one assist. Hallisey has managed to match Birnbaum's 21 points in just more than two months.

As a result, Hallisey has earned various accolades in the last month, including two consecutive Pac-12 Conference Player of the Week honors as well as a Top Drawer Soccer Player of the Week honor.

“I just keep telling people that the ball is bouncing my way,” Hallisey says.

When Hallisey first arrived at Cal in 2011 for the fall of his freshman year, the midfielder's prospects looked bright.

As a senior at Granite Bay High School in 2010, Hallisey led his team to an undefeated season and state sectional title. The young athlete set a new school record of 25 goals and 20 assists his senior year while also traveling to Israel to play for the U.S. U-18 National Team.

“He had great expectations coming in,” says his father, Dan. “I mean, his freshman class — that was a pretty good group of players. The year before, the (Cal) team came out with a very successful run into the playoffs. ... So I think all those things, he (Hallisey) was just like, ‘OK, here's just the next step — it's going to continue.’ And I think maybe some of his expectations weren't met.”

Like many young athletes, Hallisey would soon discover that the transition from high school success to college success was not an automatic one.

After starting 11 games as a freshman, Hallisey faced a major setback his sophomore year, when he developed a muscle-strain injury. He started only four games for the Bears and went scoreless for the entire season, with only two assists.

“I had some injury problems my sophomore and

junior year that I think kind of held me back a little bit,” Hallisey says. “Sophomore year, I was out a couple games. But, you know, when you want to be out there with your teammates, you work to get back.”

Hallisey did indeed work hard during the off-season and established himself back atop the Bears' starting lineup by the time the fall of his junior year came around in 2013.

“There was just this change in him,” Dan says. “He would talk with the coaches, meet with the coaches, do extra training. ... He became rededicated to the diet, rededicated to his fitness.”

Even with all of his extra work and his affirmation of himself as an important role player on both sides of the pitch, Hallisey still managed to record only two goals and three assists his junior year.

Cal's defensive-minded formation left Hallisey with less of an opportunity to put points on the scoreboard.

“I think there was a point where he wasn't scoring a lot and he didn't have a lot of the high numbers,” says Hallisey's mother, Denise. “I think his confidence wasn't there, and so I don't think he was able to relax and play without worrying about things.”

With the start of the 2014 season his senior year, the Haas student's statistics are finally beginning to match up with his expectations.

“I think that he's gone the extra steps from what we can see this year,” Denise says. “He's kind of changed the way he eats: he eats very healthy, doesn't eat anything unhealthy. He works really hard. He's always really worked hard, but I think he's just going the extra step because I think he saw that maybe he had a couple years where he didn't play maybe as well as he wanted.”

Thanks in part to coach Kevin Grimes' new attack-oriented offense, Hallisey and several other Bears have posted numbers significantly higher than the rest of the nation has. After their sixth win against Santa Clara on Sept. 26, the Bears were ranked No. 1 in the country in goal-scoring.

Hallisey also says his performance is needed to fill the large holes left behind from the departure of leading scorers Birnbaum and Christian Dean.

“The biggest thing is the seniors that stepped into their roles last year,” Hallisey says. “It's kind of like, ‘OK, well, now they're gone — now it's our time to step up.’”

Hallisey, a naturally happy and easy-going person, prefers to talk about others before himself.

It's a trait that harkens back to his high-school days, according to his parents. As a senior in high school, Hallisey, easily the top scorer on his team, would sometimes hold back in order to allow his teammates to score more goals.

“He wanted all the kids that didn't play competitive or academy soccer ... to have success and score some goals,” Dan says. “So he ended up setting an assist record his high school senior year because he wanted these other kids to do well.”

From the time he was in high school to today, Hallisey still refuses to pin his recent success solely on himself. As his numbers continue to climb upward, Hallisey continues to thrust the credit to his teammates.

“I think there's no way I would be getting these awards if our team wasn't doing so good,” Hallisey says.

“I think that it definitely says something about our team and where we're headed this year.” ■

