OLYMPIAN

VOL. 112 | NO. 11
NOVEMBER 2024



OC FIELD HOCKEY EARNS THIRD NATIONAL TITLE

OC FIELD HOCKEY EARNS THIRD NATIONAL TITLE

by Christine U'Ren, photos by Amaan Rashid

Olympic Club field hockey has already made history, winning the United States Field Hockey League (USFHL) Adult National Club Championship in 2019 and 2022, the only West Coast team at the time to even make the national tournament. Now the Winged "O" has become



Paulina Lee pulls right to eliminate Greenwich's defender.



Brittany Knouse sweeps the ball into OC's offensive circle for an opportunity at goal.

the first team since the tournament was founded to win the title three times.

"For me personally, winning this championship felt especially meaningful, not only because it marked our third title in tournament history, but that it happened just before our 10th anniversary as an OC team," founding member Savannah DeVarney said. "What excites me most is that the legacy our team has built ensures that future generations of field hockey players in San Francisco will have the opportunity to step into this tradition and contribute to the sport for years to come."

The OC is well-positioned to take advantage as field hockey grows more popular in California. The annual Cal Cup is attracting more and more teams from around the world, Santa Monica became the second West Coast team to qualify for nationals, and the state is gearing up for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. "I believe this trend will continue, as more young adults continue to compete after their collegiate careers," Commissioner Brittany Knouse said. This year has been one of the best for the OC, with a first-place finish at the Cactus Cup and second place at Cal Cup (the OC's highest ever showing), as well as first place at nationals.

Young Californians are finding their way to the Club, knowing top-level players are there. "What's special about this squad is the diversity in experience — our team now spans two decades, and that blend of youth and seasoned players helps us succeed in every game while carrying our strong culture forward," DeVarney said. The teammates range in age from 23 to 37 and have welcomed an influx of players who once competed against the OC in scrimmages at UC Davis, Cal and Stanford. For example, Agustina Singh played at UC Davis; Fenella Scutt and Emma Christus both played at Stanford. "Emma was excited to return to San Francisco, with joining our team being a key part of her decision," DeVarney said.

"When I reflect on all the teams that have played OC field hockey since starting the program in 2015, what's truly remarkable is that the core of our culture has only strengthened over time, though new

personalities and players join us each year," DeVarney said. "In 2019, we were still solidifying our identity as a team — working to build chemistry and establish our playing style. By 2024, that identity has become deeply ingrained in every player who steps onto the field, whether they've been with us for years or just joined."

"I joined the OC team earlier this year," said Fariyah Omarshah, who played at Siena College in Albany, New York, and now lives in San Francisco. Omarshah has played field hockey since she was 7 and made the Zimbabwe Junior World Cup Team in 2016. "I was so happy to find the OC field hockey team!" she said. "Being a part of the team allows me to keep playing a game I hold so dear, at a very high level. The team has been very welcoming, and I am grateful to The Olympic Club for introducing me to new friends, memories and adventures. We all know how hard it is to make new friends as an adult, especially in a new city when you know no one!"

The field hockey program provides not only excellent game play, but togetherness and joy. They use this camaraderie to build their strength, turning warm-up drills into dance circles, and getting fit as a group with lifting sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

BUILDING CAMARADERIE

"They were excited at the opportunity to train together onsite at City Clubhouse," Strength and Conditioning Specialist Giuliano Sanchez said. "I took a needs analysis of the sport by asking the commissioners what injuries their team has experienced in the past. I also looked at the NCAA injury report from recent years and discovered that many field hockey injuries occur at the head and feet.

"I keep all sport programming pretty simple but I would add a couple of injury-prevention exercises toward the end of training sessions, including ankle complex strengthening."

"These absolutely helped us during our season to stay strong and injury-free," Knouse said.

"All credit goes to the women of the field hockey program," Sanchez said. "They are such a fun group to train and are one of the highlights of my work week!"

