

Adelaide Gay: UNC Soccer Champ

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Adelaide Gay first faced rejection by the Pink Coat Detective Agency in second grade. The exclusive clique rejected her idea for a new member, so she left them in defiance.

She has hated rejection ever since. Luckily, she hasn't faced too much of it.

Since then, the 28-year-old professional goalkeeper has been a part of slightly cooler cliques, including the 2012 National Championship UNC Women's soccer team, professional teams in Portland and Washington, and even in Sweden and Iceland. She even made her own clique- starting her own business for soccer planners. Her defiance and ambitious attitude from that day in second grade continued through her life and career- she's someone who prefers playing the second half because of the danger it offers.

But she still had obstacles. Standing at only 5-foot-6 inches to guard a 8-foot goal and always amongst the youngest on her teams, Gay has faced rejection and doubts all of her life.

"I kind of ignore it," Gay said. "Sometimes I think that is the hardest part. You can say it doesn't matter as much as you want, but it's ingrained in my being at this point."

Gay tweeted, ""May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears"- Nelson Mandela." Gay's life choices have followed this. She grew up playing soccer, following her dad's footsteps and Karina LeBlanc's, a member of the Canadian National team who came to live with her, and who Gay describes as a "huge influence". She hoped to continue when she went to Yale University, but she wasn't happy, so she took her first big risk: following her hope of playing soccer by transferring to UNC.

"I think they basically told me you're probably not going to play here," Gay said. "When you transfer, it's a terrible process as an athlete."

Things turned terribly good Gay. She loved it at UNC, describing it as "better in every single way," and in her second year there, she got her big break: a chance to play when two other goalies got injured. For most, it would be a high-pressure situation. Not for Gay.

"I wasn't nervous," Gay said. "I couldn't really make my situation any worse."

She ended up making it a whole lot better. In her senior year, The Tar Heels won 1-0 against Stanford in the semi-finals in double overtime, going on to win the National Title 4-1 against Penn State- a game where Gay made two saves.

"I got chills all down my body when we won the semifinal game," Gay said. "I still can't believe it. Every step of the way, you always thought it was going to be the end."

Gay finished her time at UNC with a 21-3-1 overall record and let up only 16 goals. Her season was done, but the influence from UNC was not.

"If I hadn't come here, I wouldn't be playing soccer still," Gay said. "I felt like Anson and everybody else was happy I was there. I think that's had a huge impact on me as a person now. I try to make sure that everyone else feels that way."

Winning the National Championship at UNC wasn't the end for Gay- she wasn't done taking risks yet. She went on to play for the Portland Thorns professionally, where she won the Championship in 2013. In 2014, she played for the Washington Spirit Reserves, making it to the W-League Final. Her next big risk? Crossing the ocean.

"There was definitely a sense of I need to go away and work and do well, and then I'll be able to go home," Gay said.

Gay played for a professional team in Sweden called Kvarnsvedens IK. She was in an unknown, frigid land. Not only was her life completely different, so was her game. Players no longer just kicked the ball at her as hard as they could, they tried to catch her off guard. As with many of her obstacles, Gay adjusted, and helped the team with the second division and move up to the first division for 2016.

"I almost wish that I'd not been so focused on the outcome," Gay said. "The amount of pressure that I put on myself and my teammates was a lot. I felt that I was going to prove myself worthy of playing in the first division in any country."

Gay took this lesson into her next big risk: playing professionally in Iceland, on a tiny island with an active volcano.

"I definitely went into the season in Iceland with a different approach," Gay said. "If you don't enjoy what you're doing in the moment, what's the point? I play because I genuinely like to play soccer."

On a small field surrounded by towering, jagged rocks, Gay channeled her volcano and erupted her power. After a strong season, she led her team to the Icelandic Cup. The team was losing 2-1 when Gay jumped up for an impactful save, her red-orange and grey Nike cleats hitting the turf.

"I don't even remember putting my hand up, and I saved it," Gay said. "[It was] mentally tough, because it's easy to give up on a game at that point."

Thanks to Gay never giving up, the team won the cup in overtime. As they headed back to the ferry that was equipped with barf boxes, the celebration was magical. Fireworks glowed in the night sky from all the surrounding islands, and a police officer who had been on the team the last time they won 15 years ago brought them champagne.

"The sheer excitement, I mean I'll never experience that in my entire life," Gay said. "It just meant so much to those people, so it was special in a very different way."

It was an amazing moment for Gay, because it was an amazing moment for others- something that illustrates her selflessness.

After the season, Gay returned to her roots in Chapel Hill, and began preparing for her next risk: trying out for a professional team in Seattle.

"I'd been away for three years, and it was just like I need to be home, to play here," Gay said excitedly. "I honestly believe at some point, even if I have to wait three years, I will get a chance somewhere."

If you go to the front page of Gay's website, you will see a quote at the bottom. It reads, "The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars."

Gay showed her madness and burning personality when she left her exclusive clique in second grade, and with every risk she took from there on out. Her height never stopped her. Rejection never stopped her. It ignited her flame.

In a blog post on her website, Gay wrote, "The only thing I had to fear was failure. And that's something I've never been afraid of."