

SPORTS

Having a Ball

Rebecca Smith shines on women's soccer's expanding world stage

One of the most peculiar scenes at a FIFA Women's World Cup press area this summer was in Sinsheim, Germany, where more than a dozen German reporters ignored a live broadcast of the host country's match against France on a TV a few feet away, and instead focused on a lengthy discussion with a Duke grad from California.

Not that Rebecca Smith '03 is a random Duke grad. She's the captain and defensive anchor of the New Zealand women's soccer team and had just scored one of two late goals to give her team a 2-2 tie against Mexico, a talented team that had upset the U.S. in World Cup qualifying. It was the first time in New Zealand's nine World Cup games that it had tasted something other than defeat. The reporters—familiar with Smith because she plays professionally for the German squad VfL Wolfsburg—watched as Smith handled the interview, conducted in German, as deftly as she controls a cross-field pass.

And no wonder: German is one of four languages Smith speaks well, not counting Norwegian, which she is learning from a teammate. Though she studied Spanish at Duke, she now considers it among her weaker languages.

"I think the only way to really understand a culture [and a person] is to learn the language," she says.

Soccer has given Smith a path to experience several new cultures in her young life. Growing up near Los Angeles, she excelled in a range of sports. She played baseball on boys' teams throughout much of her childhood, competed in tennis, and was good enough at basketball to attract

some college recruiting interest. She also danced and, like many California kids, was drawn to beach sports, including surfing and skateboarding. Even after qualifying for the U.S. Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program, she resisted the call to abandon her other pursuits. "My interest wasn't strong enough at such an age to really commit my whole life just to one activity or sport," she says.

At Duke, "the soccer bug had definitely bit her," says coach Robbie Church, who took over the program before Smith's junior year. "She was trying to get better. She was doing a lot of technical work. She was always working on different parts of her game."

Smith had the benefit of working closely with assistant coach Carla Overbeck, who like Smith was a central defender during her playing career. "She wasn't very fast, but neither was I," says Overbeck, who won World Cup titles with the U.S. national team in 1991 and 1999. "Everyone knows that when you play in the middle of the soccer field, speed is not a necessity. She was confident, she didn't have a problem organizing her midfielders in front of her, she was well-liked on the team, and her work ethic was very good."

By her senior year, Smith was team captain—and now entirely serious about seeing how far soccer could take her. First came a call from New Zealand, where her mother and father were born; Smith joined the national team in 2003 and has competed with the Kiwis ever since. "She's been a leader for the New Zealand team for so many years," says New Zealand teammate Ali Riley. "I look up

to her. She's a rock in the back."

But New Zealand wouldn't be the only stamp on her passport. Between appearances for the national team, Smith has competed professionally for clubs in the U.S., Germany, Sweden, and Australia. Her odyssey began in 2004, when she joined the powerhouse German club FFC Frankfurt. Training alongside several players from Germany's national team, Smith received a fast education in international soccer.

"That was tough," Smith says. "You know that saying, being thrown in the deep end? Yeah, that was me, treading water. Before I came, the team went through some internal changes that I didn't know about, so I was thrown into a team that didn't really know I was coming, where very few players spoke English, all the trainings were in German, and no one really translated."

The following season, she moved to a club in Sweden. Although this time many of her teammates spoke English, Smith again absorbed herself in the local language and culture. She loved both—but when VfL Wolfsburg came calling in 2009, she couldn't refuse an opportunity to return to Germany, which was already bubbling with excitement about hosting the World Cup.

As in the U.S., European professional women's soccer isn't the most lucrative career field. But Smith has nurtured her professional life outside soccer. An economics major at Duke, she earned an M.B.A. from a university in Hanover, completing the program during the 2009-10 soccer season. This fall, she'll

Globetrotters

Phileas Fogg needed eighty days to circumnavigate the globe, but the **Duke men's basketball team** did it in just twelve—and played some hoops along the way. The team's summer trip to China and Dubai featured four exhibition games—all won by the Blue Devils—and visits to the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, the site of the Beijing Olympic Games, and Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. But the 20,000-mile journey turned out to

be even more epic than planned. Because of mechanical problems with its original charter jet, the team used a smaller plane, requiring more stops. In all, the travelers visited seven countries before returning for the start of fall classes.



Laurence Griffiths - FIFA/FIFA via Getty Images

Kickin' it: Smith edges past Japan's Kozue Ando during the FIFA Women's World Cup match last summer in Germany; her New Zealand team lost the game 2-1.

join several other players in working for Volkswagen, the dominant company in Wolfsburg and club sponsor.

"I have always chosen to work or study as well as playing soccer because I think it's important to keep a good balance in my life," Smith says. "Not only because from one day to the next I could get a career-ending injury, but also because no woman can retire on a soccer career. I think it's important to have some sort of interest in another career."

At the same time, she is pleased by the growing popularity of women's soccer,

particularly in the afterglow of the World Cup, which drew huge crowds throughout Germany and had a strong following of fans tuning in from the U.S.

"In my eighth season as a pro soccer player, I can say there have been huge steps forward in women's soccer in terms of game quality, fitness, training, coaching, quality of players, technique, and just overall style," Smith says. "With more attractive soccer come more fans to watch and more demand, so players can make a decent living."

Perhaps even in the U.S. one day?

"Who knows?" Smith says. "I would never say no to a great opportunity. I think I have always been open to all kinds of different opportunities and possibilities."

—Beau Dure

Dure '91 writes about soccer, mixed martial arts, and Olympic sports. His first book, Long-Range Goals: The Success Story of Major League Soccer, was published in 2010 by Potomac Books. He covered the 2011 Women's World Cup for espnW, ESPN's website for female athletes and fans, and saw two of New Zealand's three games.