

Captain and Coach Duo Make History for the Cortland Peace Frogs

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For the second time this season, Captain Yasmin Valerio and head coach Ashley Crossway found themselves on rugby's biggest stage. Again. Texas for a second time this fall representing the SUNY Cortland Women's Rugby Football Club, also known as the Peace Frogs.

The Peace Frogs competed in the Women's 15s National Collegiate Rugby Championship in Houston, Texas on December 2-3, finishing fourth in the nation in the Small College division contests.

But Crossway's postseason success did not end there.

Following postseason play for the Peace Frogs, Crossway was selected to become head coach for the Small College All-Star 7s team, named the Upstate New York Snow Leopards. Crossway is the first head coach from SUNY Cortland to be selected for this role.

The Snow Leopards featured two teams this year, a gold team (Division I) and a blue team (Small College). Twenty-four of the best athletes in New York State were selected via tryouts and participated in the tournament on January 20-21 in Austin, Texas.

"It was a really unique experience and opportunity," Crossway said.

Collaborating with players and coaches across the Upstate New York Collegiate Rugby Conference was something that Crossway valued.

“To be able to see small college athletes in a different realm and coach them was rewarding,” Crossway said.

Valerio is the first player in Cortland to make the All-Star gold squad.

“I was hoping to make the Division 1 squad when I was trying out for the All-Star team,” Valerio said. “I just wanted to compete at a higher level before graduating.”

She sent in game film and highlights to the All-Star coaches because she was unable to attend the in-person tryout. Two weeks later, she was pleasantly surprised to learn she was going to be competing on the gold team.

“It meant a lot for her to realize she’s a very talented rugby player and that she can play with the best people in the state and against the best people in the country,” Crossway said.

Aside from Crossway’s coaching experience for the All-Star team, she was able to see one of her own players from SUNY Cortland excel on a grand scale.

After suffering a traumatic injury in the Women’s 15s National Collegiate Rugby Championship games this past December, Valerio was able to regain the confidence to return and end her collegiate rugby career on a high note.

“I didn’t know if what I learned or how I practiced in the past was going to be good enough to compete Division I,” Valerio said. “But when you go out there and you’re competing, you just play your game to the best of your ability.”

The chemistry and bond Valerio and Crossway have had over the past few years is something that they both cherish.

“Crossway is the one who taught me rugby and I am here because of her,” Valerio said. “It was comforting having her there because anytime I had a question or felt uncomfortable, I was able to talk to my buddy.”

Crossway helped mold Valerio into the athlete she is today, and her coaching style is one of the factors that impacted Valerio the most.

“At times we have coaches that educate you, but don’t know how to push you. Crossway has the perfect balance of education on the sport *and* pushing you to do your best; I got the perfect balance of a coach,” Valerio said.

Going to Texas as the only rugby player from SUNY Cortland allowed Valerio to branch out of her comfort zone and meet the other athletes on her team.

“I think all of the athletes clicked right away because we were all there for the same reasons. It wasn’t awkward at all,” Valerio said.

Team chemistry came naturally to both teams. “There are people who have been on the team for several years and people who just started playing rugby,” Crossway said.

Despite these factors, both teams showed success in Texas with the gold team placing third overall and the blue team placing fourth overall.

Crossway said the evolution of rugby has changed drastically since she played on the SUNY Cortland squad herself.

“Who was in charge and how it was structured, was very different,” Crossway said. “No All-Star tournaments or organized recognition. It’s a really great opportunity for athletes today.”

With Valerio becoming the first Cortland rugby player to compete at the All-Star level, it will hopefully inspire more athletes to follow her lead. She stressed that anyone who plays and loves rugby should consider doing All-Stars, as she had a great experience with Ashley Crossway, her coach and mentor.

Picture credit: @rugbysnapshots – Olly and @alyssa_dengerrr – Ashley Denger