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SPORTS

Freshman Venturini takes initiative, keys soccer's drive for another title

By Jennifer Dunlap
Staff Writer



Tisha Venturini

Tisha Venturini is a freshman, and already the superlatives are piling up. "Believe me, I've seen a lot of great ones, and she's up there with the best of them," said women's soccer head coach Anson Dorrance.

He is not the only one who thinks she's incredible. "She'd play for any team in the country, easily," he said.

But don't worry about it going to her head. If someone told Venturini, a midfielder from Modesto, Calif., that she was as good as teammate Kristine Lilly, she'd say, "I'd be flattered. It would be great."

For someone who was the ACC scoring leader in her first season (20 goals and 14 assists), Venturini is unbelievably unassuming.

"She's very quiet and humble," Dorrance said. "If you met her, you'd never believe she was a soccer superstar."

Roommate and teammate Keri Sanchez, another California native, agreed. "Off the field, she's just like every other person," Sanchez said. "She separates soccer from life. She studies, goes out and does what everyone else does."

Venturini explained her humility very simply. "I just don't like to talk much about myself," she said.

As a matter of fact, Dorrance said she was so quiet when he first met her that he did not think she was interested in attending UNC.

But Venturini said she did not have a difficult time choosing which college to attend. "Basically, I came here for soccer," she said. "It was easy to make my choice after I came on a recruiting trip here."

Dorrance said Venturini was a popular member of his team. "She's very quiet around me," he said. "But I think with her teammates, she's very outgoing and verbal."

Said Sanchez: "She's a kiddier around people she knows."

And, believe it or not, all the hype about Venturini's talent does not make her uncomfortable. She takes it all in stride. "I don't feel any pressure," she said. "Anson doesn't pressure me, and there's no pressure from the team."

It's a good thing she does not feel pressure, because Dorrance said he planned to put her at the helm of the U.S. National Team, which he coaches, as soon as this year's World Cup is over. She was not one of the 18 women who went to China for the World Cup last week, but she will be one of the Tar Heels' big guns in this weekend's NCAA Championships at Fetzer Field.

"I think the transition (to college athletics) was easy for me because I played with the national team this summer," Venturini said.

Dorrance said Venturini was the type of player who made others better. She can cause other teams to cringe when they see her diverse talents.

"She's one of the best headers in the world already," he said. "She can jump over the defense and finish corner kicks like no one I've ever seen."

When she's not scoring goals, Venturini enjoys the normal life of a college freshman.

Though she traveled almost 3,000

miles to play soccer in Chapel Hill, she does not miss home as much as she thought she would. "I'm really busy every minute, so I don't have time to miss home," she said.

Being busy with soccer has helped her manage her time better, she said.

Her parents and her uncle, who are her biggest fans, are a big source of support for Venturini. They have made the trip to Chapel Hill on a few occasions to see her play, she said.

Although she had no trouble going across the country to school, Venturini did have difficulty at first deciding to play only one sport. "Basically, I'm interested in all athletics," she said. "I've played just about every sport."

She played volleyball, softball and soccer in high school, she said. "It was hard to stop the other two altogether and concentrate on just one sport, because I loved them so much," Venturini said.

She started playing soccer when she was 6 years old. She learned how to play from her older brother. "I grew up playing with him," she said. "I went to all his games and practices."

At age 10, Venturini started to play on the local boys' soccer team. "I think that helped a lot," she said.

"When I was growing up all my friends were boys because they were the good athletes," she said. "I was always playing in the yard with my brother and his friends — any sport."

Maybe playing with the boys taught Venturini how to fend for herself on the field. Dorrance said she takes her own initiative to improve her game.

"Everything you ask her to do, you all of a sudden see in her game," he said. "You just have to suggest what you want to happen, and she'll sort of figure out a way to do it on her own."

Judith McCullough: from road racer to blossoming cross country standout

By David Monroe
Staff Writer



Judith McCullough

As an eighth-grader, Judith McCullough ran in a Christmas 10-kilometer race. Her father promised her \$20 if she beat him.

"I had always considered him so fast, so I never thought that was possible," she said.

