Sometimes you have to lose to win. It’s a lesson the Texas Longhorns have learned all too well this season.

In a painfully familiar scenario, Texas faced SMU at Texas A&M in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. Again the Mustangs upset the Longhorns. Again, the score was 2-1.

Only this time the Longhorns were also knocked out of contention for a berth in the 2002 Women’s College Cup, which is being played at Texas’ Myers Stadium.

Back-to-back first-round NCAA losses might be cause for alarm for other programs, but Coach Chris Petrucelli isn’t hanging his head.

“There’s still a lack of experience within our team,” he says.

After early losses to Stanford and North Carolina, Texas went unbeaten 12 straight games before losing, 2-1, to Texas A&M in their Big 12 regular-season finale. A 2-1 loss to Nebraska followed two games later in the Big 12 semifinals.

“Throughout most of the season we’d been shutting out a lot of teams or only allowing one goal,” says Petrucelli. “It’s hard to win when you have to score three.”

Petrucelli took over as head coach in December 1998, leaving behind an accomplished career at Notre Dame that included a national title in 1995. Arriving in Austin, he was faced with the challenge of revamping a five-year old program that had not accomplished much.

Last year marked the first time the Longhorns had back-to-back, double-digit win seasons, and they reached the NCAA tournament for the first time. This fall, they garnered their highest-ever Soccer America Top 25 ranking (No. 3). Additionally, they have set new team records in all major offensive and defensive categories.

 “[Texas] was a program with a lot of potential, but it obviously had some struggles,” Petrucelli said. “The quality of the players probably wasn’t where it needed to be in order to be a really good team. So our biggest change has been to add better players.”

Two of those better players are juniors Kati McBain and Kylee Wosnuk. The addition of the two California natives proved a major coup — Petrucelli had targeted them as the cornerstone from which to forge the future of Texas soccer.

“We were pretty fortunate that they bought into the dream,” he says. “When we got them, a lot of other players went, ‘OK, [Texas is] legitimate.’ ”

Wosnuk is the program’s active scoring leader with 22 goals and 65 points. McBain is the Longhorns’ career assist leader with 29.

“The whole environment of the team has changed since we came in,” McBain said. “People accepted losing. But now the attitude is that we can win, we do have the ability, and we believe that we can win.”

In 2001, Texas landed the country’s No. 3 recruiting class, led by U.S. U-19 star Kelly Wilson, the 2001 Big 12 Freshman of the Year and this year’s Big 12 Player of the Year.

The Longhorns, who graduate only two starters and return the core of their lineup in 2003, will likely get another crack at the NCAA Tournament.

 “[The coaches] have all the confidence in the world in us,” defender Laura Kram said. “They know that we have the potential to be there. We’re going to get there someday, whether it’s tonight, tomorrow, or next year — we’re going to get there.”