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Maine South's Pappalardo answers to a higher calling

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Last Modified: Jul 5, 2012 04:58AM

WAUKEGAN — Critics of club soccer who insist players are turning their backs on high school friends and the local community, should consider the emotions Olivia Pappalardo displayed recently.

Pappalardo, a recent Maine South graduate, played last week what might be her final game with Eclipse Select U18, at the season-ending Elite Clubs National League's (ECNL) National Finals in Waukegan.

The squad, which plays a national schedule, went 2-2, including an overtime loss to PDA in the opener and a 3-2 victory over KCFC in the final contest.

Pappalardo, who has signed to play at University of Colorado in the fall, is still eligible to participate next summer with the Eclipse U19s, but said the tournament felt like the end of an era.

"Definitely, it will never be the same. It has been the last seven years of my life," she said. "I've spent the majority of my time with my team and they are pretty much my family. We love each other. We have gotten so close. It's sad to realize that we won't be with each other anymore. We've made so many sacrifices for each other and we know everything about each other."

Pappalardo began playing exclusively for Eclipse after a standout freshman season at Maine South. Clubs in the ECNL spend the year traveling to weekend matches around the country and competing against other elite teams.

"I feel like it's a closer bond with your club team than with high school (teammates)," Pappalardo said. "You're only with your high school team for the season, but club is all year-round, you're always with them."

An attacking central midfielder, Pappalardo was rated one of the best 100 high school players in the country by TopDrawerSoccer.com and also was one of the nation's top recruits according to ESPN.

"(Pappalardo) just has this burst of speed where she can go on 50-yard runs with the ball from the half line and beat people," said Eclipse teammate Carly Manso (Vernon Hills), who will join Pappalardo at Colorado. "With her speed and energy, she can change the game, and dictate the pace of the game."

"She's the captain of our team and a lot of girls relied on her to keep the team going."

Pappalardo chose Colorado over Northwestern, Penn State and Penn. She verbally committed last year, then was surprised when head coach Bill Hampen resigned after the 2011 season

But new Colorado coach Danny Sanchez watched Pappalardo play at a tournament in Florida, and soon made it clear he still wanted the Niles native in black-and-gold.

“I actually was nervous because my commitment was only a verbal and anything could have happened,” said Pappalardo. “With the new coach coming to watch me play, I felt like I was being re-recruited, and I thought I was done with that.

“But (Sanchez) said he liked how I played and was happy that I was part of the class. He seemed super nice and I was still excited about going there.”

Colorado’s move last year to the Pac-12 from the Big 12 means the schedule now includes trips to places like Los Angeles, Palo Alto, Calif., Seattle and Tempe, Ariz., instead of out-of-the-way burgs like Lawrence, Kan., College Station, Texas, and Stillwater, Okla.

The Buffaloes paid a price for taking a step up in class, finishing 4-13-2 (1-9-1) last year.

Pappalardo, who will have a scholarship, said she looks forward to playing some of the country’s top teams, visiting some exciting locations and helping to build the Colorado program from the ground floor.

“It was a selling point to go play in California and the West Coast. That sounded awesome,” she said. “(Colorado) didn’t do well last year, but I think year-by-year they will get better and really compete with the Stanfords and UCLAs. Another thing is that I’m looking forward to being part of building the program to another level, to be at that Stanford level. I’m excited about that.”

One advantage Colorado does have over its Pac-12 rivals is that its home games are played at altitude. Pappalardo played a tournament in Denver last year and said she did have trouble breathing.

In order to help acclimate Pappalardo, she was asked to spend the summer training in Boulder ahead of the team’s Aug. 17 season opener against Northern Colorado. She’ll also enroll in summer school.

That means Pappalardo will be leaving for school this Sunday, which will allow only about a week of true summer vacation.

“It’s what I signed up for, so it’s not a surprise. I knew it was going to happen,” she said.

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