



ESPN.com: NCAA

[\[Print without images\]](#)

Thursday, December 1, 2011

One goal left for Stanford seniors

By Graham Hays
ESPN.com

KENNESAW, Ga. -- It takes a lot of wins to reach a place where a single loss could define a legacy.

At some point this weekend a camera will capture the lasting legacy of Stanford seniors Camille Levin, Teresa Noyola, Lindsay Taylor and Kristy Zurmuhlen. It will capture a moment of celebration for one of the most successful classes in the history of women's college soccer -- perhaps the best ever that didn't matriculate at the University of North Carolina.

Or it will capture a moment of all-too-familiar despair for the greatest asterisk in the annals of the sport.

Stanford's seniors are 91-1-4 in their careers in games leading up to the College Cup. They're 2-3-0 on the final weekend, losing back-to-back championship games against North Carolina and Notre Dame, respectively, the past two seasons. That's one loss in four seasons outside the championship stage, and that was a 1-0 defeat on the road at UCLA when they were freshmen. They never lost at home, going 53-0-1. Entering Friday's semifinal against Florida State, they have outscored opponents 294-44 across all games.

They played alongside great players, spent two seasons with 2009 Hermann Trophy winner Kelley O'Hara and three seasons with 2010 Hermann Trophy winner Christen Press. They welcomed new faces who will follow in their All-American footsteps, players such as sophomore goalkeeper Emily Oliver and freshman forward Chioma Ubogagu.

But only that quartet was around for all four trips to the College Cup, and even their coach isn't downplaying the obvious importance of one final chance at a championship.

It's about 30 miles from Kennesaw Soccer Stadium to Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves, a team whose championship stumbles made it a familiar symbol of being just good enough to be remembered for not being great.

Women's College Cup

Follow ESPN.com's coverage of the NCAA women's College Cup.

- [Duke-WF](#) »
- [Stanford-FSU](#) »
- [Bracket](#) | [Schedule, results](#)

"They're tremendous people, first and foremost, fantastic soccer players," Stanford coach Paul Ratcliffe said of his seniors. "And they've meant a lot to this program; they've had so much success through their four years. My hope, though, is that they do cap off their career with a national championship because I think that's ultimately all our goal."

When the Cardinal advanced to the College Cup in 2008, the program's first appearance in 15 years and its first under Ratcliffe, they were a young team whose collective identity was just taking shape. By the following season it was O'Hara's moment, her 26 goals and combative edge fueling a run that fizzled out on a

cold, windy day against North Carolina, when that fury got the best of her and earned her a red card in the closing minutes. It was Press' turn last season, her 26 goals and cheery self-assuredness leading a team that seemed sure it would win it all, right up to the point when Notre Dame plucked away the trophy with a second-half goal.

What was left wasn't one individual to pick up the pieces. To be sure, it's not a class short on talent. As Florida State coach Mark Krikorian said Thursday, Noyola may be the best "No. 10," or central midfielder, in the country. Levin is as good an outside back as the college game has to offer, with the versatility to play in the midfield or even up top when needed. And all Taylor has done since she arrived on campus is score goals, 20 this season, even if she chuckled and demurred Thursday at the notion she had picked up the torch from O'Hara and Press.

Four years of work would pay off if we get this national championship this weekend. But for me, so much of the great experiences I've had at Stanford would be with this team. So I'm going to take away so much regardless.

--Stanford senior Kristy Zurmuhlen

But from the start, perhaps because they've been the supporting cast for such high-profile players, the four seniors who remain from a class that began with seven operated as a collective.

"We have so many different personalities, come from so many different places," Levin said of a quartet that still lives in the same apartment complex. "Obviously, through time we've gotten closer and closer and know smaller and smaller details about each other. But from the start, we were a close group. ... Through the years, we've just grown closer and closer, but from the start, we all meshed together."

In fact, if the classes before them were defined by their stars, this group that is more than the sum of its considerable parts might be defined by its least heralded member. The product of a town of about 600 people in rural New Hampshire, whose high school fell victim to pranks involving the cows used by its agriculture program, Zurmuhlen barely played at all her first two seasons. She had been the New Hampshire Player of the Year in high school, but it's a bit of a jump between that stage and the Pac-12 or College Cup.

She doesn't have Noyola's touch or Taylor's finishing touch. Just ask her. She'll tell you. But she does bring a certain Granite State sensibility to a team that stresses the beautiful game, a willingness to do anything and go through anyone to help her team keep the ball. After totaling one goal, one assist and no starts in her first three seasons, she's started 23 games this season and totaled five goals and four assists, including the opening goal in a 2-1 quarterfinal win against Oklahoma State.

"I've admired how hard she's worked over the course of her time here, every day, regardless of the situation," Levin said. "She's such a great player. And she really is a role model in that sense and has been so great for our team."

It's easy to look back at the semifinal loss in 2008 and the championship losses the past two seasons and see a team that played a little nervously or seemed a touch too tentative against big, physical teams instead of its usual creative, assertive self. Soccer is a funny old game, as the saying goes, and it's just as likely the Cardinal didn't get the breaks in largely even games. But if there is one thing the disappointment of the past three seasons taught the Cardinal, it's that if you're going to go out, go out on your own terms.

"I can say for myself, just making sure that I'm enjoying every moment and really living the moment and play in the moment," Noyola said. "Because that's what it really takes in the biggest games to come through and perform. From my previous Final Fours, I'd say that's one thing that I've learned from."

Savor the moment. It's one of Stanford's charms that you can show up to watch one of the nation's best soccer programs practice, see more than a dozen bikes scattered around the grass and imagine for a moment that you're watching nothing more serious than a pickup game out of some Rockwell painting. When they arrived on campus for the start of preseason training as freshmen, Levin and Noyola, with their moms in tow, quickly surmised bicycles were sorely lacking from their supplies.

"We went across the street, we drove over there, and we bought bikes -- our parents made us get helmets," Levin recalled. "My mom and [Noyola's] mom watched us bike back onto campus. We were just laughing."

Not long ago, Noyola unearthed a photo one of their moms took that day, a shot of the two of them on their bikes, riding away from the camera toward all that awaited in the years to come.

So, yes, one picture this weekend will define their legacy. But there are a whole lot of pictures, beginning with that one of Levin and Noyola, that went into getting them to this point.

"It would be like a dream," Zurmuhlen said of closing out their careers with a championship. "Four years of work would pay off if we get this national championship this weekend. But for me, so much of the great experiences I've had at Stanford would be with this team. So I'm going to take away so much regardless.

"But obviously, we want to top this off."

Graham Hays covers women's college soccer and softball for ESPN.com. Email him at Graham.Hays@espn.com. Follow him on Twitter: [@grahamhays](https://twitter.com/grahamhays).

Follow ESPN.com's college sports coverage on Twitter [@ESPN_College](https://twitter.com/ESPN_College) and on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/ESPNCollege).
