

STAYING AND THRIVING

Inside the unique journey of
Caroline Doherty (Hingham, Mass.)
to an NCAA Division I commitment

By Patrick Donnelly

CAROLINE DOHERTY had a choice to make. Only in eighth grade, the Hingham, Mass., native and her parents toured prep schools and weighed whether she should attend Hingham High.

“Every school I toured, I liked, but I just couldn’t get myself to leave,” Doherty said.

“I kept saying, ‘I want to do a year at Hingham and see how it goes, and maybe next year I’ll go to a private school.’”

Those conversations continued to come up as Doherty filled box scores as a freshman and sophomore. She toured schools including Williston Northampton and Tabor Academy and heard from several more.

Every time, she decided to stay at Hingham.

“I probably visited some schools two or three times, but I just remember I couldn’t get myself to leave Hingham,” Doherty said. “I loved it so much. I just wanted to keep playing here. ... Being at Hingham, we had really great upperclassmen. I knew my sister (Brenna) was going to come up and play with me my senior year.”

Now a senior, Doherty’s decisions have paid off. The 5-foot-6 winger posted 19 goals and 25 points in her first seven games as the Harborwomen remained undefeated, firmly among the early favorites. She recently became Hingham’s all-time leading goal scorer across both girls and boys hockey with her 122nd career goal on Christmas Eve. Currently sitting at 129 goals and 198 points, the 200-point mark is next. The cherry

on top of it all: This past fall she committed to play Division 1 hockey at Holy Cross.

Most importantly, she did it all her way.

Doherty is unique to a landscape where so many of New England’s college hockey prospects come up through prep schools and academies. But the future Crusader bucked the trend.

“I think everybody kind of said, ‘Oh, you’re not going to commit out of a public school. That’s not likely,’” Doherty said. “I think that was honestly the most motivating part of it all. Nobody really thought I could do it out of a public school, which is fair because it’s not common.”

Most college commitments in the MIAA are for Division 3 or ACHA club programs. One recent example, Kasey Litwin (Swampscott, Mass.), is a freshman defender at Nichols after captaining St. Mary’s to a title last season. Former Duxbury goalie Anna McGinty is now at Framingham State after back-to-back state championships. Among current MIAA players, Bishop Feehan senior Chloe Bryda (Cumberland, R.I.) will head to Rivier and Winthrop senior Talia Martucci is off to Salem State next year.

St. Mary’s Jenna Chaplain (Peabody, Mass.), now a sophomore forward at Assumption, is one of the few, like Doherty, to earn a Division 1 look. There are some others, too, like Grace Nelson (Middleboro, Mass.), formerly of Bishop Feehan. She’s among a smattering of players who went on to play at Sacred Heart, which is in the NEWHA conference with Assumption.

But most players of Doherty’s caliber likely would have opted to make the jump to prep, whether before or during high

school. There are at least 60 Division 1 commits playing in NEPSAC this season.

"These kids go play for their club teams, and all the talk, starting at U-12, is, 'Where are you going to prep school?'" Duxbury coach Dan Najarian said. "So they get influenced."

Pembroke's Jen Birolini, the school's all-time leader in points and recently one of the MIAA's most prolific scorers along with Doherty, is repeating her junior year at Tabor. Duxbury's Maddie Greenwood is doing the same at Phillips Andover. Bella Freitas (Everett, Mass.), who scored more than 40 goals and 60 points as a freshman at St. Mary's last winter, is now a freshman at Cushing. Ayla Abban left Duxbury for Tabor after her junior year, playing two years of prep and committing to Amherst College. After standing out at Canton, Boston College blueliner Olivia Maffeo played three productive seasons at Nobles.

The hope is Doherty's successful path will influence other elite players, whether at Hingham or elsewhere around Massachusetts, to stick around longer.

"I think it helps keep players in the program," Hingham coach Courtney Turner said. "Having someone to look up to, like, 'OK, Caroline is going to Holy Cross. It's definitely possible. I can stay here, play with my friends, have a sense of pride for my town and my community and hang out with my friends every single day who I've grown up with, played hockey with since I was 5 years old, and try to chase down a trophy in the playoffs.'"

As the talent pool continues to get deeper around the state and programs grow with it, others believe the MIAA can be a viable stepping stone, whether or not those top-tier talents stay for the full four years.

Najarian has had his share of conversations with players who have either chosen to stay or go.

"Not every path is the same. My mindset has become, 'Let's get you here for two or three years. Let's do a hell of a job preparing you so that when you are a junior, you're mature enough physically, emotionally, mentally to go carry a load at a Phillips Andover or a Tabor or something like that,'" Najarian said. "Instead of sticking your head in the sand and saying, 'We are the final destination.' Maybe we're not. I think it's pretty clear, given the college landscape, that we're not. The MIAA isn't the final stop on a lot of these kids' high school careers, be it boys or girls.

