Owls provide temporary shelter for Smith

Hailey Smith is a San Jose Sharks fanatic. That's why when she decided to transfer from the University of Maryland back to the Bay Area, one benefit for the sophomore was attending home games at the Shark Tank. Instead, the NHL season is in peril as the owners have locked out the players in a labor dispute.

"I was so excited to be home and be able to go to some games," said Smith, who over Christmas break last year watched the Sharks at HP Pavilion five times in 12 days. "I did cry a little bit when I found out about the lockout."

To help her get through these tough times, the 19-year-old can lean on the Foothill College women's water polo team. The Owls, ranked No. 7 in the state, in a way offered Smith asylum after the program at Maryland was eliminated due to budget cuts.

"I loved Maryland, so initially I was going to stay there," Smith said. "And I really didn't make my decision until late July that I was going to transfer."

Smith was the MVP of the Peninsula Athletic League Bay Division her senior year at Menlo School in Atherton and attracted the attention of multiple Div. I programs.

The 5-foot-6 attacker from Redwood City knew nothing about Maryland until a visit her junior year.

"I absolutely fell madly in love with the school," Smith said. "The team was a lot like this. We were just so close in and out of the pool. We loved our coaches. They were like our parents. But it was hard last season knowing that we were getting cut in the back of our mind."

The announcement that eight teams were under the chopping block at Maryland came last November, right before the signing period. Word was the women's water polo team had to raise $4.2 million by June 1, Smith said.

The Terrapins, who held on to the glimmer of hope that success in the pool would
spare their fate, finished one game shy of reaching the NCAA Championships as the runner-up of the CWPA Eastern Championship game.

Smith contributed, scoring 11 goals in 12 games off the bench.

"I went from being one of the stronger girls in high school to the very, very bottom of the food chain last year," Smith said.

That's no longer the case at Foothill College, where Div. I-caliber athletes have a tendency to thrive. Smith is fifth in the state in scoring with 80 goals for the Owls (19-4), who have yet to lose to an opponent from Northern California.

"She is not afraid to shoot," Foothill coach Jeff Bissell said. "Sometimes at this level you have to coach the confidence into the kids. And there was no need for that. Hailey loves to shoot, and she shoots well. She's got a great arm."

There's one more thing.

"Playing with Hailey is easy because she likes to shoot, but she's very unselfish, if that makes sense," Bissell added.

Foothill is a collection of talent from the Peninsula, including Jamie Breen (Woodside), Gurpuran Singh (Notre Dame-Belmont) and Anna Kim (Mission-San Jose) -- all of which have scored at least 35 goals. Smith, who has 33 assists, attributes the success to the lack of drama on the squad.

"It definitely shows in the water during games that we're able to connect in certain ways, make certain passes and create plays," Smith said. "We're just having fun, we love our coach, we love each other, and I think that has helped us play our best."

Bissell has never won a game at the state championships in his 12 years at Foothill College. But this could be the year the Owls achieve that goal. It starts by winning the Coast Conference Championships this weekend in Los Altos Hills, which would likely earn Foothill the No. 1 seed for the next week’s NorCal Championships for the first time.
"We're hoping for a lot of firsts," Smith said. "And as much as we would love that state title, we just have to do it one step at a time."

"Girl for girl, talent for talent, I feel this is the most talented team I've had at Foothill," Bissell said. "And I think if each girl plays within her particular skill set and doesn't try to do too much -- and realizes there are 12 other girls on the team as well as her -- I think we can achieve all of our goals. And they know that."

After Thanksgiving, Smith will take a 10-day trip to Hawaii, where she will transfer in January. She will be a walk-on with the women's water polo team, though Smith must sit out the spring season due to her time with the Owls. Her final two years of eligibility will be spent with the Rainbow Wahine. Smith plans to major in kinesiology and communications.

"As of now I'm going pre-med," Smith said. "My ultimate goal is to be a cardiologist. But the communications career is if I decide I don't want to spend all the time and money going to med school."

If her path in water polo has taught Smith anything, it's that a backup plan is never a bad idea.

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