



Contact: Matt Dougherty, NFHCA Director of Communications

Email: matt.dougherty@nfhca.org

For Immediate Release: August 2, 2017

Converse Joins Growing List of Southern Squads

By Matt Dougherty, NFHCA Director of Communications

On November 15, when all but 12 collegiate field hockey teams had wrapped up their 2016 seasons and started to point towards 2017, Kelsey Lovelace was about to embark on a daunting task: build the Converse field hockey program from the ground up to be able to compete this fall.

Lovelace was hired that day as the head coach at Converse, which had announced just over a month earlier that it was adding field hockey as the 13th sport at the all-women's college. The Valkyries will compete in the Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) at the Division II level as the school in Spartanburg, South Carolina joins a growing group of field hockey programs in the south.

"We wanted to add field hockey because a lot of our board of trustees members were pushing to bring the sport back," Lovelace said of a program that first began in 1973 before being discontinued in 1983. "Since Limestone, Newberry, Belmont Abbey and Queens had added field hockey, we wanted to get on board and make it happen. We are an all-women's college and the sport promotes the school's message of empowerment and fits right along with our whole mission."

Lovelace's sentiments were similar to those expressed by Athletic Director Joy Couch, who stated the following when Converse announced the addition of field hockey on Oct. 5: "Field Hockey will certainly bolster our continued growth as an Athletic Department and College, as we provide educational opportunities to our current and future student-athletes in which they have the ability to excel."

It took Converse just six weeks to hire Lovelace, who had to get to work right away to be able to field a squad that could compete in the fall.

“When I got here there was nothing in place,” Lovelace said. “I’m basically building from the ground up and I had to start right away to get a team ready by the fall. I walked into a completely empty office and was tasked with finding a team. We have been recruiting heavily because nobody knew we had field hockey this year. So our first goal was reaching out to clubs and coaches to let them know we had a program, and we had to focus on getting equipment and more to get ready for the first season and worked on that in partnering with Longstreth and USA Field Hockey.”

Getting ready for the 2017 season was a challenging task, but one that Lovelace pulled off despite some trying moments.

“I’m definitely not going to lie, it’s been a very stressful process,” Lovelace said. “I think everything is going to pay off and we just need to see it through. We talked to other programs and my experience at Limestone (as an assistant coach) helped in knowing how to build the program. A lot of the student-athletes in our first class will be international because they are wanting to come and play here and are more prone to coming to an all-women’s college. Getting started so late, in December and January a lot of the 2017s were already committed so there weren’t a lot of people available. We did get a couple of good players late and are still recruiting 2017s, but we have a full team for next year and are looking to build towards our 2018 season.”

She added, “It was tricky when I started because I had to look at 2018s as well as 2017s. My pool of 2018 was a lot bigger, but I think our first class is going to be great and we are just developing it. I do get to look at 2018s now and we are in the process of bringing them in, but at first I was only able to focus on 2017s and in about February I realized we had to focus on 2018s as well.”

Lovelace spent the past two seasons as an assistant coach at Limestone College, a program that had its origins in the same manner as Converse. Limestone announced that it was adding field hockey on Nov. 4, 2008, and three weeks later hired Lindsay Jackson as the first head coach. After going through a winless campaign in her first season in 2009, Jackson led the Saints’ program to consistent growth that featured a winning record by season three and consecutive ECAC titles in 2013 and 2014, reaching the top ten in the national NFHCA Coaches Poll each season.

While Jackson departed to take the head coaching position at Holy Cross before Lovelace began her time at Limestone, the similar situations give some direction for the potential growth of the program at Converse.

“Lindsay started the program at Limestone and knows a lot of the stress that I’m under,” Lovelace said. “She’s been a big help with being a voice of reason when things get a little crazy. The athletic director at Limestone, Mike Cerino, has been a big help since he was there when the program started. My athletic director here is great and she will go out of her way to help me. I have amazing support if I do feel overwhelmed and my time and energy can be dedicated to what I need to do to get our program going.”

Lovelace also believes the program at Converse will have growth potential because of the rise of field hockey participation in the area.

“I’ve worked with Jess Mulhern (Limestone assistant coach) and Hannah Dave (Newberry head coach) along with Sally Goggin from USA Field Hockey to help promote the sport in our area. We are inviting high school athletic directors to our games in the hopes that they will sponsor as a high-school sport and that would it would be taught earlier and people could look to play in college. We’ve seen it in the last 10 years in lacrosse with growth into Florida and Georgia, and I think it can happen the same way with field hockey. There is a club director in Charleston who is from Upstate New York and really advocating for the growth of the sport. We’ve seen it in Charlotte with four or five clubs there who have produced some good Division I and Division II players and it will eventually be big on the whole east coast.”

Soon, all the last-minute recruiting and work to get ready for the 2017 season will culminate as the Valkyries step on the field for the first time in August. Lovelace knows there will be obstacles but wants to begin building on the field in year one.

“There’s going to be a lot of hills I haven’t even come to yet,” she said. “All of my girls are already in communication and getting to know each other right now. It will be weird stepping into a new place, so them getting to know each other now will help the transition. The girls are more excited than even I am to get going, and preseason will be really important since it’s our first chance to get things together on the field. Our strength and conditioning staff is working with the girls now so we can focus on field hockey when we get on the field. We are working now and planning out meetings about expectations for us and from our girls. We’re going to be a smaller team in the first year, but I expect these girls to do great things.”

She added, “I feel like a lot of people will see us as a first-year program that would be lucky to win a couple of games, but every day I want to get better and become a team with experience. All of these girls will come in and get experience, so by year three and four they will have played more than most of the other juniors and seniors they are facing and by then we want to be a force down in the south. The first year we are looking for people to work hard and lay the brick in the program for what is to come and the girls are so excited about it.”

“I put together a full schedule because of all of the teams who are down here now and want to play us because we are close. We are really excited to have the schools close to us and it will make it even easier for schools to add field hockey because it won’t be as big of a concern on the budget.”

Lovelace believes Converse can follow the model of fellow ECAC member Limestone to become a successful program in a short amount of time.

“I think we can be very strong four or five years down the line,” she said. “By year three I want to be competing for a conference title, winning one by year four and then building from there because success breeds success. Limestone did not win any games its first year, but they kept building from there and by the seventh year of the program they almost had a national bid. They started on a grass field, but we’re renting a turf field from a high school to play and practice there. We hope to have our turf field by 2018. There’s always obstacles, but every year you should be better and that’s what we plan to do here. There’s no manual on starting a program. I hope that more schools add it, and I’d love to talk to more schools about adding field hockey especially down in the south and I look forward to having it grow down here.”