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Prairie Stars find 'keeper in Kubal

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Kelli Kubal

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER
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Kelli Kubal isn't bothered by an unexpected turn of events — she just goes with the flow.

"Things don't really bother me," the University of Illinois Springfield sophomore goalkeeper said. "Plans change. It's not a big deal to me."

From switching positions midway through high school to seeing an NCAA Division I offer disappear, the outgoing Kubal handles life in stride.

"She's an upbeat kid," UIS women's soccer coach Pete Kowall said. "If you go to a restaurant she doesn't like, she deals with it. If we don't buy her the gloves she exactly likes, she deals with it. Last year, she didn't like the soccer balls I bought, she dealt with it."

Kubal, who grew up in the Chicago suburb of Woodridge, was a field player until her sophomore year at Downers Grove South High School. That's when her coach approached her with a proposition.

"He said, 'Either you're going to spend another year on the sophomore team or you're going to sit the bench on the varsity team. Maybe you'll get a few minutes or play JV games, but if you want to be a starter on this team it will be as a goalie.' I said, 'OK. It sounds good to me.'"

"He said I had good hands since I played basketball."

Six matches into her sophomore season, Kubal moved into the starting lineup. She had an 0.66 goals against average that first year. She was voted to the Illinois High School Soccer

Coaches Association all-state team the following season. As a senior, Kubal helped Downers Grove South finish

fourth at the Class AA state tournament. She posted 39½ shutouts and her goals against average was never above 1.00 in three seasons.

Change in plans

Playing Division I soccer at the college level was once a goal for Kubal. That's the reason she left one traveling team and began playing for the nationally known Eclipse Select Soccer Club as a high school sophomore. The move netted her a Division I offer.

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Prior to her senior season, Kubal gave an oral commitment to Western Illinois University. Kubal said the rug was pulled from under her when coach Kevin Sherry resigned and took the same position at Louisiana Tech University. Things didn't work out for Kubal at WIU after his departure.

"I had put all my eggs in that one basket," she said. "It was my senior year by then and most recruiting is done. I said, 'Maybe, I'll just go to a bigger school and play club or walk-on somewhere or just play intramurals instead of collegiately.'"

Before she was forced to make a drastic choice, her prayers were answered a few months before graduation. Kowall contacted her club coach. He was looking for a goalkeeper. Kubal traveled to Springfield for a visit with teammate Jessica Jaime. Both ended up signing with the Prairie Stars. Kubal was named to National Soccer Coaches Association of America All-Region Team in her first season at UIS.

"It turned out nice for me," Kubal said. "All my things seem to come out of left field and it seems to work. I go with it. I guess it was meant to be."

The cherry on top when she accepted Kowall's offer was UIS moving up from the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics to NCAA Division II and joining the Great Lakes Valley Conference.

Three GLVC schools are currently ranked in the top 25 and a fourth team received votes in this week's NSCAA Division II national poll.

UIS is seeking its first conference victory. The Prairie Stars are 0-5 in the GLVC and 2-5 overall. The closest they've come to a GLVC win was in a 1-0 loss to Maryville a week ago.

"We're struggling right now and you've got to find the positives," Kowall said. "Kelli is handling it the best she possibly can. When you're the goalkeeper and you're getting scored on a lot and we're not scoring, that's a hill to climb. Kelli gets it. She understands this is going to be a process and it's going to take some time and patience."

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