Delucchi develops into elite keeper for Owls

The Foothill College women's water polo team has not faced its equal in Northern California so far this season. It's unlikely to happen this weekend at the Coast Conference Championships or next week at the NorCal Championships.

But goalkeeper Dana Delucchi knows from experience that the seventh-ranked Owls (19-4) shouldn't feel invincible.

"I know that there are teams out there that can whoop us," Delucchi said. "So whenever I'm feeling bored in goal or not sufficiently challenged, I just try and remember all those other times. And that challenges me to do my best -- always."

The 18-year-old rarely tasted victory in high school, with Notre Dame-Belmont unable to contend in the West Catholic Athletic League. Her time on the Stanford water polo club also exposed her to the best talent on the Peninsula.

And then there was the trip to Southern California at the end of September, in which Foothill lost four times in five times -- its only blemishes this season.

"We definitely felt like we were the cool kids on the block up in Northern California," Delucchi said. "And when we got down to SoCal, we got challenged. It was definitely, 'Oh, hey. We need to work harder. This isn't a joke. We're not so cool as we thought we were.'"

The Owls have won 11 games in a row since, with Delucchi allowing more than five goals just twice. Even after splitting time for most of the season with fellow freshman Ashley Arras, the 230 saves made by Delucchi are second in the state only behind College of San Mateo sophomore Daria Kekuewa.

"We pushed each other to work harder because we want each other to do well since we just want to win," Delucchi said of her battle for playing time with Arras, who last saw action Oct. 3 because of an injury. "We're here to support each other for the benefit of the team."

"I've never had so much depth in the cage while coaching," Foothill coach Jeff Bissell said. "A lot of times at the JC level you're trying to find someone with a little of goalie
experience or no goalie experience and developing them into what could be a good goalie at this level."

That certainly wasn't the case with Delucchi and Arras, who led Leland-San Jose to the Central Coast Section Div. I title last year.

Delucchi herself was a late bloomer. Not until her senior year did the 5-foot-7 keeper join the USA Water Polo Olympic Development Program as well as the Stanford "A" Team on the water polo club.

"Things just really started opening up, but unfortunately that was too late for the recruiting process," Delucchi said. "So I somewhat missed the boat, so to speak."

Hungry for the opportunity to play water polo at the next level, she turned down acceptance letters to multiple four-year colleges. This allowed Delucchi to extend her window to get recruited by a Div. I program by showcasing her skills with the Owls.

"The goalie is always the last line of defense, and I'm very comfortable having Dana back there," Bissell said. "She does a great job of covering the cage from post to post. She always seems to get a finger or a hand on the ball."

Delucchi finds allowing even one goal unacceptable. And though shutouts are rare in the sport, Foothill accomplished the feat Oct. 2 when Delucchi made 13 saves during a 15-0 win over Chico State.

"I prefer it to be zero goals against me," Delucchi said. "But you can only control the things you control."

That includes avoiding a sense of complacency and invincibility.

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