



From underdog to dominance

How the UOIT women's soccer team evolved from rookies to OUA champions and national medalists in five short years

By Joel Wittebel
The Oshawa Express

*Take us to the days where we're no longer underdogs in the OUA.
Where we're a threat in every game we play.*

The above lines are borrowed from a song created by the UOIT women's soccer team five years ago. Thinking of the team singing the full rendition, created when they were only 10 days old, still gives head coach Peyvand Mossavat goosebumps when he thinks about it.

It was like a prophecy – one that came true this season.

"I couldn't comprehend it in the moment, I didn't even know what to do. I was shellshocked," says Ridgebacks captain Kylie Bordeleau

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Sports at a glance

Durham bidding for ParaSport Games

Region looking to host annual tournament in 2019

By Graeme McNaughton
The Oshawa Express

The province's top para-athletes may soon be coming to Durham Region.

Regional councillors will be asked to endorse Sport Durham's bid, submitted earlier this year, to host the 2019 edition of the Ontario Paraspport Games, as well as authorize a grant of \$20,000 to go towards the event.

"For more than a decade, Durham Region has worked to achieve an inclusive and accessible environment; one that preserves dignity and independence for individuals of all abilities," says Brian Bridgeman, the region's commissioner of planning and economic development, in an emailed statement to The Oshawa Express.

"As a result of this strong leadership, Sport Durham – in partnership with other community organizations and volunteers – decided to complete the necessary research and due diligence for a potential bid to host the 2019 Ontario ParaSport Games."

If the bid is successful, the region can expect to see more than

400 participants, including approximately 260 athletes, come to the region in either February or March of 2019 to take part in eight to 10 sports, including swimming, wheelchair rugby and wheelchair basketball.

Bridgeman says hosting the event would not only be a great opportunity to host a provincial event in the region, but also an economic boon.

"Winning the right to host these games would boost our local economy by about \$500,000," he says.

"But for us, it is about more than just economic factors. It would offer the chance to strengthen inclusion far beyond our borders, while creating legacy opportunities here at home."

And to add to that, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport has advised that it will give a hosting grant of \$110,000 for the games.

The report, due to be presented to councillors for the first time at the next committee of the whole meeting.

The document does not indicate when a decision on the host community for the 2019 games will be announced.

Gens top Bulldogs to hold down first place

The Oshawa Generals added more points to their division lead over the Hamilton Bulldogs with a 2-1 victory on Dec. 2.

Currently, the Gens (18-7-0-2) are eight points ahead of the Bulldogs, who sit with 30 points for second place in the OHL's Eastern Conference.

It was Jack Studnicka who got things started for Oshawa on the road, scoring shorthanded in the first period to put the Gens up by one.

Mitch Vande Sompel, coming off one of his biggest games of the season against North Bay Battalion where he netted a hat trick, sealed the deal on the powerplay in the second period. Hamilton would manage one in the second frame as well, beating starter Jeremy Brodeur, but it would prove not enough.

The Gens are back home for a pair of games this weekend, facing off against Saginaw on Dec. 9 and the Battalion on Dec. 11.

Minor Gens travel to ACC

On Dec. 4 the Oshawa Minor Generals and York Simcoe Express got a chance to act like their hockey heroes for a day as they took part in Under Armour's Storm The Centre competition.

They were welcomed at Air Canada Centre with training gear and stepped on the ice with Toronto Maple Leafs staff and alumni, Wendel Clark, for on-ice training session.

Players also got a taste of what it's



The Oshawa Minor Generals Bantam AE team pile together on the ice at the Air Canada Centre after taking part in Under Armour's Storm the Centre competition.

like to be a pro off the ice with media training, dry-land training, nutrition coaching and a talk from Leafs alumni Mike Johnson. The teams capped the day off with a regulation game on the ice at the ACC.

Lords end 2016 with a win over Fleming

Coming off a last second loss to Centennial on Nov. 30, the Durham College men's basketball team was able to rebound, earning an 87-70 victory over Fleming at home.

The win over the Knights wraps up conference play in 2016 for Durham as they enter the break with a 5-4 record, putting them in fifth place in the OCAA east region standings.

Funsho Dimeji had a big night for Durham as he dropped a game-high 22 points to go along with eight rebounds, six assists and a steal.

Durham will next be in action in the new year when they head to Toronto for the annual George Brown New Year's Classic.

Ridgebacks roll over over RMC 7-2

The UOIT men's hockey team closed out conference action in 2016 with a 7-2 victory over the RMC Paladins on Dec. 3 at the Campus Ice Centre.

