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O'Connor Family Has Game

Summary: Feature story about the O'Connor family makes front page news on NCAA.org

(February 23, 2010)-*O'Connor Family Has Game*

By Christopher Butler

[The NCAA News](#)

Eight all-conference honors, one league player of the year, one conference postseason tournament player of the year, 53 goals, 50 assists, 156 points, four National Soccer Coaches Association of America academic awards, and an NCAA postgraduate scholarship candidate.

Not bad for a team.

The thing is, that's just one family.

Senior twins Pat and Justin, junior Amber and freshman Kyle O'Connor all play soccer at Minnesota-Morris, a member of the Division III Upper Midwest Athletic Conference.

Not only are they prolific, the O'Connor siblings are self-deprecating and sportsmanlike – quick to pass credit to others and loathe to take the spotlight. That is, unless, it's amongst family.

“So, who's the best player?”

“Me,” says Justin.

“Best player at what?” asks Kyle.

“Me,” Pat corrects.

“Who scored the most goals this season?” asks Amber with the sure smile of someone who already knows the answer.

“Who scored the most points?” Pat counters.

“I said goals. How many goals did you have?”

“Ten.”

“I had 11...”

“... How many assists did you have?”

“This could go on for a while,” Justin warns.

This bit of familial rivalry notwithstanding, the O’Connors together may be one of the most (if not *the* most) productive groups of siblings to play Division III soccer at the same school. In just a short time, they’ve elevated the Minnesota-Morris men’s program to prominence while adding to an already established and successful women’s side.

All these figures hide the fact that Justin has played defense for four years and rarely has the opportunity to score, and that Amber and Kyle have played but two and one year, respectively.

“Score often, score early and don’t get hurt.”

That’s the simple benediction Diana O’Connor delivered before every game her children played, sending them to the pitch with a message that emphasized success, but safety first.

Each of the O’Connors dabbled in multiple sports (hockey, football, basketball, lacrosse) as youngsters, but soccer won out as they sought to emulate their older brother who first played the game.

“We started playing as soon as we could walk,” Amber says.

“Soccer is one of the sports children can play when they’re very young,” says their father, Michael O’Connor. “They started with soccer and always went back.”

Fortunately for them, growing up in Ham Lake, Minnesota, they were pulled into the sports-happy district of Blaine, home to the National Sports Center, which attracts amateur athletes from around the country to take advantage of top-flight facilities – including more than 50 soccer fields.

In Blaine they first encountered Chuck Schlichtmann, a well-known youth soccer coach who has worked with the O’Connors from the earliest days of knocking the ball around. He could see the talent in each one and would coach Pat and Justin on state champion teams at ages 11 and 12.

“Pat and Justin’s team would be so dominant that we’d try to play an age group higher for better competition,” Schlichtmann says.

If that didn’t work, the wily coach had other ideas.

“If we had a big lead, I’d tell them they could only set up other players for goals, or they had to play with their opposite foot. I think this helped them be better team players.”

Certainly that could be said for all of the O’Connors, especially Pat, who in 2009 ranked second in the nation in assists with 19.

For all the time the siblings invested in the game, their parents made every step alongside them, providing support.

“Diana O’Connor was my manager,” Schlichtmann laughs. “She took care of schedules, travel plans, snacks, everything. I couldn’t have done it without her.”

To Michael and Diana, the time spent on soccer paid dividends not for the game itself but for the relationships it fostered.

“We’ve tried to tell each of them that the friendships you gain, the camaraderie, that’s what makes a sport worth playing,” says Mike.

Throughout their high school careers, each of the O’Connors received numerous college offers, but Pat and Justin decided on a fledgling Minnesota-Morris program. They were persuaded in part by an in-home visit from coach Christian DeVries.

“Quite a few programs recruited Pat and Justin, but Chris was the only coach who visited them at home,” says Mike. “That made a big difference.”

Next to enroll was Amber, who played one year at Wisconsin-Green Bay but then earned all-conference honors in her first year at Minnesota-Morris.

Then Kyle enrolled for the 2009 season, which included a UMAC title.

The quick rise to success surprised even their coach.

“I don’t know if you can put it into words,” says DeVries. “They’ve provided a consistency and desire that exemplifies what UMM soccer and the university is all about. They all have great personalities and they’re great students.

“I always thought we’d be successful here, but because of the O’Connors we got there faster than I expected.”

Justin sums up his student-athlete experience this way: “Soccer made the other side exist. I don’t know if I’d be at Morris if it weren’t for soccer. Right after high school I didn’t know if college was the right step, but soccer was there so I went.”

He recently completed his senior thesis in management and now will look toward a career in real estate. Amber is pre-medicine and aspires to be a doctor. Kyle, like many freshmen, is sampling courses and finding his path. Pat will enroll in graduate school next fall for an advanced degree in statistics.

Like many student-athletes across the country, sports helped the O’Connors focus their studies and vice versa.

In the meantime, at Morris now and after Morris to come, they’ll keep “knocking the ball around,” demonstrating the delicate balance of the physical and intellectual, a life skill learned between the pitch of Cougar Soccer Field and the classrooms of UMM.

From left: Kyle, Amber, Pat and Justin

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