

Marylanders help Navy women's lacrosse program take off

Rawlick, Ruttum show leadership on, off field, on way to flight school

By Katherine Dunn

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When Erin Rawlick and Mary Ruttum decided to attend the Naval Academy, they never expected to play lacrosse, but they packed their sticks anyway.

Good thing.

As the two endured the grueling initiation of Plebe Summer 2006, academy officials hired former Maryland coach Cindy Timchal to guide the lacrosse program in its transition from club to varsity over the next year.

Rawlick and Ruttum figured, "Why not?"

The lure of playing for Timchal, who led Maryland to eight NCAA titles, was irresistible. They joined the club team as plebes.

"I never thought I had a shot at playing college lacrosse, because I was never involved in the [youth] club program, which is where most of the recruiting comes from," said Rawlick, a longtime club soccer player who took up lacrosse as a freshman at C. Milton Wright. "I kind of just ruled it out, but then when I found out that it was starting up, it was so exciting. Everything just fell into place."

That last sentiment applies to the whole academy experience for Rawlick and Ruttum, an Annapolis resident who played lacrosse at St. Mary's.

Each arrived not knowing which sport she would play or which career she would pursue. Now, they're wrapping up unexpected but rewarding lacrosse careers and heading for more challenges as Navy pilots.

Soon after graduation and commissioning May 28, both will head to flight school in Florida. They might fly jets, helicopters or other aircraft, they said; whatever the Navy needs most at the time.

Lessons learned on the field will be just as important as those learned in the classroom for a career as a pilot, a 10-year commitment to the Navy.

"Our coach says it and I believe it that you learn so much about yourself on the field," Ruttum said. "It sounds like a cliché, but talk about stressful situations and being able to handle yourself in a difficult situation, you learn about that a lot out on the field, more so than you do even on the Yard."

Rawlick and Ruttum have been instrumental in building a solid Division I program that has gone 36-11, including 9-4 in the Patriot League, since debuting in 2008.

Both had more experience than most of their peers, who came from Navy's club program or from other sports. Rawlick helped C. Milton Wright to a state championship and Ruttum helped St. Mary's to an Interscholastic Athletic Association of Maryland A Conference title.

"Our first day when the club team got together, I'm pretty sure Mary and I and the other seniors that are still on the team might have been the only people who could catch and throw," Rawlick said.

After three recruiting classes, that has changed. Rawlick and Ruttum laugh when they talk about how they used to run the midfield. Faster recruits keep them more on the attacking end now.

Rawlick, a two-time All-League selection, holds all of Navy's career scoring records. This season, she ranks first in Division I with 76 points - 51 goals and 25 assists - and earned Patriot League Player of the Week honors four straight times, tying a conference record.

Ruttum ranks second on the career scoring charts for goals and points and was Navy's most efficient attacker last season. She has 13 goals and 12 assists this spring.

More important than their numbers is their leadership on and off the field. Rawlick was elected the only team captain and the players also look up to Ruttum, who is commander of her company, one of 30 at the academy. The positions are equal in rank.

"You talk about the Naval Academy being a school of leadership and they experience that every day," Timchal said, "so it's easy for them to be placed in situations where they need to communicate or be responsible or talk to the team or whatever it is."

Kierstin King, a sophomore midfielder from Hereford, said their leadership was particularly helpful in adjusting to academy life.

"As a plebe it's good to have a good leadership foundation for off the lacrosse field, because here it's so hard when you're a plebe just trying to get through the daily academics with being an athlete. Mary has amazing grades and Erin has good grades, too. They're just amazing models for everyone on the team to follow," said King, adding that Rawlick helped her decide to attend the academy.

One of the perks of being on a team is having all-girl time that is rare at the male-dominated academy.

"Obviously we get along really well with the guys, but it's nice to have a group of girls that you can go to when you're just kind of overwhelmed," said Rawlick, whose father, Steven Rawlick, is a West Point graduate.

The Midshipmen are 10-2 as they prepare for Saturday's noon conference game against Holy Cross - a team they have beaten twice by a single goal the past two seasons - at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium.

Timchal upgraded the schedule to include No. 3 Duke and William & Mary. The Midshipmen were tied 7-7 with William & Mary before falling 14-9, but they were down 9-0 before their rally fell short, 19-10, in Durham, N.C., on Sunday.

Rawlick and Ruttum said they were glad the Midshipmen had the chance to test themselves against a couple of the nation's better teams.

"We scrimmaged William & Mary freshman or sophomore year," Ruttum said, "and I can't tell you what the score was, but it was a lot to 1. It wasn't even close, and now we see how far the program has come and how you do play up to your opponent. I know Erin probably agrees, but I would rather play a William

& Mary 100 times and even lose to them 100 times than beat a team by a big margin, like 20 goals."

As student-athletes who have more responsibilities than their peers at most other schools, Rawlick and Ruttum would not have traded the experience, no matter how difficult it was at times. They will take that commitment, discipline and work ethic to flight school.

"It's not about being able to do things when everything is going well, but being able to come back after failing," Ruttum said. "It's hard to hold your head up when things aren't going your way. Like Colgate last year [17-4 loss in the Patriot League final], there are games that crush you, but it's bouncing back from that that will help me be a better officer."