

A Tale of Two Teams

By: Brian Weiss

MUNCIE, Ind. – One hundred and eighty two miles separate the University of Kentucky and Ball State University. For the average traveler this distance can be driven in a few hours.

For Elaina Musleh, it took much longer.

Musleh grew up playing soccer, spending hours on the field kicking a ball that would shape her life for years to come; a ball that would bounce in ways she never thought possible; a ball that led her to the United States U-14 national team, four state championships and a collegiate soccer career.

But every road has its bumps and every journey has its setbacks.

Musleh broke her back while training for the national team and was subsequently cut from the squad.

“It sucked. It really sucked,” Musleh said. “But at the same time I knew I was good enough. I just had to work for it.”

Despite the injury, Musleh didn’t give up on her dream, not yet at least. She continued to play club soccer, winning four state titles for Carmel United and a national title with the Ohio Elite.

Her play earned the attention of college coaches from across the country; specifically Kentucky head coach Jon Lipsitz.

“Kentucky offered me a scholarship and usually when you get a scholarship anywhere you’re kind of interested in that place,” Musleh said.

Musleh, an admittedly shy person, had a big decision to make: leave her friends and family behind to pursue her soccer career or pass it up to stay close to home.

She mulled it over. And over. And over.

“It was a hard decision because I’m a homebody and I like my family,” Musleh said.

Ultimately, she decided to attend Kentucky, signing a National Letter of Intent as a sophomore.

“I really liked [Kentucky]. I liked the school; I liked the soccer program, just everything about it,” Musleh said. “I just couldn’t stand my coach.”

Road bump.

“At first [Lipsitz] was a really good guy, but he switched up,” Musleh said. “He had promised things and didn’t follow through. He changed.”

Collegiate soccer has two seasons, a spring preseason and a fall regular season. In the spring Musleh saw plenty of playing time, starting several matches for the Wildcats.

But when fall came around, the story was different.

Musleh didn’t start a single game, playing a grand total of 30 minutes in four games.

“It really pissed me off. He told me he wanted me to prove that I could play,” Musleh said. “But he never gave me a chance. He never changed his starting lineup the whole year.”

The bench was an unusual position for Musleh. She was forced to watch girls play that she had previously started over. Forced to watch the game she loved instead of play it.

She was discouraged, hurt and alone.

Not wanting to give up on her dream, it was time for a change.

Musleh waited until the summer to tell coach Lipsitz that she was transferring. The meeting merely confirmed Musleh’s decision.

“He told me that he honestly thought I wasn’t going to play next year,” Musleh said. “He made us feel like we weren’t good enough to play.”

The coach’s lack of confidence got to her. It made her lose belief in herself.

She thought about quitting the game all together, giving up on the sport that had given her so much in return.

Setback.

Musleh’s father had been her biggest cheerleader since day one. But to see his daughter give up on her dream really upset him, to a point where Musleh’s mother brought it to her attention.

“It just hit me. It really hit me that it wasn’t only affecting me, but it was affecting everyone else,” Musleh said.

Collegiate transfers must reach out to schools because coaches don't recruit transfers.

With her grandfather in bad health and a desire to stay in state, Musleh had few options.

She knew she had the talent to play at Indiana or Purdue but wanted to give Ball State a chance.

It offered her the college experience while also keeping her close to home.

Musleh toured twice, meeting the coaching staff and falling in love immediately.

"I was excited but I was nervous because I didn't believe in my own ability," Musleh said. "I was so discouraged at Kentucky."

Musleh made the decision to enroll at Ball State for her sophomore season.

"When we met with her, she didn't feel like she was being developed," Ball State head coach Craig Roberts said. "We made it very clear that we'd develop her game, and that we'd be able to take it to the next level."

Roberts added that team chemistry and how the coaching staff approached things really appealed to Musleh.

Everything seemed to be falling into place.

Musleh moved into an apartment with three of her teammates, who all happened to be transfer students.

"Surrounding her not only by very supportive teammates, but also by people that she can live with, I think that helped immensely," sophomore teammate Lauren Hall said.

Musleh is the first to admit that she struggles meeting new people, but having that core support group made the transition to a new school much easier.

“We all understand each other, we all have stories to tell,” Musleh said. “We all like it hear so much better.”

Roberts mentioned that Musleh liked to ask questions, a lot of questions. So many that he had to sit her down and tell her to stop asking questions, not completely, but that she needed to start believing in what she already knew and stop seeking clarification on everything.

“You really have to touch on the confidence level with them, make sure they identify and recognize what they’re good at and make sure they can start self-believing,” Roberts said.

“That’s what [Musleh’s] starting to do again now. She’s starting to self believe that she can change a game, and she can change a game.”

He showed confidence in her and it showed on the pitch.

Musleh played in all 22 games, got one start and amassed 1099 more minutes than she did in her one season at Kentucky. She also led the team in points with 11, scoring four goals and adding three assists.

“As I went forward I gained more confidence in myself and saw that the coaches had confidence in me,” Musleh said. “If you see somebody else has confidence in you, it gives you confidence.”

Musleh had regained the confidence she lost at Kentucky.

She reverts back to something Roberts told her during a campus tour: “Your history is good enough, you don’t need to give up on something you love. Just give me one more season out of you and you can decide at the end of the season if you want to play again.”

A month into the season, Musleh had already made that decision.

“I just looked at coach and said ‘I love it here’. I can’t wait for next year,” Musleh said.

The journey was complete.