



Former CU standout Wenino making dream come true

Former CU soccer standout earns spot in WPS with Chicago

By Joshua Lindenstein
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BOULDER, Colo. — Michelle Wenino was never afraid to dream big when it came to playing soccer.

During a recruiting visit while in high school, she told Colorado soccer coach Bill Hempen that she wanted to play professionally someday and earn a spot on the U.S. national team.

Nevermind that there wasn't even a women's pro league in the United States at the time -- or that she ended up being merely a walk-on when she first arrived at CU.

Wenino believed in herself and, for the past several weeks, she has been making half of that dream come true.

Wenino earned a spot on the Chicago Red Stars' roster five weeks ago and has been loving life as a pro - even if she hasn't seen game action yet and has been spending as much time completing her degree as practicing soccer.

"It's been quite a rollercoaster ride for me," Wenino said in a recent phone interview with the Camera. "But it's awesome. It's good to be here. Just being able to play and do what I love for a living was really what I wanted to do."

Call it perfect timing.

The seven-team WPS debuted on March 29 -- six years after the old WUSA women's pro league folded three seasons in. Until a couple of years ago when she heard plans for the WPS were in the works, Wenino thought she'd have to go overseas to get a taste of playing for a living.

But by the time she'd played her final season for the Buffs last fall, a pro career seemed as real a possibility as ever.

After attending the WPS player combine in California in December, Wenino was passed over in the draft. But a call on her behalf by Hempen got Wenino a tryout with the Red Stars, and she earned one of 22 spots on the team.

Each team in the league is allowed to have an 18-woman active roster. Wenino is one of the Red Stars' four allotted developmental players, meaning she doesn't yet travel to away games or suit up at home unless there's an injury to an active player.

Of course, if the path she traveled at CU is any indication, Wenino won't be watching from the sidelines for long. The lanky defender from Smoky Hill High School earned a starting spot as a freshman for the Buffs and eventually blossomed into the Big 12's co-defensive player of the year by last fall.

WPS player contracts aren't guaranteed until July 1, meaning Wenino could still earn a spot on the 18-woman roster.

Wenino has no illusions about the path to playing time coming easily.

Each WPS team has three U.S. national team members and five international players, including many of the best in the world.

"It's awesome," said Wenino, who said she still might try to play overseas during the WPS offseason to keep gaining experience. "I love going up against them. You get to see where you're at and see what you need to do to get to that level. It's hard watching the game and not traveling, but it just makes you want to work better and play better. I've always started off at the bottom and I really don't mind it."

WPS teams have \$565,000 salary caps with which to work, with the average player making about \$32,000. Developmental players, however, make much less than that -- not that Wenino minds. She shares an apartment owned by the Red Stars' owner with three other players on the team, and this is the first steady paycheck she's ever had. And most of her free time these days is spent doing online coursework toward her finance degree, which she hopes to complete within a year.

"I don't care how much I make as long as I'm playing soccer," Wenino said.

Wenino knows how fortunate she is to be getting in on the ground level of the new league.

Players like former CU stars Fran and Laura Munnely and Katie Griffin never had such an opportunity to pursue when they used up their college eligibility.

"I think everything just kind of fell into place for me," Wenino said. "I know for sure Fran and Laura could have played in this league. I think the timing was just on my side. It's a humbling experience because of that."

Wenino's former CU teammate, Nikki Marshall, who will be a senior for the Buffs in the fall figures to be Colorado's next solid professional candidate.

"It just adds a level of excitement for the program," Hempen said.

Indeed, Wenino's example is already influencing area youngsters, especially since she, like Marshall, grew up playing in Colorado.

Fairview High star forward Annie Stuller, a junior who has already verbally committed to the Buffs, said she and her family were thrilled when Wenino made the Red Stars roster.

"My dream is obviously to play pro soccer, but I know I have to work a lot harder and have a lot to improve," Stuller said. "But it's great to watch them come up through the Colorado system and go play pro soccer. It gives me hope."

And hope is where it all started for Wenino.



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