

Soccer as an Escape to Hope for Afghan Teenager

In world religion class, Shamila Kohestani is neither the adolescent who defied the Taliban in Afghanistan nor the symbol of liberation that shared the stage with stars from Hollywood and sports at the 2006 ESPY Awards. She is a teenager whose lips move as she takes notes, and whose list of words to look up grows exponentially each minute, each hour and each day.

Kohestani, who also plays basketball, accepted an award at the '06 ESPYs on behalf of Afghan female soccer players.

Some of her classmates at Blair Academy here know that Kohestani, 19, is the captain of the Afghanistan national women's soccer team. Some are aware that she is Muslim. Most know her only as the striking young woman who is eager to stock her iPod with any kind of music they recommend.

Until recently, they had no idea of what Kohestani has already endured in her short life. The music that some of them take for granted is a luxury to her; the classwork they grumble about is a privilege.

When you have been deprived of both from age 8 to 13, as Kohestani had, this prep school in the woods of northwest New Jersey is as perfect a place as exists on earth.

"With no soccer, there would be no school, and no hope," said Kohestani, whose sparkling smile attests to the fact that hope is one thing she has in plenty now.

Slide Show

Kohestani became one of the 440 students at this 160-year-old boarding school in late October, when she arrived with the clothes on her back, a small carry-on bag and her soccer cleats. It was sports that delivered her here, but that has taken a back seat as she tries to expand her English and make up for five years without an education.

The Rev. Cynthia J. Crowner, the teacher of the world religion class, wrote "absolutist vs. liberal" on the blackboard and asked her students to name the traits of religions that span both spectrums. Kohestani raised her hand: "The Taliban were fundamentalists."

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, Kohestani and her six sisters were virtually confined to their small home in Kabul. They were not allowed to attend school or work, and when they appeared in public, they had to be covered in a burqa.

But Kohestani's two older sisters — one is now a midwife, the other is in medical school — made money by adorning burqas with embroidery. The family sought out underground schools and traded books among friends, violating Taliban laws.

Kohestani said she was beaten for not wearing her burqa properly. "I threw the burqa off and ran," she said.

It was with the same determined abandon that Kohestani became one of the cornerstones of women's soccer in Afghanistan. In 2004, she was one of eight girls who came to the United States for a clinic to learn soccer as part of the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange, a fledgling program started by Awista Ayub, an Afghan American.

"These girls had dreams of becoming something and had passion in life, and it was cut short for a while," said Ayub, 28, who played women's ice hockey at the University of Rochester. "I think some of them might not have realized that the window of opportunity would open again."

In the spring of 2006, Kohestani was among 250 girls who took part in a five-day clinic in Kabul sponsored by the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange. She was back in America that summer and met President Bush and accepted the Arthur Ashe Courage Award at the ESPYs on behalf of all Afghan female soccer athletes.

The highlight of the trip, however, was participating in the Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy in Hightstown, N.J. There, she caught the attention of Carolyn Conforti-Browse, who teaches English and is the softball coach at Blair Academy.

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“She wasn’t an amazing soccer player, but the energy and the joy that she brought to the field for every practice — I have to say that stayed with me,” said Conforti-Browse, who is also a counselor at the academy.

Conforti-Browse asked the Blair headmaster, Chan Hardwick, to find scholarship money for Kohestani. Foudy, the former captain of the United States women’s soccer team, pledged to pay for Kohestani to return to America for a year of what is essentially postgraduate study.

As an athlete in Afghanistan, Kohestani is a big deal. Last August, she scored six of the national team’s 11 goals as the Afghans won four of five games at a tournament in Pakistan, their first international event. The team is a

long way from qualifying for an Olympics or a Women's World Cup, but it is followed closely. Kohestani said President Hamid Karzai even had a member of parliament call to wish the team luck before the finals.

But at Blair Academy, her athletic prowess is barely acknowledged. Kohestani arrived too late for the soccer season, playing in only the last game.

For her winter sport, she chose basketball, which she had never played before, and is a member of a struggling junior varsity squad. She stands apart from her teammates not only for the sweat pants and long sleeves she wears under her uniform in accordance with Muslim custom, but also by the intensity she brings to the court.

"In the first two or three days, she traveled almost every time she caught the ball, and I'd have to stop and she'd get very frustrated and angry because she is so competitive," said Ryan Spring, the basketball coach and a history teacher. "Now she can score, and she leads with her energy."

Kohestani said she wanted to attend college in the United States. To do so, she must overcome a steep learning curve. A half-dozen Blair instructors have been tutoring her privately.

"This was a young woman who had never used a calculator before, did know how to use a computer, but didn't have one," said Hardwick, the headmaster. "She had a lot of holes in her educational background, because she had been out of school for about five or six years of her early learning. If there is any great leveler in the world, it's got to be education, and this is what she wants, she wants to be educated."

Hardwick witnessed her drive over the Christmas holiday when Kohestani stayed with his family. She attacked the Internet with the same fervor as she danced to hip-hop music with Hardwick's daughters Elizabeth, 21, and Kate, 18.

Often, Kohestani is up past midnight, paging through a dictionary for one of the hundreds of words she does not understand. There are some words,

like “crush,” that only her classmates can explain.

“She asks about everything and wants to absorb it all,” said Frances Salaveria, one of her basketball teammates. “She makes me think about all the things we take for granted.”

Kohestani is a daily visitor to the weight room because there is no such facility for women in her home country. Her desire to fill her iPod with all kinds of melodies, too, comes from the fact that the Taliban banned most music.

Kohestani is an observant Muslim, saying her prayers at the appointed times in her dormitory room. She talks about her faith when her classmates ask, but mostly she reassures them that she is tolerant of the mores of American teenagers.

“Some of them think, you don’t speak with boys,” she said. “You are not friendly with boys. ‘We have boyfriends, do we look bad to you?”

“No, this is your culture,” she said she tells them. “Why do you look bad on me? You guys were born here, raised here and this is your culture.”

One morning last month, the Blair student body gathered for its weekly chapel, and Kohestani shared her story, her culture.

She showed a documentary that outlined the degradations of the Taliban rule and showed how women’s soccer has taken hold in Afghanistan and changed girls’ lives. There were images of women being executed at the Olympic Stadium in Kabul under the Taliban reign. Now, Kohestani and her teammates play matches on that very same field.

When the lights came up, the questions came steadily. Kohestani answered them all gracefully.

“Is there an arranged marriage awaiting you when you get home?” asked a female student in the balcony.

“No, I came here to find a husband,” she deadpanned to thunderous laughter.

Now, her classmates knew Shamila Kohestani’s story. They gave her a long, heartfelt standing ovation.

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