

ACQUIRED TASTE

■ From humble lax beginnings, Boston University star Jill Horka (Westboro, Mass.) now is rubbing shoulders with the game's elite

By Ryan O'Leary

ASK JILL HORKA about her lacrosse beginnings and she can't help but chuckle.

She won't tell you stories about how the sport swept her off her feet. Her first impressions are far from what you'd expect from a player who today stars as a Boston University midfielder.

"The only reason I stayed with it was because my friends were doing it," Horka said. "I wanted to cry every day when I had to go to practice."

Horka (Westboro, Mass.) was a middle-schooler back then, and her decision to stick with her Central Mass Club Lacrosse team and branch away from soccer set her on a path she never saw coming: the path to playing among the best women's lacrosse players in the nation.

Horka's been earning those stripes at BU, where as a sophomore last season she led the team in goals (29), draw controls (46) and caused turnovers (24), while finishing second on the team in groundballs (31). She's the kind of player — and a rare one, at that — who can score the wowing goal one minute and create a momentum-changing turnover the next.

"I think one of the biggest things is she just works hard all over the field," BU senior captain Siobhan McCarthy said. "It doesn't matter what she's doing. She's always going 110 percent."

That effort earned her an invitation to Georgetown University in June to compete in an 88-player tryout for the 2014-15 U.S. Women's National Team. Horka wasn't about to pass up the experience, even if she felt that making the 39-player

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cut was a long shot. She had some familiar faces around her, too, with former BU star Danielle Etrasco in the tryout pool and current BU head coach Liz Robertshaw returning to the national team as an assistant.

Horka was not among the players who made the final cut. Her coach sees the kind of natural style and athleticism in her game to reach that level one day. She just saw it only in spurts at Georgetown.

"There were times when she was timid, and there were times when I think she was unsure of herself playing against the best players in the world," Robertshaw said. "But to give credit to everyone else around her, she wasn't at that level yet. It's my job to help her get to that level and feel confident in her game."

There was a time, back in Horka's youth years, when playing lacrosse felt more like a chore. Coming up through middle school, she was more of an all-

around athlete who was willing to try anything. She loved playing soccer and also ran track. Lacrosse never came into the picture until a friend of the family started a youth team in her hometown.

Horka had some natural talent, even if she couldn't see it right away. The connection to her town team soon opened doors to Central Mass Club Lacrosse, where she would later refine the skills that helped Westborough High School capture three district titles in her four

varsity seasons.

"I went to all these big tournaments with my club team and fell in love with all my club friends," Horka said, "and just started to really love the game. And I started getting better at it, too. So I think that definitely made me like it a lot more."

Horka made varsity as a freshman at Westborough. She had never imagined the idea of playing in college, but that possibility came into view during her sophomore year.

The first school to contact her was Boston College. Her initial visit to Chestnut Hill was impactful. She loved it. She loved the layout of the campus — and she loved the idea that a Division 1 school like BC was interested in her.

But she took her family's advice to keep her options open. She received considerable interest from the University of Delaware and could picture that as a landing spot. The list also included Boston University, which opened at a distant third.

"I remember before these big camps, my mom was having me send out all these DVDs and stuff to a bunch of different colleges before a big tournament," Horka said. "She wrote one to BU and I made her rip it up and throw it away because I was like, 'I'm definitely not going to BU. I hate it.'"

Sound familiar?

The campus felt a bit different at BU, more of a city feel than the big, glamorous campus made for a brochure cover. But it was the team that won Horka over. She felt a sense of honesty from the coaches and a sense of family from the players, the same kind she cherished at Westborough.

"We clicked really well with her parents," Robertshaw said. "They're fantastic people and they fit right into our BU family. And I think Jill started to feel that comfort level. And I think the people around her started to see something great."

Horka is still unlocking that potential. She's spent the offseason working on increasing her shooting percentage — she wants 60 percent to be on net — and decreasing her fouls, which at times have been troublesome given her hard-checking style.

She's all about putting in that work, too. Lacrosse may not have been love at first sight, but it's a lifestyle now.

"Two-a-days is one of my favorite times of year, because we just start from scratch, there's no school, it's just lacrosse and everyone comes right back into it and everyone's ready to go," Horka said of the practices that loom Jan. 11. "I think we have a really good team for a great season."

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