As it turned out, McCullough not only defeated her father, she kept up with her best friend's father.

But it was not the \$20 that made the race so special for her.

"I think the greatest part was that they gave out mugs to the top 100 women, and I got one of those," she said. "That was a real thrill."

Since that race, McCullough, a sophomore on UNC's cross country team, has come a long way in her running.

Surprisingly, she did not begin running until the eighth grade. She said her parents started her off, and she became even more interested when her younger brother started running.

"I wasn't very athletic, and they would try to convince me to try to come and run on the track with them," she said. "I always got jealous because they got free T-shirts, so I started doing them (running 5Ks)."

McCullough said she began to take running seriously while she was in the 10th grade at Westminister High School in Atlanta. Her times dropped by more than a minute for a 5K, she said.

Two of McCullough's teammates influenced her new attitude toward racing. One of those inspirations was Tracy Stevenson, now a runner for Duke. The other was Tracey Harrell, who runs for Georgia Tech.

One thing these three runners share and that drives McCullough to work even harder is the Georgia connection. "It's kind of like upholding Georgia pride," she said.

Last year, McCullough, a Morehead scholar majoring in Spanish and in psychology, brought her talents to UNC.

Between the end of her freshman year and the end of her sophomore season, McCullough showed great improvement. As a freshman, she ran 3.1 miles in 18:31 and finished 24th in the ACC Cross Country Championships. At this year's conference meet, she ran 17:29 and netted All-ACC honors with a ninth-place finish.

UNC's No. 1 runner the entire 1991 season, McCullough won the Appalachian State Invitational and the North Carolina Intercollegiate Championships. The women's team ended its sea-

son last weekend in the NCAA District III Championship. McCullough placed 14th with a time of 17:55.

McCullough's accomplishments this year surprised her. During her senior year of high school, she was not sure if she was good enough to run in college.

"I never expected, either last year or this year, to win any race," she said.

Several reasons explain McCullough's improvement, but one element stands out — competitiveness.

"I am very competitive," she said. "That's one reason I like to have people in front of me. I run a lot to competition. I'd rather be behind someone and have someone to race with or try to catch up to. If there is someone in front of me, I'll try to catch them. At the level I'm at now, that's a real asset to me."

Not only does McCullough display her competitiveness in races, she also demonstrates a strong work ethic in practice.

"When I am at practice, I put all my energy into that and try my best," she said.

UNC assistant coach Andrew Alden described McCullough as a hard worker and a leader.

"She sets a really strong example in both races and in workouts," Alden said. "She is really the workout leader in virtually every workout that we do. She doesn't mind taking that load."

Teammates echoed Alden's remarks.

"She's always pushing, always trying to do her best in practice," freshman Kelly Donahoe said. "It makes us just want to work a little harder."

McCullough said her improvement could also be attributed to the intense practices at the collegiate level. In high school, McCullough did not do the speed work, distance repeats or tempo runs that she has done at UNC, she said.

McCullough named her coaches as a final reason for her improvement. She said she had very good coaches in high school and in college. She said Paul Koshevas, her high school coach, and Alden talked to her, gave her advice and offered her encouragement.

McCullough said she wants to qualify for the nationals and finish in the ACC's top five before she graduates.

In the past seven years, McCullough has gone from being a road racer to being one of the best racers in the ACC.

"I really enjoy running because it has shown me I do have athletic talent," she said. "The feeling after a race is thrilling, too. You know you have given all you can, and you're rewarded for it by your time or your place."

As McCullough said this, her eyes lit up, and she recalled another time when competition drove her to do her best.

As a senior in high school, McCullough won the state cross country race and her team won the state championship. That same day, she won the trophy for being the best performer out of all Georgia divisions.

"That was exciting because there was another girl, who now runs at Florida, who ran in the division above me," McCullough said. "She is a really, really good runner. However, on that day, my time was better than hers, which was amazing because I had never come within a minute of her times before."

If McCullough maintains her intense level of competition, she will be a force to contend with in the coming years.

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THE Daily Crossword by Jane Davis

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