Creative Expression Drives Senior Lauren Papalia in Soccer and Studies

BY JO KOELLET

It was one who would argue that on the grassy fields of collegiate soccer, Lauren Papalia, CC '02, is a force. Even the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) will likely notice her next year when it begins looking to draft new players. And they should. Her leadership as co-captain this season helped Columbia (GWU 1-0) finish in the nation's top five in goals and five assists. At the end of the season, she was named to the Buzz Freshman All American.

Papalia spent her high school career with a change of coaching staff, a recruiting process and a move to the same league she did her freshman year with her team to a championship. Rather than a change of coaching staff, the recruiting process and a move to the same league, Lauren chose George Washington University in the nation's capital where she stepped into the starting lineup and helped lead her team to a championship Atlantic-10 game against U-Mass (who narrowly beat GWU 1-0). She finished her first collegiate season with five goals and two assists.

As the next year ended with a change of coaching staff, Papalia began to feel disillusioned. She lost her passion for soccer and school. Rather than going through the motions of academia, she felt the right thing to do was to take a break. She traveled to Spain and Portugal with some surfer friends and eventually returned to Boston with a little more wisdom and perspective.

"The best thing I could have done personally was to take a year off. Papalia says. The time exploring the beauty of Europe’s countryside and learning to surf off Spain’s shores with her friends gave her a new appreciation for the opportunities she'd been given.

Back in Boston, she got an office job at Harvard, saved some money and by the end of her year off, decided she was ready to return both to the classroom and the soccer field. Papalia remembered McCarthy from when he initially tried to recruit her, and called him.

"Lauren's time off created a little more appetite in her for the game," McCarthy said. "We were excited to have her with us because she’s constantly refining her skills, constantly working her craft. Her ability to stay calm in the tumult of the season is something her teammates have absorbed."

The feeling was mutual. For Papalia, playing on the team and being at Columbia has been almost surreal. "To be in New York City, at a place like Columbia, and playing soccer with this group, well, it’s a little like a fairy tale. Students sometimes think it’s a lot of pressure being here, but they don’t have to be here at all," Papalia suggests. "I think it’s a privilege. It’s forced me to grow up a lot." The "growing up" process has included Papalia’s discovery of writers like Jeannette Winterson, Tom Robbins, Flannery O'Connor and James Baldwin. It’s also meant learning to juggle Shakespeare, non-fiction workshops, and world literature classes with soccer practice, personal writing and family in order to maintain her 3.6 GPA and a consistent spot on the Dean’s list. Still, she sees an easy correlation between each commitment since "the (soccer) field’s got a lot of space to cover and no set plays. It mirrors literature and good writing because there’s no formulas or equations. The only way to get better at it is by playing."

And so, Lauren Papalia plays: as a leader on the soccer field, in the classroom, and with her own pursuit of creative expression. Where will she be ten years from now when she returns to compete in Columbia’s alumni game? McCarthy won’t be surprised to see her former co-captain playing "professional soccer, traveling abroad, and carrying for me an autographed copy of her published short stories."

Papalia smiles at the thought. "I’d be happy taking any kind of job as long as I have time to myself and to write. Maybe I’ll freelance, teach, write a screenplay or travel the country. Maybe I’ll play for the WUSA. Who knows? I never thought I’d be at an Ivy League school at all," she says. "Columbia has given me a little bit of everything and I don’t know if I’ll get another chance in my life to have so much."

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