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Annika Huhta: A natural-born leader from across the world

Keira Gilmore

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Senior midfielder Annika Huhta kicked two shots on goals during the game against TCU on Oct. 17, a season high for her at UCF.

Keira Gilmore

At just 8 years old, Annika Huhta began kicking her way around the soccer pitch, unsuspecting that her exceptional soccer skills would lead her to a career spanning two countries—a dream few achieve.

“I fell in love with the process,” Huhta said. “I have always loved practicing even more

sometimes than playing.”

Huhta is a senior midfielder and team captain for the UCF women’s soccer team. She grew up in Espo, Finland and arrived in the U.S. as a college freshman in 2021 at North Carolina.

Soccer in Finland

In Finland, Huhta was often the youngest player on the team, stating that there was no real age group for her to play in. Because of this, she ended up playing with mostly boys or with older girls for almost four years before there was a team her own age.

As an only child, Huhta said that she relied on the support and sacrifices from her parents to help carry her through the ups and downs that came with being a young female athlete in Finland.

“He [Huhta’s father] was always saying, ‘I’m gonna be your number one fan,’” Huhta said when describing her father’s eagerness toward her as a soccer player.

Huhta describes her dad as being her biggest supporter throughout the years, always encouraging her to practice and to keep improving.

“Before I came to the US, I don’t remember a single game that he wasn’t watching,” Huhta said. “He’s always been there no matter what, practice or game, no matter if it was raining or sunshine.”

After many years of kicking the ball around the pitch with club teams throughout Finland, Huhta’s desire to constantly challenge herself led her to sign with the Finnish National team. Huhta said that at just 15 years old, this made her one of the youngest on the roster.

Huhta played for three years with the Finnish National team, representing her country in the women’s under-16, WU-17, WU-18 and WU-19, before coming to the U.S. in 2021.

Huhta describes her biggest soccer memory in 2018 when she got to play in the World Cup with the Finnish National team in Uruguay.

“It’s one of the highest competitions on the national level, so being able to say I was there and

that I went through that, that's huge," Huhta said.

Soccer in the U.S.

While many may see a dedicated soccer player on the field, Huhta's real journey started when she moved to the U.S. in 2021.

Huhta said that some of the biggest obstacles she had to overcome were learning a new language and the difference in team atmospheres. Huhta said it took at least 6 months to really learn English here.

She described the women's team in Finland as also being only a club team to most of the players and that it is just work to them, where they practice, play the games and go home after.

Here in the U.S. Huhta described the women's soccer teams as being part of a family and not just a soccer team.

"It's a big family environment, we see each other on and off the field," Huhta said. "You form these closer friendships here."

After arriving to UCF in 2022, Huhta suffered a torn hip labrum. She said that it took a while to figure out what had happened, but once they did, doctors and physical trainers determined that the injury required surgery and physical therapy which limited her playing time that season.

A dedicated leader

After overcoming a language barrier, cultural differences and an injury, head coach Tiffany Roberts Sahaydak said Huhta had proven that she had what it takes to lead the UCF women's soccer team.

Huhta, a dedicated athlete, became a senior team captain alongside redshirt junior forward Mia



During the game against Cincinnati on Oct. 25, senior midfielder Annika Huhta (20) played the entire 90 minutes at the UCF track and soccer complex.

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Asenjo and senior forward Chloe Netzel for the 2024 season.

“She's a little bit more on the serious side, but she's easy to connect with,” Roberts Sahaydak said.

Roberts Sahaydak said that Huhta excelled in the new position she was playing, a defensive center midfielder, and embraced the opportunity this season to step up as a leader.

“She just really embraced that role, which was really big for our team because we didn't quite have a natural six, and she became that,” Roberts Sahaydak said.

Huhta felt honored that her teammates chose her as a leader but said that it took her growing personally to get there.

“I had to put myself first in a good position on the team, to where I felt like I was ready to take on the leadership role,” Huhta said.

Roberts Sahaydak described Huhta as also being disciplined and fully committed to the sport since her arrival at UCF.

“She's okay holding someone accountable or enforcing the standards because she cares about it [soccer] so much,” Roberts Sahaydak said.

When looking towards the future, Huhta said that her three years at UCF have helped her grow on a personal level, and that she wants to continue playing soccer and take those steps toward professional soccer.

“I feel like I'm ready to take on the big world now,” Huhta said.



Senior midfielder Annika Huhta has helped lead the team as a team captain this season through wins, losses and ties.

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