With the lopsided win, UOIT heads into the holiday break with a 12-5-1 record, good enough for third place in the OUA eastern conference standings with 25 points. Going into the new year, a number of teams are still in the hunt for the conference title with only seven points separating first from sixth. Queen's (13-4-1) leads the way with 27 points while McGill (12-3-2) is in second place with 26.

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A success five years in the making

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That moment came when the final whistle blew, sealing the deal on UOIT's 1-0 victory over the Queen's Gaels to capture the U Sports bronze medal, the first not only in the program's history, but for the university.

"It was kind of just the cherry on the cake. We all knew that we could do it, but we knew that anything can happen in those games. So when the whistle blew and we actually knew we accomplished more than we ever thought we could, it was just surreal, and a fairy tale ending," says Jamie Ryan, a team veteran.

While the fairy tale came to an end for some of the players this season, it has been a long story in the making, one with wins, losses and hard times; one that started with an idea and a vision five years ago and quickly became a reality beneath the feet of a team of dedicated soccer players and coaches.

Goals, values and a new program

It started with a job interview.

The UOIT Ridgebacks were looking for a coach to head their women's soccer program. The eventual successful candidate would have big cleats to fill with coaching veteran Vaso Vujanovic (recently retired) heading the men's program since 2009, and included several Ontario University Athletics (OUA) final four appearances.

It was the vision of Mossavat that eventually took the job, and the hefty goals of leading the new women's program all the way to the U Sports (formerly CIS) championships.

"I said this is what I wanted to accomplish and I don't think they thought it would happen in such a short period of time," Mossavat says.

The university sport game was nothing new to Mossavat, who already had a U Sports coach of the year honour under his belt, coming in 2007 during his time with the Ryerson Rams.

In the early days of the program, Mossavat began with building the foundation. Along with teaching his team of rookies solid soccer skills, he was focused on their growth off the pitch as well. This included the creation of team "core values" that each player needed to exemplify.

"That's something that we hold very dear in our program," Mossavat says. "Right off the bat from day one, we created a competitive environment where the girls knew that you've got to continue trying to get better and every year we brought in players who were better than the previous year and that pushed everybody."

And the club has seen players come and go, some graduating out of the program, others not completely buying in to what the team was building.

Four players have been around since the inception: Bordeleau and Ryan, along with teammates Sara Voisin and Jessica Mithrush, making up what the team has dubbed the Original Four.

"We wouldn't have the culture, we would-

n't have the work ethic, we wouldn't have the knowledge, we wouldn't have anything that we do have...Peyvand has absolutely taught us everything that he knows to be better players, to be better people, to be better just as a whole," Bordeleau says.

Up against the best

Entering the OUA as a new team is one thing; going up against veteran schools like Queens is another.

However, even from their first year, the team showed promise, with strong defense quickly establishing itself as an underdog in the OUA, a team not to be ruled out.

"We set goals that we didn't really know if they were realistic or not, but we did everything that we could to achieve them," Ryan says.

It was in the team's third season together in 2014 that their success was taken to the next level.

Following a dominant 12-2-2 season, behind only Ottawa (the year's eventual national champion) in the OUA East standings, UOIT would find themselves in the finals for the first time in their early history.

After getting edged out by Western, missing out on the chance to play for the gold medal, UOIT played for the bronze medal against the seven-time OUA champion Laurier Goldenhawks.

In the biggest game of their program history to that point, UOIT would top the Goldenhawks 2-0 and win their first ever OUA medal, and move on to the U Sport championships, also a first.

However, the record-setting season would come to an end after a loss to the reigning champion Trinity Western Spartans relegated UOIT to the consolation round, where they would fall in penalty kicks, 1-0 to the Montreal Carabins.

The club would have to wait two years before seeing U-Sport action again.

Banner season

Coming into this year, Bordeleau and her teammates knew that if they were ever going to see national glory, this had to be the year, especially with a collection of team veterans in the Original Four getting set to graduate.

"We knew that this was the team that was going to be able to do it," she says.

For Ryan, the team was like nothing she had played with before.

"I think the team chemistry was so strong and we were all just so excited about what we had the opportunity to do."

And throughout the season, the team continued to show they had one thing in mind.

At the end of the OUA regular season, UOIT was top of the league, dominant with 40 points and a 13-2-1 record. The Ridgebacks were also top in the nation in scoring managing 60 goals in 16 games along with a strong defensive core that held opposing teams to only nine goals all year.

However, to go down in the history books, a great regular season needs to be followed up with an amazing post-season run.

UOIT had a trio of opponents ahead of them in order to capture the OUA banner – but for a team riding a record-winning season, it seemed to be a breeze.

