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BALANCING ACT

By Kathleen Harte Simone, Philafieldhockey.com Founder & Editor

No doubt, balancing the demands of college academics and a sport is a challenge for any collegiate student-athlete. Add the rigor of playing for an elite NCAA Division I program that goes far in post-season play and you've got an even more robust schedule. More so, for two college All-Americans – Ashley Hoffman and Margaux Paolino – add yet another layer: playing with the U.S. Women's National Team. For the two, the commitments are a lot to juggle, but the rewards are huge.

Hoffman will graduate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) in December as a highly decorated athlete, including being named a Honda Award finalist. Playing for USA is a dream come true – and a reality that came sooner than expected. "When Janneke asked me (in March 2017) to play in New Zealand with the team, it was a complete shock," explained Hoffman. "I had another year with the U-21 team and didn't expect to be pulled up." Hoffman noted that the best part of being part of the U.S. Women's National Team is "pushing your limits and discovering potential in yourself that you didn't know you had. Also, working with some of the greatest women athletes and people I've ever met is incredible."

Paolino's invitation to join the squad came a year later on the heels of a 2017 break-out sophomore season at Duke University, where she was an Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) assist leader. "Of course it felt like a surprise to be named to the national team, but being a part of the pipeline for so long I've grown and learned a lot as a player," said Paolino. "I'm still very humbled that my hard work and dedication have been recognized. I think the best part has been competing against my teammates, as well as play-

ing with them in games. I learn so much from all of them and the high level of play has been fun to be a part of."

Although Hoffman and Paolino find themselves on opposite sides of the field as ACC rivals in the fall, competing for teams that finished No. 1 and No. 2 respectively in the NCAA Division I RPI poll in 2017, they are teammates who stand side-by-side on the pitch, listening to the National Anthem and wearing red, white and blue. Their journey to play elite field hockey on both the collegiate and international stage also saw them wearing purple, as members of the X-Calibur Field Hockey Club. They also both advanced to the Pennsylvania state tournaments in high school, Hoffman the backbone of Twin Valley High School in the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association and Paolino, a key contributor to Episcopal Academy in the Pennsylvania Independent School Athletic Association.

Both players don't hesitate to share their same USA Field Hockey goals: to win the World Cup and to play in the Olympic Games. They also don't miss a beat when asked about their collegiate field hockey aspirations: to win an NCAA Division I National Championship. Attaining these lofty goals takes a great deal of organization, support and balance – all of which they seem to have in check.

"Academically, it has not been easy, but it's definitely worth it," said Hoffman. "Traveling all over the world doing what I love has been a blessing. Thankfully, I have wonderful academic support at UNC, who have had many athletes before me in similar situations and they have helped me immensely. I'm also fortunate that



Coach Shelton and the rest of the staff are extremely supportive and feel that any training I get with the national team will help the UNC team."

"It's definitely a challenge because of the time commitment you make to all three (school, Duke and Team USA)," added Paolino. "I know frustrating and hard moments will arise with balancing everything but having early and open conversations with everyone has made it a lot easier for me. This past semester, I was very up front with my professors. We usually worked together beforehand to plan makeup dates for missed assignments or tests. My Duke coaches are also supportive; I missed a few spring games but they are accepting of my commitment. They work with me to find a balance of the two and to make sure I'm healthy."

Hoffman and Paolino are also big calendar planners, carefully marking academic study groups, quizzes, exams, college practice and work out sessions, training at Spooky Nook Sports with the U.S. Women's National Team, international competition, and even time to be regular college students hanging out with friends, which they both say is essential in keeping a healthy and happy balance.

"I spend a lot of my time with friends when I am at school," continued Paolino. "I have friends that are teammates, other athletes, and students so it can be nice to switch things up a little. "I usually hang out with my roommates watching a TV series, but I'm also in a sorority and they hold various events that are fun to attend."

"I live with three of my best friends and we are together all the time," said Hoffman. "We do a lot of studying, but also hangout, watch movies, go into town and eat tons of meals together. I like to go to coffee shops and nice restaurants." Hoffman has also carved out time to volunteer at Northside Elementary, the UNC Children's Hospital and with the university's student-athletes pen pal program. She also played intermural basketball and worked at Smoothie King.

During their college off-seasons, Hoffman and Paolino travel to Spooky Nook Sports to train with Team USA about once a month, sometimes connect through FaceTime or phone for meetings, and analyze film remotely. They also stay up to speed with the fitness requirements on their own by adding extra running, lifts and drills. "Ashley

and I met a few times in the spring to do some extra drills and stick work together because our schools are so close," noted Paolino.

Transitioning back and forth between their college teams and Team USA, they both say, can be a challenge. "It's definitely a faster game with the national team so the transition isn't always immediate, but UNC does a good job of preparing me and I usually can get back into it pretty fast," said Hoffman. "I try to bring the drills and mindset from national team training to UNC also."

They're also able to look back on the academic year and smile knowing that despite their highly demanding schedules, they made it work and grew both as athletes and people.

"It's worth it because I get to do something every day that I love to do, and I have been fortunate to do both hockey and academics at the highest levels," said Paolino.

"I love field hockey and competing at the highest level and continuing to have room to grow makes it fun," said Hoffman. "Traveling with the team is a blast and college field hockey has introduced to friends that I will have for a lifetime." **FH**

