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Section: [Sports](#)

Page: [01](#)

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Traveling star

Pro dreams take Colchester's Bernard to youth national team

By Alex Abrami

Lauren Bernard doesn't like leaving her family. She doesn't like hopping on a plane and flying to another destination — whether it's to Costa Rica or California — and not knowing the person seated to her left or right.

On such departures, the 15-year-old Colchester High School sophomore cries while saying goodbye to her parents. But the teenager has high aspirations — a professional soccer career — so dealing with a few tearful goodbyes is worth it.

A member of the 15-and-under United States women's national soccer team, Bernard's participation at the elite level, plus her involvement with a Olympic Development Program regional squad and Nordic club, calls for traveling across the country to various camps and tournaments throughout the year.

"I'm going there to do what I love," said Bernard, also a member of the Colchester High School varsity team. "I'm going there to do what I'm good at.

"I want to be paid to play (professional) soccer some day, and this is my chance to do it."

National exposure

A couple of years ago, through her play at the regional level in an ODP tournament, Bernard was recruited to play for the 14-and-under national team. She went to camp last summer and, despite a hamstring injury, was rewarded with another year, slotted into a place in the player pool for the U-15 squad.

Staying with a youth national team for another year gives Bernard a great opportunity: She's eligible to make the 17-and-under squad that, assuming it qualifies, will play in the 2010 World Cup.

Bernard's age — most of the girls selected will be a year older — poses a challenge, said Aaron Heifetz, the press officer for the U.S. women's national teams.

"It's a long shot, but it could happen," said Heifetz. "You just got to make the next camp and distinguish yourself as a player, because they're so many."

Regardless of her future standing with the national team, Bernard understands the benefit.

"I know I'm going to be a step higher when I leave (camp)," she said, "and I like that feeling, knowing I'm coming back a better player."

Bernard has the skills to play several positions. From outside back or midfielder to an attacking player, her mix of speed, power and ball control caught national attention.

"She's very dominant with her left foot; very fast and focused in game," said Mike Dickey, the U-15 national coach.

All day, every day

Nordic coach Todd Wennar calls Bernard a "gym rat" who wants "a soccer ball on her foot every day."

Colchester coach Jeff Paul elaborated.

"Lauren Bernard eats, drinks and sleeps soccer," Paul said. "This is what she was born to do."

If Bernard's longtime passion for soccer was evident for Wennar and Paul, it was smack-you-in-the-face obvious for her father, Pat Bernard, and Hank Bechtel, her coaches for many years as she rose through the Nordic ranks.

"One thing I always noticed ... you can show her some sort of ball control move and she was the type of player who would go home and work on it," Bechtel said. "She played hard at practices and in matches — very committed."

Bernard admits she doesn't know what to do when she takes a hiatus from soccer — for all of two weeks in early August — but it's the love of the sport that drives her.

"When you are good at something, you can't help but love it," she explained. "It takes my mind off things. I enjoy the game; I love having the ball at my feet. ... My parents have supported me. I love everything about it."

Colchester connection

Bernard has pumped in five goals this fall from a central midfielder position, helping Colchester to a 2-2-1 start. She hopes to have the Lakers contending for a state crown; they made a surprise run to the Division I semifinals last year with Bernard mainly playing defense.

Whether it's playing defense or midfield, Bernard is patrolling the same field that Kristi Lefebvre once ruled. The former Laker great, who played at the University of Connecticut and is now an assistant for the University of Vermont women's team, also made the youth national teams during her high school days. Lefebvre coached Bernard last summer during ODP.

"It's pretty interesting. (Paul) coached me my last year and now's he got Lauren," Lefebvre said.

Paul links the pair as cornerstone players.

"Lauren reminds me of Kristi. What made them impact players, what separates them, are their mentalities," Paul said. "Lauren is very young and still has a long way to go, but you can see the same characteristics."

"I look up to (Lefebvre)," Bernard said. "She's a good player and she went places. I want to do something like her."

Bernard's next plane ride is in November, when she meets with her national team in Florida. For now, she is focused on her high school team.

"I think we can win a championship," she said. "We have stuff to work on, but I don't think it's too far away from us."

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