



Youthful Wickett brings vast life experience to Green Knight girls' soccer

By Adam Michael Times Sports Writer
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ANNIE WICKETT FAIRFIELD GIRLS' SOCCER

When the Fairfield girls' soccer team gathered in the spring to meet their new coach, they were taken aback by her soft-spoken nature. After three years playing under the candid and animated Phomma Phanhthy, Annie Wickett's demeanor was a change of pace.

"She seemed a bit nervous, which I found cool," Fairfield rising senior Nora Clarke said. "Normally the players are the ones who are nervous to meet the new coach."

When they listened to what the 26-year-old Wickett had to say, their eyes grew wide.

Wickett is a former Division I soccer player at the University of Connecticut. She's rubbed elbows with World Cup Champs like Alex Morgan while playing for the D.C. United reserves after college and she'd still be playing overseas if not for a stroke that put an abrupt end to her playing career.

"We were all concerned that it happened not all that long ago, but it seems like she's made a full recovery and can do anything," Clarke said. "It seems like she could play alongside us. We know she'll do a good job leading us going into the future."

The Frederick native tasked with guiding the Green Knights in their quest for a fourth straight YAIAA-3 championship and a shot at a PIAA Class 1A championship — last achieved in 2016 — has a strong track record as a player. All she has to do is prove that she's capable of completing the same list of accomplishments as a first-time coach.

Wickett feels up to the challenge, especially after spending the last five weeks or so running optional practices with her squad.

"It's a great group of girls. With my experience, I was looking forward to getting in the mix and getting back out there." Wickett said. "I can't play anymore, for the most part, so I've really wanted to get into coaching."

BUILDING A RESUME

As a child, Wickett first realized she was ahead of her peers when she could play competitively with the boys and the trend continued through middle school. Her success on the big stage started early, when her Tuscarora High School team won a 3A state championship in Maryland during her junior year. The following season, they exited in the state semifinals.

Wickett was recruited to play at Eastern Kentucky University. In her first year, she played keeper and allowed only 1.24 goals per game. Wickett knew she could boost her resume for the pros by playing in the field. She got that opportunity when she transferred to the University of Connecticut. She shined most in her senior year at UConn, playing all but 23 minutes and totalling more than 2,000 minutes overall. Her team went 19-4 and made the Sweet 16. For her efforts at left back, she was rated the 16th best player in the American Athletic Conference that year.

After graduation, Wickett spent some time with the Boston Breakers and Washington Spirit reserves. Both clubs are members of the women's premier soccer league, a fact that impressed her new team.

"It's nice to know that she was a versatile player and it's not just one area she'll be focusing on," Clarke said. "Everyone gets to work with her and we look forward to the knowledge she'll give us."

A CAREER HALTED

Wickett thought she'd hit it big when she signed to play with FCU Olimpia Cluj out of Romania following her premier league stint. Only a week into her stay, she began to feel wobbly during an afternoon practice.

"I'd never been dizzy before in my life," she said.

At first she wrote it off. She was simply having a rough adjustment to a new country with a different climate and diet, she thought. During a rehabilitation session in the pool she became violently ill but continued to fight through it.

The true scare began that evening. As she got ready for bed, all sensation left the right side of her body. She grabbed the wall with her left arm and hopped to the bed where her roommate found her.

By the time the ambulance arrived, Wickett could no longer speak.

"I couldn't even tell my roommate where to find my passport in my bag," she said. "But I remember everything."

The first hospital visit left the doctors at a loss for what caused the stroke, Wickett said. She was rushed to another hospital, where she was diagnosed with a blood clot on her brain stem. However, the staff was incapable of treating it.

Flown to a third hospital, she finally underwent surgery. She remained in Romanian rehabilitation clinics for six weeks before she could return home.

"You don't expect anything like that that young," she said.

Wickett continued to rehab at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore because she still required assistance with most basic functions. The recovery was slow, but by Christmas she was mostly self-reliant. She'd found a job and earned coaching opportunities working with camps in Frederick.

"I've gotten almost everything back," she said. "My writing is a little slower and my balance isn't perfect. I haven't tried ice skating, snowboarding or skateboarding yet."

A new, keen awareness of her mortality has made her appreciate life, but also made her a little more mindful of potential dangers. Wickett is free of restrictions regarding diet and exercise, but has been tentative about returning to her playing career.

“Clots on the brain stem most times end in death,” she said. “I know I’m lucky in general to be 99 percent recovered. I’m beyond thankful to be back in soccer. But I was that close once, I don’t need to risk anything like that again.”

X’S AND O’S

Wickett knows her specific malady was at best a fluke and at worst a genetic abnormality unrelated to soccer, so it won’t hinder her coaching style. She’ll still put the kids through the workouts that turned her into a superior athlete.

Still in the process of evaluating her team, Wickett isn’t certain what style of play they will employ. A defender at heart, she hopes to help the Green Knights tighten up an already strong backfield.

“I’m very excited for that,” said Fairfield middle back Milly Heinbaugh. “I’m really excited to learn new things from her on the defense. She’s very technical. We’re doing a lot of new things that we’ve never done before. It’s a big advantage.”

For a little more than a month, Wickett has met with players during voluntary practice and conditioning sessions a few times a week. She’s gotten to know the returning players, including leading scorers Anabelle Anderson, Zoey Logue and Clarke, midfield talents Nai Roberts, Rio and Honey Strosnider, defenders Heinbaugh and Liv Cliber, and goalie Haley Bolin. Only two starters from last year’s team, midfielder Emma Snyder and defender Maya Callenbach graduated. The Green Knights had a strong bench last year, and the incoming freshman class looks promising, Wickett said.

“I was impressed with their skill level,” she said. “It reminded me of when I played for Tuscarora. It’s definitely a state championship challenging type of team.”

Wickett knows what the team’s expectations are, but wants to make sure they get a complete high school experience while playing under her watch.

“We want to be challenging for championships, but winning isn’t everything,” she said. “I want to set expectations for how we play and make sure that everyone knows academics are important. Success is about a lot more than winning.”

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