



Contact: Matt Dougherty, NFHCA Director of Communications

Email: matt.dougherty@nfhca.org

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Lykens Leads New Haven into New Era

By Matt Dougherty, NFHCA Director of Communications (From the July NFHCA Newsletter)

2017 will end up as quite the calendar year for New Haven Head Coach Kelsi Lykens. After being hired in January, she has put together a roster to compete in the school's inaugural season in the fall while also looking towards future classes to build the program for the Chargers.

"This is definitely a challenging process," Lykens said. "I found out on my interview that we were expected to compete in 2017. It's been very challenging in finding recruits especially with this senior class. I had a base of a club team to start with here, but only four people ended up coming from the club. That's been my biggest challenge, but now we're up to about 16 with the hopes of two more."

She added, "I ended up reaching out to students who had already been on campus, some seniors who checked off field hockey as an interest in their application and was able to get a few off my first clinic on April 29."

Of the 16 student-athletes set to compete for the Chargers in 2017, seven are incoming freshmen, four are from the club squad and a few are from other teams at the school, including one from both softball and lacrosse. Others on the team were already at or decided to come to the university.

"A lot of the freshmen I had to seek out," Lykens said. "A few of them came from high school and club coach recommendations. Two or three did not have New Haven on their radar, but once I got them on campus I was able to get them to commit. The other half had already decided to come to New Haven and had played in high school. I have some experience coming, and there are others who I haven't seen play beside my clinic and a couple I have not seen play at all."

While the roster for the inaugural season has taken shape, Lykens already has an eye on building and solidifying the program for future years.

"I already have one 2018 commit and a lot of potential recruits for that class," she said. "The biggest challenge with recruiting moving forward is a lot of people don't know that the program exists, even though we've done a great job promoting it through our sports information staff. By the end of the summer I want to be able to get a hold on my 2018 class commits and then we can begin focusing on subsequent classes."

Once her team assembles for the first time in August, Lykens looks forward to getting her program in place and seeing her squad on the field.

"Initially one of the biggest challenges will be to get everyone on the same page in physical fitness," she said. "I hope that the people coming from the club program will understand the difference in endurance and strength that it will take to play at this level. After that it's building the skills and what I am looking for going forward. I want to get them to the same skill foundation."

She added, "One thing I want to focus on is not taking anything from a program and taking it to this group. I'm not going to be able to do the same formations I am familiar with, so I need to find out strengths and weaknesses and tailor game plans accordingly."

Whatever the on-the-field success ends up being, Lykens has a goal in mind of where she wants her team to be in its first season.

"Honestly I just want to see my culture into place," she said. "We're starting brand-new, so establishing that culture and then growing with it will be key. I want to have good student-athletes and find the small wins within everything so that we are literally getting better every game and every day at practice with an effort and mindset always at 100%."

Lykens certainly has a great foundation to look upon as she aims to build a winning culture. A 2014 graduate of West Chester University, Lykens was an NFCA first-team All-American in both 2012 and 2013 and led the Golden Rams to the NCAA championship in consecutive seasons in 2011 and 2012. Lykens also excelled in the classroom and was the field hockey nominee for the Division II Honda Sports Award as a senior. She closed out her career with 33 goals and 29 assists, and spent her first season following graduation as an assistant at West Chester before moving on to Sacred Heart University over the past two years.

Lykens spent her last three seasons as a student-athlete and her first as an assistant under West Chester Head Coach Amy Cohen, who has been a trusted mentor in a crazed time as New Haven prepares to play its first season.

"I had a lot of questions for Amy and she had a lot of insight for me," Lykens said. "I've tried to speak to people who have started their own program. She's been helpful in how to start a program and the challenges you are going to see. I've also spoken with Julie Munson of Southern New Hampshire since she had experience with it."

Lykens' squad will play at the Division II level in the Northeast-10 Conference, which consistently places multiple teams into the NCAA postseason and in the rankings of the NFCA Coaches Poll. Still, that competition does not deter Lykens' belief that her team will be able to challenge anyone soon.

"I really want us to compete for the NE-10 championship," Lykens said. "I'm not sure if in the next four or five years we'll be at the national level, but I really think it's possible to establish a championship team. If I can focus on my 2018 team and then turn to my 2019 and 2020 group, I think we can really get to that level of competing for an NE-10 title. The five or 10-year plan is obviously competing for a national title."

But before her long-term goals can be achieved, Lykens just wants to focus on growing the program and building her culture at New Haven.

“I hope I can be the rock for our student-athletes so they can see the program grow,” Lykens said. “I want people to be proud of where they played and know they can build something special here and look back and know that they were the ones who got it started.”