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THE OLYMPIC CLUB
OC FIELD HOCKEY WINS
SECOND NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

OC FIELD HOCKEY WINS SECOND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

by Christine U'Ren, photos by James Beaver/Flat Tail Photography

When The Olympic Club women's field hockey team arrived in Delaware on July 16, for the fifth annual United States Field Hockey League (USFHL) Adult National Club Championship, they immediately knew their job was going to be tough. They were assigned Pool 1, which meant they would play some of the most accomplished teams in the tournament. But despite the long trek across the country to Rullo Stadium on the University of Delaware campus, the Winged "O" arrived ready for battle.

"We started off strong in our first match against the Miami Surf," remembered commissioner and center midfielder Nicole Ng. "Both teams had chances to score, but we were able to put the ball into the net twice to win the match 2–0. In the

Savannah DeVarney founded the OC field hockey team in 2015 and helped build it into the top-caliber program it is today.



Janaye Sakkas, a new member of the OC women's field hockey team, was an indispensable part of their 2022 National Club Championship win.

second match against the Strikers (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), we had a little bit of a slower start and were actually down 0–2, but thanks to two goals by Janaye Sakkas and one by Brynn Creeth, we were able to pull off a well-deserved win. Winning 3–2 when we were 0–2 at halftime was a huge confidence boost for the team."

That boost made a decisive difference in the crossover quarterfinal against Running on Empty (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) of Pool 2 that Saturday afternoon. The OC women considered this matchup more challenging than the other quarterfinal pairings, but Sakkas, Savannah DeVarney (the inaugural OC field hockey commissioner) and Brittany Knouse each brought in a goal for a 3–1 finish.

In the United States, field hockey is centered on the East Coast, and the National Club Championship has always been held there. Because of the travel burden, the OC requested no games on the Friday of the three-day tournament. "We didn't realize it would lead to such a rigorous schedule on Saturday!" said Ng. "We played five games total in two days, three on Saturday, which is extremely demanding. These games were two 25-minute halves in the heat and humidity. There was less downtime for socializing and connecting as a team. We were really focused on preparing, playing and recovering, with little time between competitions."

With the victory over Running on Empty, the OC advanced on Sunday to the semifinals against the Boston Blackouts, "which arguably had the strongest individually skilled players," said defender Lisa Lohre. The Blackouts had scored 11 goals in their two pool games against strong opponents, Big Apple and Baltimore FHA, and they weren't ready to stop. "Although we were up 2–0 at halftime, they came back to tie the game," Lohre said. It all ended in a shootout, in which five players from each team take a one-on-one shot against the opposing goalie, and the OC earned the win.

The final game was a nail-biter all the way to the finish. "We faced Atlanta FHC, which was a tough team to play because they probably had the best structure and good balance between the defense, midfield and forward line," explained Lohre. "We were down 0–1, but Britt scored the equalizer." Once again, it came down to a shootout, and once again, the OC women emerged victorious, winning their second national championship.

"Winning this year felt amazing," Lohre stated. "We were unsure about our chances this year: we lost a few key players due to relocations and career-ending injuries, so we weren't sure if we had the same depth needed to succeed all the way with such a demanding tournament schedule." The team was also short on practice venues, as COVID-19 restrictions and staffing changes reduced the availability of the Astroturf surfaces at Cal and Stanford; the facilities in San Francisco are field turf, which has a much slower surface. "Finally, the level of the other teams at nationals has gotten better every year," added Lohre. "Overcoming all these factors made this win that much sweeter."

You would never guess that the only West Coast women's team to make the national championship, let alone win it — let alone win it twice — has only been a team since 2015. *(For more on the team's history and their first championship win, see the September 2019 issue.)* How do they beat teams that are often more established, with dedicated practice fields and waiting lists for membership?

Elizabeth Hitti, a member of runner-up Atlanta FHC, described the OC's play as "structured and disciplined [field] hockey relying on teamwork."

"Our short corner execution was extremely good at nationals this year," said Ng. "Probably the best it has ever been compared to any tournament prior. We were also able to stay

composed during the most crucial moments, especially in the shootouts."

And of course, the team is strengthened by its standout players. "Janaye had an incredible all-around tournament and was our team's MVP," said Ng. "She is a new member, local to the Bay Area, and we're so proud to have her on the squad." Ng herself was voted to the USFHL Championships All-Star team for the second year in a row, and this year was joined by teammate Tollie Bell.

The OC team is itself something of an all-star collective: the players themselves point out that many of their members can be offensive threats and score goals — six different players scored during nationals.

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

Just a few weeks after the USFHL Nationals, Lohre, who is also the current Athletic Committee Chair, and DeVarney headed to Nottingham, England, as part of the United States over-35 national team for the 2022 World Masters Hockey World Cup. Both players had qualified for the O35 Masters' roster in 2020, but the tournament was postponed a year and then canceled. When 2022 brought the event back to life, the two Olympians once again made the team.