"I've taken the approach this year to kind of embrace that a little bit and say, 'Hey, we're going to play all the best teams in the MIAA. You're going to get a program that looks and feels as much like a prep school program as you can get with game film, your own locker room, workout sessions, academic responsibilities, community responsibilities, all of those things that are going to be expected of you when and if you make the jump to prep school. We can provide that for you here. Oh, and the most wonderful side effect of that is you get to play in front of your hometown.'"

He believes a path that includes the MIAA could be especially valuable if a player isn't ready to board at a prep school away from home as a freshman or sophomore, limiting their options to local day schools.

"All we're trying to tell kids is they've got a viable option where they're going to improve," Najarian said. "Then maybe the options open up because you're more mature, and mom and dad aren't worried about a 16 or 17-year-old going to live on-campus somewhere versus a 14- or 15-year-old."

So, how did Doherty do it?

For one, she changed club teams this past summer, going

from the Bay State Breakers to the Massachusetts Spitfires, which featured 11 Division 1 hockey commits on the roster this season. Despite missing tryouts, coach Joe Hulbig gave her a shot, and she earned a spot on the team. Doherty impressed over the summer at the Wizards Showcase with two goals in three games before carrying the momentum into the fall at the NAHA Labor Day Tournament (four goals in four games) and beyond. Aside from Birolini, who was headed to Tabor in the fall, Doherty was the lone MIAA product on the roster.

Even though she was still playing in the NEGHL and many of the same showcases, Doherty felt she had more exposure to college coaches.

"So many of my friends were going off to college and leaving the Breakers, so I kind of wanted a change and a different group of girls to play with," Doherty said. "There's been so much exposure to coaches, and Joe is awesome at connecting with coaches. So many of them were at our games. There was a lot of opportunity. I think that switch was the biggest thing. I was on a great club team, and I was grateful for that."

As important as getting that exposure during split-season

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Hingham's all-time leading goal scorer, Caroline Doherty will play college hockey at Holy Cross.

■ HS GIRLS: DOHERTY

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hockey is, Turner emphasized much of the onus falls on players putting in the effort beyond just playing in those high-end environments.

"Everyone does have a unique path, whether it's stick around for one year and then decide to go or stay. A lot of it also revolves around different club teams and tournaments that you play in the spring, summer and fall and just really putting in the work to email coaches and put your name out there," Turner said. "I think that's 90 percent of the battle. You need to put in the work off the ice, whether it's in the gym, talking to coaches or getting on campus. That's on the players to figure out.

"You just have to be realistic about where you fall, too. If you're realistic and relentless in trying to make that path happen for yourself, it can happen, but you have to put the work in. You have to be able to look in the mirror and be like, 'All right, this is where I stand. I want to play college hockey.' Maybe it's not going to be at the D-1 level, and that's OK. You just have to find out what you want to do."

Turner also believes as the quality of hockey in the MIAA improves, especially with more tournaments featuring the best teams and players like the Hingham Showcase

and the Tenney Cup, more and more colleges could take notice.

"The pool to pull from is getting a lot bigger. ... If you can put all the talent in one place more often, it would be a lot more beneficial," Turner said. "There are a number of girls who stay because they want to. They have pride in their hometowns. They want to play with their friends, and they just aren't getting seen.

"Obviously, it's hard (for coaches) in-season when colleges are still playing, but even the MIAA playoffs, that Notre Dame (Hingham)-St. Mary's game last year was unbelievable, and it was at (9 o'clock) in the morning. I guess we just need more people to know about the MIAA because some people just don't know. All they know is prep."

Doherty impressed on her club teams and backed it up by dominating in the MIAA the last few seasons.

"It's always, 'Well, you're doing great in club, and now you're going back to the MIAA. How are you going to do there?'" Najarian said. "Well, Caroline blew everybody's doors off. That solidified her status as an elite hockey player. Not to knock anyone, but she didn't just go back and score 20 or 25 points and be a nice factor. She is and has been the best pure goal scorer in the MIAA. It was the best of both worlds for her."

Doherty owes it all to hard work. She has no regrets and hopes she can serve as an example for other players and families in similar positions.

"My biggest thing was I loved the people and everybody pushed me to be better. Playing for your hometown, I think that's everybody's dream," Doherty said. "If you're working as hard as you are and as hard as people at private schools or prep schools, everything will work out in the end. Obviously, it is very stressful and you have to put in so much work because, I mean, college coaches, they're not going to come to Hingham versus NDA. But I've had a great experience." ■

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— Duxbury coach Dan Najarian, on Hingham star Caroline Doherty

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