

# The Making of a Champion: Stephanie Lopez

## World Cup Member's Mom, Coach Offer Advice; Laud CYSA's Olympic Development Program

By Deloris Roach

SPECIAL TO SOCCER CALIFORNIA

Stephanie "Steph" Lopez is a natural athlete, but she wouldn't be as far along in her soccer career if she had not participated in California

Youth Soccer Association's (CYSA) Olympic Development Program (ODP) says her mother, Cindy Lopez.

"The experience helped her to become a stronger player mentally, because it taught her how to get past the pressure of coaches standing there evaluating her skills," Cindy says, recounting the numerous tryouts, training sessions and selection processes that Stephanie endured as she competed for spots on district, state, regional and national teams.

Stephanie is now a member of the U.S. Women's World Cup Team, which won a bronze medal in Shanghai last September. She is the youngest member at 21, and the only current college player on the squad. She is also the first woman from the California Central Valley area to ever play in a World Cup Tournament.

"I strongly believe that she would not be on the world stage if she had not been exposed to the opportunities and higher level of coaching from her competitive coach and ODP," Cindy says. "I am very grateful for Coach Danny Cruz, the coach of her Elk Grove team; he did a tremendous job bringing Stephanie along."

Cruz coached Stephanie for over six years, and noticed her natural abilities early on. He believes she would have gone far with or without

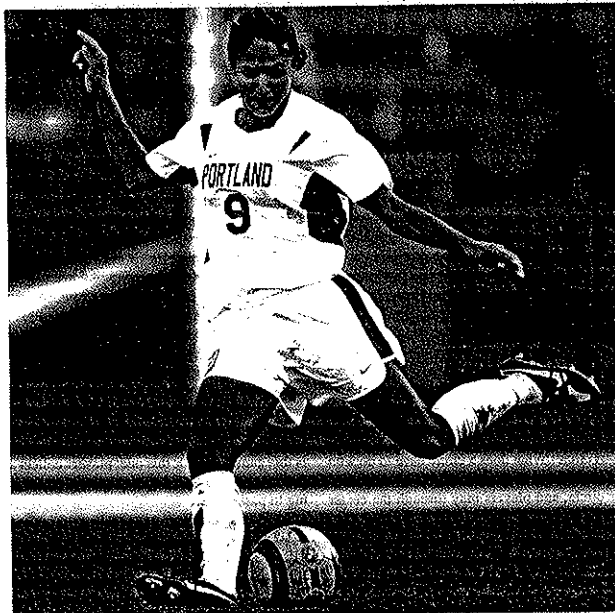
the ODP. "She just had composure; she didn't get rattled; it's just her nature," he says, recalling some of his first sessions with her when she was only 13. "She was very fluid about the way she played ... she aspired to be the best."

Stephanie started playing soccer in CYSA's recreation program (Elk Grove South) when she was five years old. Around age eight or nine she began playing competitive soccer with an Elk Grove team. When she was 13 she tried out and made the district ODP team, and by age 14 had gone on to play on both a state and a regional team (her coach on the regional team was Greg Ryan, who directed the U.S. Women's National Team at the 2007 Women's World Cup). Shortly after making the regional team, she received an invitation to join the U16 national program.

When she was in high school, her competitive team, the Elk Grove Pride, joined the Women's Premiere Soccer League (WPSL).

"This experience sharpened her skills even more," Cindy says. "Playing with college players and women when you are only 15 is such an advantage to your growth. I think it was instrumental in taking Elk Grove Pride all the way to the nationals."

After playing for years in national competitions, and a week after helping her undefeated University of Portland team win the NCAA Championship, she received a call from Greg Ryan, who asked her to join the Women's National Team at the Algarve Cup in Portugal. However, Stephanie's road to success was not without its hurdles. Cindy says her daughter was almost ready to quit at one point during the state tryouts.



"I think she thought it was too much trouble driving two hours one way every Saturday and Sunday for weeks," she says, referring to all the time and financial sacrifices the family had to make as they traveled to tryouts, practices and tournaments. "But the Elk Grove Soccer Club was behind her and paid the original ODP state fees; and I just let her know that if she could make it through, it might be worth it, and it was."

Cindy advises parents to stand back and let their child take the lead in determining if soccer is a game that they want to play, and how far they want to take the experience.

"At that point for Steph, I needed to encourage her, but not push her," she says. "It's important for the athlete to know that the sport is for them; don't let it be for you. If they enjoy it, let them do it. Some parents are living through their kids and putting too much pressure on them."

Coach Cruz agrees, and believes that parents should assess carefully their child's talent and interest in the game.

"Be honest with your kid; teach them how to be honest with themselves ... if they aspire to be a national team member or get a full-ride scholarship, they have to put the time in," he says. "In America we tend to fabricate how good we think our children are. Let them play the game; let them enjoy the game."

Cindy says that ODP could help parents assess their athlete. "If anybody knows that their child wants to play soccer in college, I would recommend that they take them out to the district tryouts and find out how much they love the sport. The exposure through this process might be a key to their opportunities in the future, like it was for Steph." Cindy also stresses building self-reliance and responsibility in young players. She does not feel obligated to attend all of Stephanie's events.

"We have other children to care for, and for financial reasons, I had to make the hard decision not to go to the World Cup Tournament to watch her play," she says. (Stephanie's father, grandfather and fiancé were able to go.)

Throughout her daughter's soccer-playing years, Cindy made sure that Stephanie and all of her siblings (all of whom are or were soccer players) were responsible for their own uniforms and water, and knowing where and when their games were to be played.

"They also had to do extra things to earn

some of the money needed to play their sports. We considered sports a privilege, not an entitlement," she says.

"It's also important that kids have an identity outside of soccer," she adds. "One day Steph was having a crummy attitude before practice. I let her know that maybe she wouldn't go, or shouldn't be playing. This devastated her, and left her wondering who she would be without soccer. It was a very important time for her to evaluate her identity. She learned from that experience that she was more than just a soccer player." Cindy points out that Stephanie is indeed a well-rounded person.

"She played other sports in high school (basketball and volleyball), which was a good distraction from her intense soccer schedule; she is a good student and friend."

Cindy also says that it is important to teach children to respect their coaches and teammates.

"On the way home from games, I wait until Stephanie wants to talk about the game, and we don't talk negatively about coaches or players." She believes that young players need to understand, too, that they should not question their coaches in a disrespectful manner, and that parents should follow the same rule.

"ODP also taught me a lot as a mother, and someone who knows the sport fairly well," says Cindy, herself a longtime soccer player and coach. "Through the program, I learned to sit back and keep my own counsel. I was at games to watch and not yell directions to my daughter. That is the coach's job, not mine. I learned that even when trying to be positive I could be saying things contrary to what the coach is saying. So my old standby 'SHOOT!' was no longer appropriate. I learned to sit back and let the kids decide when to shoot. What a revelation!"

Stephanie is currently attending the University of Portland on a full soccer scholarship. She is majoring in psychology and Spanish. The young champion is also making plans to marry her fiancé this coming December.

*(Editor's note: CYSA congratulates Stephanie Lopez, her teammates, and Coach Greg Ryan on their bronze-medal performance in the Women's World Cup Tournament in Shanghai, and wishes the team the best of luck in next year's Summer Olympic Games, which will also be held in China.)*

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