Being a part of The Olympic Club is a major advantage, DeVarney said: "The Club fosters a culture that encourages athletes to excel in multiple sports over their lifetime, and this crossover has only strengthened our bond as a team." Lisa Lohre and Caitlin Beatty have won national championships in tennis, and several other teammates now play tennis regularly ("despite Janaye [Sakkas], our Pickleball Queen, trying to convert them to pickleball," DeVarney said). Nicole Ng met her husband through the OC tennis program. Loren Shealy is an excellent golfer and encourages her teammates to join in. Teammates have entered triathlons, running races and the Trans Tahoe Relay. "We even participated in the Aquatic Showcase, despite none of us really being strong swimmers (except for our star swimmer, Kendall Beveridge)," DeVarney said. "This kind of camaraderie across sports speaks to the supportive, dynamic environment that The Olympic Club creates."

"The Club fosters a culture that encourages athletes to excel in multiple sports over their lifetime, and this crossover has only strengthened our bond as a team." — Savannah DeVarney

THE RETURN TO DELAWARE

"There is a lot of pride in bringing home the gold this year," Knouse said. "I joined the team just before the last championship in 2022, and since then, my connection to the Club has grown much stronger. Another reason this win feels much sweeter is the level of competition. Each succeeding tournament, the level of play increases — teams that attend nationals grow stronger and more skilled."

The team qualified for the national championship this year through the Northern California Field Hockey Association (NFHCA) Spring League, an invitation-only series played for six weeks in the spring at UC Berkeley, with each team meeting twice. The Club finished first and were thrilled to head east to the national championship for the seventh time in the team's history.

The championship took place July 19–21 at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware. It's not easy to fly across the country and jump right into a competition played at the highest level of your sport. But the venue has two Astroturf water-based pitches, similar to surfaces the team has played on in the Bay Area. In addition, several OC players are championship veterans: Brynn Creeth and Knouse were on the 2022 championship team, while Meredith Chandler, DeVarney, Ng and Sakkas all played on *both* the 2022 and 2019 first-place teams. So the Olympians were ready to go.

"We did not have a chance to warm up before our first game, against Greenwich," Knouse said. "It went very well despite this." The Greenwich Rovers, based in New York, were one of the top teams in attendance and had already played a game that day. The contest began at 8:10pm, under the lights. The OC played offensively from the start, with Chandler dribbling into the offensive 25 (an area close to the shooting

circle, the spot on the pitch where a player can shoot for a goal) in the first quarter. Chandler slipped a pass left to DeVarney, who put the ball in the cage for a 1–0 win.

Saturday morning brought the second pool-play game, against SteelStyx from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For context, field hockey is hugely popular in Pennsylvania, and half of the 2024 U.S. Olympic women's field hockey team hails from the state. The OC again went on the attack from the beginning. Sakkas dribbled into the offensive 25 and pulled around players and the goalkeeper to make the first goal. Not long after, the OC earned a penalty stroke, giving Singh a shot against only the goalkeeper. She brought the score to 2–0.

Next, Omarshah earned a penalty corner against SteelStyx by an intentional pull into the defender's foot. The ritual of the corner is fascinating to watch. Defending team members and the goalkeeper don safety equipment and form a lineup at the goal, while opposing players take position in the shooting circle. The ball is placed in a designated spot, and attacking players get an enhanced but nerve-wracking chance to earn a goal as the defenders rush toward them in a group and try to block. (The safety equipment is necessary: the ball travels so fast it looks as if it could take off your head if it got near it. The sport has extensive rules about how high the ball can be hit.) Corners are so important to the game that they are noted on the scoreboard. Under the tricky scoring rules, the first player to reach the ball must pass it. DeVarney assisted with an insert (a push pass or sweep, not a hit) to Creeth that swept the ball in, making the score 3–0.

DeVarney next drove the ball down the endline into the circle, passing it off to Paulina Lee for the fourth goal. Then Sakkas and Scutt did some beautiful passing to get the ball down the field to Omarshah, who sent it over to Singh to finish with a touch into the net. Final score: 5–0, OC.

After finishing first in their pool, the OC faced the Philadelphia Strikers in the quarterfinal. "This team was another top team at nationals and we knew the game would be tight," Knouse said. Up to this point, no one had scored a goal against the Olympians, but in the first quarter of this game, the Strikers scored twice. (The tournament format was four 12-minute quarters with two-minute breaks in between.) Over the next two quarters, the OC fought hard and slowly brought back the momentum. Sakkas upped the score to 2–1. With three minutes left, the OC earned a corner. DeVarney inserted to the top for a sweep from Creeth toward the right side of the cage, where Knouse made a dramatic finish by diving head-first to redirect the ball into the goal, making it 2–2. The OC held the Strikers for the last three minutes, which sent the game into shootouts. All five Olympians — Knouse, Omarshah, Sakkas, Scutt and Singh — scored in their turns against the goalkeeper, while the Strikers missed one, making the final tally 7–6, and the Winged "O" moved up to the semifinals.