A 2-0 win over Laurentian in the quarter finals was followed up by a 3-1 trouncing of the Windsor Lancers in the semi-finals with a pair of goals from Nicole Zajac and Durham's own Tajjah Henderson on a penalty kick.

For Mossavat, Henderson's play has pushed her from barely on the field last year to being the team's "go-to person."

"I think the girls around her helped her, the environment helped her," he says.

And the players were going to need all the help they could get as they entered the OUA final against the Queen's Gaels. The national stage is nothing new to Queen's, which has lifted the championship trophy six times before along with two CIS championships.

After a scoreless start to the game, it was Henderson again, muscling off a Queen's defender to run in on a breakaway and pick the bottom corner.

The goal was the only offense of the game, and it was enough to seal the win for UOIT and punch their ticket to the U Sport championships for the second time in program history.

"Every step of the way, everything has been historical," Mossavat says.

And it didn't end there.

The club's first match of the championship saw the Ridgebacks draw the Trinity Western Spartans, the club that knocked them out of the tournament two years ago.

If UOIT was looking for a bit of redemption, it came off the foot of Mississauga's Shynice Williams in the second overtime half, breaking the scoreless tie and push them into the semi-finals for the first time ever.

There, the Ridgebacks found themselves against the powerhouse in Laval, who was coming into the championships following an undefeated season, and the team's last regular season loss coming all the way back in 2014.

As fated as the team's season appeared to be, the veteran club was just too much for the young Ridgebacks, but they didn't go down without a fight.

When Laval jumped ahead, it was Henderson again who found the back of the net and sent the game to overtime. There, Laval would eventually win to advance to the finals.

"It's inevitable that you're going to be disappointed, and you're going to wish that things would have gone different," Ryan says. "I think once you do a little bit of self reflection, you realize that, you know what, Laval was a really good team and they've been around for a long time, and their girls were amazing."

The loss sent the Ridgebacks to the bronze medal game, where they once again found themselves up against Queen's in a rematch of the OUA final.

And again, the evenly matched teams found themselves in a scoreless gridlock. Unlike their previous two games of the championship, this one wouldn't need any overtime though as it was third-year midfielder Katherine Koehler-Grassau who found the back of the net in the 59th minute.

The goal culminated the Ridgeback's historic season earning the university its first ever U Sport medal in school history, something that was recently applauded by university president Tim McTiernan.

"There are a lot of proud moments each and every year, but there are very, very few moments that are absolutely stunning and we had a few of them this year," he says.

More than just soccer

Over the five year history of the team, the girls and Mossavat have amassed a collection of accolades for their efforts on the field.

To go along with his 2007 award, Mossavat was named coach of the year in 2012, 2014 and recently accepted the award again this year.

Mossavat has also been named as the coach of team Canada for the upcoming 2017 Summer Universiade in Chinese Taipei.

Bordelau was named as an OUA all-star for the fourth straight season and also earned the title of league MVP. She was also named a CIS



Photo by Allan Fournier

“I couldn't comprehend it in the moment, I didn't even know what to do. I was shellshocked.”

Kylie Bordeleau
Captain of the UOIT Women's Soccer Team

All-Canadian along with teammate Koehler-Grassau.

However, it's their efforts off the field that have helped UOIT become an attractive spot for young varsity athletes.

"I think that we've had more looks from really great players across Canada and more people wanting to come out," Bordeleau says.

"I think it's not only benefited the soccer program, but UOIT as a whole," Ryan says. "It's been a complete 360 turnover since I've been here and it's amazing to see."

That change and focus on the student-athlete has also been a focus of Mossavat since day one, though it hasn't always been easy, he credits the university's sport managers in Scott Barker at UOIT and Ken Babcock at Durham College with playing major roles in the program's success.

"I'd like to think that we've created a program," Mossavat says. "It's been amazing, and I tell you it hasn't been easy all the time, always ups and downs as you go...but overall, it's been growth from every perspective, even for myself as a coach. I've learned a lot and gotten better just being involved in this."

For Bordeleau and Ryan, their days wearing the Ridgebacks jersey are over, but their involvement in the program, perhaps not.

"As much as we're going to move on and graduate and do things, I don't think that I'll ever fully move on because my heart is always going to be with this team," Ryan says.

And while the team has accomplished nearly everything they set out to do in its early stages, perhaps some things will never change:

Take us to the days where we're no longer underdogs in the OUA.

Where we're a threat in every game we play.

"As much as we are a threat in every game now and we're glad to be there...I don't think we'll ever lose that underdog feeling," Bordeleau says. "We never want to lose that."


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