

Pair of Valley college athletes reunite with past coaches

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(Photo: Mesa Community College)

Mesa Community College quarterback Rathen Ricedorff and Paradise Valley soccer star Megan Schulze don't know each other, but they have more in common than they realize. Both players are Phoenix natives who left the Valley for short periods of time but found their way back.

Both players spent a year at Division I schools before returning to local colleges to restart their careers under coaches they knew when they were younger. Both are first-year leaders of two of the most high-powered offenses in the Valley.

Ricedorff took over a struggling MCC team, and its scoring per game more than doubled. His play recently earned him the Western States Football League's offensive player of the week for the second consecutive week.

Schulze is tied for second in the nation in scoring and has helped her team dominate most opponents so thoroughly that she has yet to play an entire game.

Both relish the opportunity to return to Division I competition. But in their short college careers, both have experienced many obstacles.

The Mesa sidelines



Mesa Community College quarterback Rathen Ricedorff. (Photo: Mesa Community College)

Ricedorff's pinkie finger was sliced so badly he feared there might be damage to the tendon. One of this knuckles was crushed. The break is referred to as a boxer's fracture because it commonly occurs when an untrained person throws a punch and connects with the wrong part of the fist.

Ricedorff didn't throw a punch. He sustained the injury when a gate was thrown open and a piece of it rolled over his throwing hand. Worse still, the accident happened only minutes before last week's game against Pima College.

So, he went out and threw for 249 yards and three touchdowns and ran for two more. Then, he was named WSFL offensive player of the week for the second time in a row.

As hard as it was to play with the injury, the harder part comes now. He has to watch from the sideline for the next four to six weeks. He knows the sideline intimately but as familiar as it is, he would rather be on the field.

Ricedorff grew up in Mesa. His father was an assistant coach on the MCC football team for two years, and the father's workplace was the son's playground. Ricedorff roamed the sidelines during games and practices and idolized the big college players.

He played quarterback for his father, Randy, at Show Low High School, broke five passing records in his career and led his team to the Class 3A championship his senior year. After high school, he went on a two-year LDS mission to Raleigh, North Carolina, which limited his college football recruitment.

In 2014, he was given preferred walk-on status and a redshirt at ASU but without a scholarship, the financial burden was sizable. He returned to MCC in January 2015 and a coach he was familiar with from his senior year at Show Low.

Coach Ryan Felker welcomed Ricedorff but made it clear to the 6-foot-1 quarterback that he would not be handed the starting job.

MCC scored 21 points in each of its first two games, both losses, but Ricedorff showed enough potential in the fourth quarter of the second game that Felker decided it was time for a change.

"He brought that energy," Felker said. "He and a few others, they have that never-quit attitude."

The next week, Ricedorff finally got his first collegiate start. The feeling was "incredible."

“Realistically, I’ve been waiting for five years,” Ricedorff said. “My last start in a football game was in 2010, my high school season, so I’ve been waiting to get back on that field and prove myself for a long time now.”

That first start turned out to be a 55-52 overtime victory over Phoenix College in which he had 349 total yards and four touchdowns, a performance that earned him his first player of the week honor. Last week, despite the severe hand injury, he led the team to a 41-27 win over Pima and a 2-2 record overall.

Ricedorff is 2-0 as a college starter, but after a rod was surgically inserted into his hand, he will have to wait until at least the Arizona Western game in four weeks to continue the streak.

The tip of the spear



Paradise Valley Community College forward Megan Schulze. (Photo: Paradise Valley Community College)

Schulze has the rare opportunity to play for the same coach at two different points in her life. She grew up in Phoenix and played club soccer for coach Jon Ruzan.

“She was one of our fantastic goal scorers, even when she was 10 or 11 years old,” Ruzan said.

As Schulze continued to play for Ruzan, he became an important person in her life.

“He pretty much became my second dad,” Schulze said. “He was my coach all the way up until high school.”

Schulze’s father is in the Air Force, and he was transferred to California before her freshman year in high school, so she left Phoenix and Ruzan for Arnold O’ Beckman High School in Irvine.

Her next stop was the Air Force Academy. Though she was a solid contributor on the Academy’s soccer team, things didn’t work out in Colorado Springs. When she needed a change, she knew exactly who to call: Ruzan.

Ruzan had taken over the Paradise Valley women’s soccer team from Kacey Bingham, a two-time national championship coach and a two-time NJCAA coach of the year.

Ruzan added Schulze to a team that has turned out to be “surprisingly good,” in the coach’s words.

He rattles off the names of the players who form the backbone of the team: goalkeeper Madison Lucas, defender and captain Tasha Coleman, and midfielders Andrea Ortiz, America Garcia and Maria Del Rio.

“And at the tip of the spear is Megan Schulze,” Ruzan said. “She has an uncanny ability to get open in really tight spaces, and she puts (the ball) away.”

Schulze has scored 15 goals in nine matches and the team has outscored opponents 38-6, including seven shutouts. The 8-1 record has earned Paradise Valley a No. 8 national ranking, with the only loss to No. 6 Pima College.

At the halfway point of the season, the team is fighting for home-field advantage in the playoffs and has a critical rematch with Pima in mid-October.

As for Schulze, her coach’s voicemail has been filling up with calls from four-year universities inquiring about her future services but none bigger than the two he spoke to this past weekend: Arizona State and the University of Arizona.