"Coming back to win our game against the Strikers when we were losing 2–0 is one of my favorite memories of the championship," Omarshah said. "We really hustled and gave it everything we had to get that win."

The team started off the semifinals with lots of energy. Lonestar, from Austin, Texas, elevated their level of play in the second quarter, making it a close game. "We were fighting back and had dominated most of the game yet couldn't quite get the ball past their goalkeeper; she was having an amazing game," Coach Michael "Mikey" Barminski said. In the third quarter, Lonestar's goalie was injured and had to be pulled. "Lonestar added an extra field player and competed with 11 field players vs. our 10 for most of the quarter," Knouse said. "We capitalized and drove into the circle as a team." Singh dribbled in and finished with a solid hit to finish with 1–0, and the OC was off to the finals.

"There was a really evident breakthrough in the semifinal game," Barminski said. "We pushed past with relentless passages of play from our defense to our strikers — complete mental fortitude that was inspirational and pivotal to the team's win."

In the finals, the OC came full circle to face the Greenwich Rovers again. Both teams were tired and hot going in; this was the fifth game in three days. In spite of the fatigue, Omarshah's favorite memory of the tournament was hyping the team up for the final match. "It was very hot on the pitch, and we needed a surge of energy. We got in a circle and started bouncing to stay loose, and we did our cute chant: 'When I say OC, you say woohoo, OC, woohoo!'" The Olympians, with renewed spirit, created their own opportunities to score. Scutt found Knouse at the top of the circle for a sweep, which led to a bobble and a quick reverse finish from Lee. The Rovers dominated the second quarter, but were unable to even the tally.

"Coach Mikey kept our spirits high throughout the tournament, specifically

"It's not just about the win itself — it's about wearing the OC jersey and knowing that we've added a new chapter to the Club's legacy."
— Savannah DeVarney



Agustina Singh drives forward out of the midfield with the ball.

during the final match, and really inspired us to dig deep," Knouse said. The coach suggested some changes, including one big switch: running with an opposing player at a distance but close enough to add pressure, rather than attempting to win balls. "Quarter three was much more calm and controlled, and we gained some momentum back. Quarter four was a battle to the end," Knouse said. "Out of the back field, Casey Swezey sent an amazing aerial down the field to DeVarney, who made a beautiful hit into the back left cage to increase the lead to 2–0 with only five minutes to play." The Rovers fought back with a goal, making it a tight 2–1 game for the last minute. But the OC held them off and prevailed, winning first place after an undefeated tournament. As icing on the cake, DeVarney was named to the 2024 USFHL National Club Championship All-Star Team.

DeVarney observed that the 2024 championship team benefited from a greater depth of experience across all lines. "Brittany Knouse and Janaye Sakkas, in particular, have stepped up as commissioners while showcasing their versatility on the field," she said. They are natural forwards, but both rotated through midfield

and defense during the 2024 nationals, doing whatever was needed to help the team succeed.

"The Olympic Club has a strong legacy, with generations of athletes contributing to its rich tradition of excellence across many sports," DeVarney said. "To have our field hockey team woven into that fabric, and to make history, fills me with immense pride. It's not just about the win itself — it's about wearing the OC jersey and knowing that we've added a new chapter to the Club's legacy." This commitment to supporting athletes across all sports and encouraging lifetime membership is unique to The Olympic Club and fosters an environment where teammates can continue to grow together. "It's not just about playing for a few seasons," DeVarney said. "We're part of a community that values long-term development and excellence. We're building something lasting, and it's an incredible feeling to know that the legacy we've created will be here for future generations of players to carry forward." ■

The 2024 national champions. Back row (l-to-r): Brynn Creeth, Casey Swezey, Meredith Chandler, Fariyah Omarshah, Brittany Knouse, Coach Mikey Barminski. Front row: Savannah DeVarney, Paulina Lee, Janaye Sakkas, Agustina Singh, Fenella Scutt.

