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Self-made Sutton drives team's rapid ascent in 3-year history

By Brian Kane on February 11, 1999



Reactions

Four years ago, women's lacrosse coach Kerstin Kimel would sit in her office and be unable to concentrate, for she would always hear someone playing around on the racquetball court upstairs. But this did not upset her one bit.

Why? She knew the noise came from one of her newest players, Karen Sutton.

Sutton would take her lacrosse stick and a ball to the court and practice fundamentals, catching and throwing for hours.

"Karen is far and away the hardest worker on our team," Kimel said. "When it comes to fitness, lifting, getting extra stick work in, there are few people that work as hard as she does. That is part of Karen's biggest strength."

Through the early years of Duke women's lacrosse, Sutton and Kimel have been the only constants. She has started all 48 games the team has played and will be a key player in every match this season. Sutton's presence is a major part of the team's growth from its 3-12 inaugural campaign to a 10-7 finish last season.

The first year Sutton was at Duke, there was no varsity lacrosse. She played on the club team, which she admits was night and day compared to the varsity program.

"When we were at club level, we only practiced two or three times a week," Sutton said. "But when we moved to varsity, Kerstin really demanded a lot of us. I really looked forward to the pressure and competition of the practices and games, whereas the club level was lacking the intensity and competitiveness that I wanted."

Because her first season was on a club team, Sutton was able to play varsity the last three years and still have one more year of eligibility. With the Blue Devils on the verge of a great season, she saw no reason not to return for a fifth year. And her teammates could not be happier.

"I love that Karen has come back," sophomore Kate Soulier said. "She is such a great leader, just seeing all the adversity she has gone through and now coming back sets a great example for the other players."

Without Sutton, leadership may have been a question mark for this team. The Blue Devils have only five seniors compared to 17 underclassmen. Sutton brings stability to the midfield and to the team as a whole.

But this leadership role is not new to the senior. She was named a team captain three years ago and has kept that title ever since.

"She's an emotional leader and a great role model to the rest of the team," Kimel said. "She'll tell you that she isn't the best lacrosse player in the country, but she is a real inspiration to her teammates because of everything else that she does."

No one will argue the fact that Sutton is the hardest worker the program has seen in its short history. When Kimel first saw Sutton play club lacrosse, the coach knew she had an incredible athlete, but one who needed coaching to better understand the game.

"The first year was a little nerve-racking since we didn't really have the players to compete with a lot of the upper-level teams," Sutton said. "We worked on a lot of the fundamentals because even those were difficult for us."

While Sutton admits she was quite nervous moving up to the varsity level, she took full advantage of every opportunity the new varsity status of the program provided.

"Karen is a self-made player," Soulier said. "You can really learn from her determination and all the things she's done over the years to make herself a great player. I think that's how she leads our team, by her work ethic."

While Sutton's leadership will be essential, her play on the field cannot be overlooked. She has only netted 16 goals for her career, but her statistics do not tell the whole story.

Sutton is Duke's defensive stopper in the midfield. She is possibly one of the fittest players in the nation and is able to hound the opposing team's top players for the entirety of the game without wearing down.

"She's so fast and athletic that she has been able to often shut down the other team's best player to no goals," Kimel said. "She's a defensive specialist that can really break up the other teams' plays."



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