"Putting on the USA jersey for the first time and stepping on the pitch for our first match against South Africa was a total goosebump moment," said Lohre. "There was so much pride in representing this country and competing at the highest level with an incredible group of women from all over the U.S. Beating Germany was definitely a very memorable moment because it was our first victory at the World Cup, and Germany is a field hockey powerhouse. On the flip side, we suffered a heartbreaking end to our match against the Netherlands (who are No. 1 in the world), as they managed to tie the game at literally the last second of the match. The ball crossed the goal line as the buzzer went off to end the game. The team was in shock and we were devastated. Unfortunately, in the end, this tie cost us a chance to play for a medal. But we are so proud of how we responded by beating Italy the next day and defeating Scotland in a very tough match for fifth place."

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— Lisa Lohre

International field hockey comes closer to home each year at the California Cup, which celebrated its 50th tournament in 2022. As Ng pointed out, "Cal Cup is one of the best tournaments in the U.S. for attracting a high caliber of competition. Teams are often comprised of all-star rosters, including international players who compete on their national teams." The event is open to men, women and juniors, and this year, 127 teams competed in 11 divisions. The OC traveled to Moorpark, California, to play in the elite Women's Super Division in the four-day tournament. Fieldhockey.com reported that players from Australia, Canada,



Caroline Beaudoin, who played at Stanford, is one of the most versatile players, with great ability to distribute the ball.

Mexico, the Netherlands and Spain came to compete in the Super Divisions.

"We lost in the semifinals to the Colorado Bears, who ended up winning the tournament," Ng related. "We are looking forward to competing again in 2023, with a focus on getting back out for regular, full-field training on Astroturf ahead of time."

Despite the OC loss, DeVarney's conclusion was, "It was so fun — this team really shines when we play at this level!"

BUILDING BAY AREA FIELD HOCKEY

One reason for The Olympic Club's existence is to provide high-level adult sports competition outside of school and university systems, but the women of OC field hockey still mix it up with local Division I college teams — which is beneficial to both sides, especially in a sport that has a small presence on the West Coast. UC Berkeley, UC Davis, Stanford and the University of the Pacific all scrimmage with the OC squad during their fall preseasons and spring offseasons. These scrimmages are official, and must meet all NCAA requirements.

"In August, we played against Cal and Davis during their preseason," said Ng. "We lost 1–2 vs Davis and won 3–2 against Cal, beating them in overtime. We historically do very well against these college rosters, e.g., we have never lost to Cal during these scrimmages. These matches are also great opportunities to recruit future OC teammates." Current OC players Caroline Beaudoin, formerly of Stanford, and Sakkas, formerly of Cal, both became acquainted with the Winged "O" during college scrimmages.

The Club has also competed against the U.S. Women's National Development Team, which is comprised of athletes in the transitional phase between the U-21 U.S. Women's National Team and the senior team.

A key interest of OC women's field hockey is enlarging the sport. "We worked with the Northern California Field Hockey Association (NCFHA) to develop a new league for competitive club field hockey that plays in a different season than their long-standing social league for all skill levels," explained current league Vice President DeVarney. "Olympic Club teammates, including Kendall Beveridge and I, have served on the NCFHA board to help lead and drive this vision."

"Sav is really helping to restore momentum to pre-pandemic levels," Ng added. "Participation has taken a hit during the last two years." Because of the close contact required between players during games, neither Stanford nor Cal allowed the NCFHA to book their facilities for quite some time. But NCFHA has been running a new weekly league for all levels at Stanford this fall, and in the spring, it will bring back its competitive league, once again allowing the OC to play against other Bay Area teams.

Field hockey is becoming more popular throughout the country. Since its inception in 2017, the USFHL "has grown from what felt like simply an annual tournament into a more sustainable infrastructure for a national adult club structure," said Ng. "They are now working directly with USA Field Hockey, the national governing body, to ensure adult club field hockey continues to thrive."

USFHL's efforts are attracting players in both new regions and in clubs within existing regions. The OC isn't the only club to have added an upstart team. The Boston Blackouts, who met the Olympians in the semifinals at



Lisa Lohre, who played at Cal, is a team captain alongside Nicole Ng. Lohre organizes the defense as the center back.


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nationals this year, were there because they beat out the historically dominant club, the Minutemen, to represent the Boston region. "Texas is a new region that has emerged," Ng explained. "Miami Surf Club has historically struggled to send a full squad, but now has a waitlist of people wanting to play for them and several extremely talented players. Atlanta and Miami used to combine to send a southeast team but now represent their own regions respectively."

In addition, the women of OC field hockey have always had youth development as a goal for the program. "After the past couple of years, it's starting to look more realistic," said Beveridge. "With the success of the Junior lacrosse program, we are kicking off conversations about how to start a program focused on middle schoolers who have an interest in attending one of the many high schools that now offer field hockey." Several OC team members have coaching experience: Ng is the longtime head coach at St. Francis High School in Mountain View; Beveridge coaches at San Francisco University High School (and has started field hockey programs at several Boys & Girls Club locations in San Francisco); and Caitlin Beatty and DeVarney are former Saint Ignatius coaches.

The pioneering OC field hockey team was the first in the United States to be supported by an athletic club. They created their own Bay Area competitive league, and all along the way found opportunities to play that would not only strengthen their own gameplay and camaraderie, but also strengthen younger players. True to their team origins, the women of OC field hockey aren't waiting for the world to catch up with them; they're moving forward and bringing the world along. Congratulations to the team on their second nationals win, and their success in increasing athletic opportunities and training for talented players, in the spirit of The Olympic Club. ■

