



Charlie Webb's Unlikely Journey to the Field

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It was the final minutes of the NCAA field hockey quarterfinal playoff game. Charlie Webb looked onto the University of Maryland field as he tracked the motion of the ball by his Virginia teammates. Amidst the clatter of sticks, a forceful swing of a Virginia stick sent the ball hurling past the goalie into the net.

A resounding cheer erupted from the team as Charlie threw his arms back with excitement and swung into a backflip, his signature celebration move. The goal increased UVA's lead over Maryland and injected a surge of confidence into the players, solidifying their stance in the crucial playoff game. Charlie could feel the energy amongst the team. Victory seemed within grasp, yet a bitter truth remained. Charlie would not play in their next game, just as he had not played in this game. As the male practice player for the varsity team, he was bound to remain on the sidelines.

Growing up in New Jersey, Webb was introduced to field hockey in seventh grade. On a weekday afternoon in the backyard of his friend's house, he picked up a stick and started hitting around. Several of his girl friends played and he didn't want to be left out, so he decided to play with them. In middle school, co-ed was still a possibility for the sport so after his friends began to teach him how to play and the rules of the sport, he joined an indoor co-ed league.

His first goal was a reverse chip, a trickier one to execute than a traditional shot. It was during his first game in the league, playing amongst the girls who introduced him to the sport. Though he was excited to be with his friends, he was more excited to finally experience the thrill of playing a sport in a competitive setting, something he had never done before.

"The feeling I got celebrating that goal with my friends, it was awesome. It's why I kept playing," Webb said.

Once middle school ended, Webb faced the realization that opportunities for male field hockey players were hard to come by. Co-ed indoor leagues were no longer a possibility so he had to turn to other options. His freshman year, he earned a spot on his school's varsity team as a practice player. The role meant that he could do everything with the team - practice, lift, watch film - except play in games. Though this situation was not ideal, it benefitted both the team and Webb. He could experience playing with a team of his school friends, and they could improve their skills by practicing with him since he was faster and stronger than them.

“It's unfortunate that once you reach a certain age, opportunities just vanish,” Webb said.

Opportunities existed in select all-boys leagues, but these required traveling to New York for weekend tournaments or flying across the country to play on the men's youth national team in California. Traveling to play on these teams was not only impractical but expensive for Webb's family.

Despite struggling to find ways to play, Webb's love and passion for the sport was not stunted. He was determined to continue playing in college so in the spring of his senior year, Webb reached out to several schools to inquire if they would accept male practice players. One of the coaches who responded was UVA's assistant coach, Ole Keusgen. After phone calls and a visit to the team, Keusgen offered Webb the role of practice player. It was the opportunity he had dreamed of. Virginia's team was ranked #4 in the nation entering that fall, and Webb knew the team included some of the best players in the country and in the world. Though Webb could not technically commit to the team as a real player, he was grateful for the chance to continue to play at the highest level yet.

That fall, he also tried out and made UVA's club field hockey team. Though also primarily made up of female players, the team did allow him to play in games with other male players. The team had no coaches, no resources, and no funding. Twice a week, at 9 p.m., the club team practiced on Carr's Hill field with a gangly squad of over 20 players. With so many players and no proper coach to corral them and guide their skill improvement, Webb often felt stagnant with his progress. In addition, the field is natural turf, not what field hockey is designed to be played on.

Despite these challenges, the club team offered Webb a chance to play in games. When he's lucky, Webb gets to go face-to-face with other male players. In one club game against Virginia Tech last season, he was playing defense on another male midfielder. After the two fought throughout the game with aggression and physicality, the VT player approached Webb to show his appreciation.

“It's nice to see another guy on the field and feel like I can push them around,” the player said to Webb.

Webb often felt that though he played the same sport as the other girls, he couldn't be too aggressive or physical when defending them, so having someone to relate to meant a lot.

His experience on the varsity team wasn't perfect either. The varsity team had better resources - professional coaches, a state-of-the-art astroturf field, high-quality equipment - but didn't acknowledge him as an official athlete due to Title IX rules.

Title IX is a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in federally funded activities, including athletics. In order to promote gender equality in sports, the law requires that for every male-only sport a school offers, it must also offer a sport for girls. As a result, field hockey is exclusive to female athletes only. Webb is prohibited from being a registered player and he cannot travel or stay with the team on away games.

“I understand the rules, but it’s sad to see Charlie give so much and not get that back,” said Tyler Kennedy, a goalie for the UVA varsity team. “He doesn’t seem to let it bother him, though. He’s just non-stop positivity and competitiveness.”

A challenge Webb has faced over the last year of playing in college has been deciding which team to prioritize- a team he can play on but has less experience and funding, or a team that plays at the top level in the country but won’t allow him on the field.

As the fall semester and seasons progressed, the stakes for the NCAA national title were rising and Webb knew he needed to be present to keep up the intensity of practice. He began to focus his energy on the varsity team. By late November 2023, the UVA field hockey team made it to the NCAA tournament to compete for a national title. After defeating Saint Joseph’s in the first round, the team traveled up to Maryland for the quarter-finals.

“I get sad sometimes, it's the worst,” Webb said. “When they're doing really well, I wish I could go out and play with them and have some fun.”

Webb’s dismal envy for his teammates playing in these games did not deter his pride for their success. He needed to support his teammates, even if he could not travel and stay with them. He drove himself 3 hours to College Park, Maryland, and found a place to sleep for the weekend with a family friend. He packed his own meals that he ate with the team, not minding the extra effort required to be with them on the sidelines.

“I felt like I needed to be there,” Webb said. “We all worked so hard and put in so many hours all season, I wanted to see it pay off for them.”

UVA dominated Maryland in the quarterfinals and advanced to the semifinals against the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Once again, Webb drove himself the distance to be with his team. UNC was the #1 ranked team in the nation, and he wanted to support his friends in this crucial game. Unfortunately, their season ended there, and they lost to UNC by two goals. The players and coaches were devastated to be so close to a national championship and fall short, yet Webb was starstruck by the entire experience.

“It was awesome to be there and witness that level of talent and skill,” Webb said.

Even if the team lost and he couldn’t be on the field to contribute to their efforts at the moment, he was still grateful to have experienced their run in the tournament. Webb loves to play the sport, but he also loves the game itself. He is willing to sacrifice his time on the club field in subpar conditions if it means witnessing the best collegiate players in the nation play the sport he worships.

Webb plans to try out for the men’s national team this summer, but he has his calendar marked for July 20th when summer practice for the varsity team begins again.

“Hopefully, we'll get the national championship next year.”