

In a man's world of football, Hopewell's Goss fits right in at Kent State

By Lauren Kirschman

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It's not unusual to find April Goss on Dix Stadium's field after the rest of Kent State's players have left practice. She tends to linger, taking advantage of the opportunity to get in some extra work on her kicking. Goss has always been this way: Dedicated, determined. She needed to be, just to convince her dad to let her play football.

On this day, she's practicing under the watchful eye of Kent State punter Andrew Horning. A fifth-year senior, he's known Goss, a Hopewell graduate, since she earned a walk-on spot in the spring of her freshman year three years ago. Horning, a takeout box filled with his dinner in one hand, paid close attention to Goss's footwork as he mock complained, saying she's like having a little sister around all of the time.

He teases, but he's been willing to help her from the beginning of her career. As soon as Horning heard the Golden Flashes would be getting a female teammate, he decided he wouldn't treat her any differently. Nobody on the team has. They don't take it easy on her, either. Goss won't allow it.

"She's shown a lot of progress in the past couple of years," Horning said. "Especially this year I've seen a lot of improvement. ... She's taking everything I'm saying and actually applying it." He pauses and glances over to see if she's listening. "For the most part."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me," Goss said as she readied another football. There was plenty of similar banter as Goss continued her post-practice work in the late afternoon sun. It's not hard to see why she also likens the relationship with her teammates to that of siblings. That's exactly how they act. There's plenty of joking and even some bickering, but Horning still stopped to offer advice as he was leaving the stadium.

It's a far cry from the beginning of Goss's football career. Before she was officially named a walk-on, she would practice as the team cleared out.

"Some of them saw me kick but never talked to me," she said, "which was good because they scared me."

They aren't so scary anymore. In fact, Goss has a hard time picturing her college life without Kent State football. She has more than 100 older brothers, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

'I got heart for the game'

When Goss first told her dad, Craig, that she wanted to play football, he immediately said no. Goss played soccer for 10 years, but had always loved football. During her sophomore year of high school, she decided she wanted to switch sports. It took a couple of months for Craig to agree.

"I was a little apprehensive," he said. "It's a contact sport. Knowing how physical it is, anything can go wrong and then mentally, you hope the boys wouldn't treat her bad. I was kind of against it, but she was persistent."

It's easy to see why he was concerned. Goss is 5-foot-6 and weighed just 120 pounds when she started at Kent State. Even now that she proudly put on 15 pounds of muscle, she's still dwarfed by her teammates. But that didn't stop her then, and it's not stopping her now.

Once he relented, Craig — who punted for his high school team — showed her everything he could. When he got off work early, he would drive her to go practice until April got her license. She could've played both soccer and football, but she wanted to dedicate herself to one sport, so she left soccer behind. Unlike when she joined Kent State's team, she knew most of the players when her football career began at Hopewell. The initial nerves, though, were the same.

"I just went off to the side and kicked, and they didn't know what was going on," she said. "Eventually, they came around. Not that they were mean or anything, they just kind of kept their distance at first."

When her high school career came to a close, Goss wasn't ready to let the sport go. She emailed the Kent State football office, letting them know she was interested in walking on.

On the first day of practice, she went to the stadium to fill out a walk-on form and got her official tryout during spring ball. Once she was offered a spot, she became one of a handful of women to join a Division I football team.

"She went for it," Craig said. "She practiced everyday. Even at home in the off-season, she'd go out there everyday. She's pretty determined. She said, 'I got heart for the game.' I said, 'You need more than heart. You need skill.'"

As it turns out, she has plenty of that, too.

'If our guys were as tough as her, we'd be 11-0'

When Kent State special teams coach Dave McMichael first met Goss, he thought she was "one of the nicest, sweet people" he'd ever encountered.

"If I had a daughter," he said, "I'd want her to be like April."

He never expected her to be so tough.

"She does everything we ask of her teammates," he said. "She's gained the team's respect with her toughness. If our guys were as tough as her, we'd be 11-0."

Goss refuses to be treated differently, or looked at as anything other than just another player. And what she appreciates the most about her teammates is that they understand that. They don't let her slip.

"If she's not listening to me, I'll get in her face," Horning said. "If she's not doing well, then I'll tell her what she's not doing well. And the same for me. If I'm having a bad day, she'll come up to me and tell me what I'm doing wrong, and I'll take the criticism."

Every year brings more demands for Goss, and, every year, she's willing to accept them. Her role feels small sometimes, and she admits that. But it can be big. That's how she chooses to look at it. That's why she puts in extra time, warming up early, staying late, going with Horning

to the field house in the off-season for extra practice. She's never appeared in a game, but she kicked a game-winning extra point in the 2014 spring game and the game-winning field goal in a spring kick scrimmage.

Winter workouts, though, are her time to shine. While she can't compare to her teammates in physical strength, she makes up for it with mental toughness. Kicking, she said, is more mental than it is physical. You're only as good as your last kick.

"She fights through. She never quits," McMichael said. "We do some hard things in winter conditioning. She does all the conditioning. She doesn't want a break because she's a girl. She's going to do what we ask of the young me on the team."

'If someone out there messed with her, they'd be in trouble'

There are things Goss misses about soccer. Some of her teammates have trouble believing it, but she was much more physical in her previous sport. With opponents more her size, she could give them a little push. She was on the field constantly during soccer, too. In football, she spends most of her time on the sideline.

The biggest transition, though, was moving from a team of all girls to a team of all boys. It's been so long since Goss played with girls that she almost forgets what it feels like, but what she misses the most is being with her teammates all the time.

She's left out of the locker room chemistry with the football team, and most of her teammates live together. But, at the same time, she admits the distance can be good. She gets a break. And when she needs a girl fix, she has her roommates.

"The biggest thing is taking things personally," she said with a laugh. "(The team) will joke. With them, they will say mean things to each other, but they'll get over it.

"When I first got here, I was like, 'That's kind of mean,' and I would remember it the next day. But I'm getting better. I'm learning not to take things personally and just give it right back."

In the end, though, Goss doesn't regret leaving her soccer career behind. She loves football. And while there was a time when she was surrounded by 100 male teammates and didn't know a single name, she now calls them family.

“The team loves her,” McMichael said. “I know one thing: if someone out there messed around with her, they’d be in trouble.”