

SPORTS

Rising UPEI rugby star weighing options

Josh Lewis
Sports Editor

Ashley MacDonald has certainly carved out a spot for herself in UPEI athletics lore over the past four years.

She has been a crucial member of the Panthers women's rugby squad that has made it to the AUS final the past four years and she has climbed the ladders of the provincial and national programs at the same time.

MacDonald, who played the last game of her Panthers career in a 33-5 loss to the St. F.X. X-Women in this year's final, says she started in rugby at Charlotte-town Rural, where she won team MVP awards in grade ten and twelve.

"But I don't really feel I started to develop as a player until the provincial under-19s," says the Corran Ban native. "That's when I decided to take it to the next level. But (Rural) is still a really strong program."

Since then, MacDonald has been no stranger to national and international competition, playing for the Island's under-19 and senior women's teams in addition to making Team Canada for under-23. She is currently long-listed for the Canadian senior and sevens squads.

In fact, MacDonald says her experiences with the Panthers and the other squads have become almost indistinguishable. That's because many friends have played with both programs.

"All of my best friends and a lot of other close friends have played with me through all the stages of rugby: high school, under-19, UPEI," says MacDonald. "Three or four of them have been long-listed for Team Canada. It's a unique thing we've got here, all of us growing up and playing together, and I don't think other universities have that. It's a pretty neat thing."

MacDonald, a two-time AUS all-star, all-Canadian, AUS rookie of the year and

UPEI's Most Dedicated Player for 2005-06, ranks more team-based accomplishments as her most memorable.

"Last season (2005) when we finished second to X when it was really ridiculously close. Competing at the national under-19, that's where I first got scouted. When I played my first international (U23) two summers ago in Edmonton."

MacDonald, who led the Panthers with ten tries and 66 points this season, is pleased with the program's progress since she started at UPEI.

"I'm really proud of us. The program has come a long way and everybody's been pushing for us. There's a few girls on the team that have been together for quite a few years now. Losing this year to X stung a lot, but when they won CIS it showed we could compete nationally. That helped ease it a bit, but I still would have liked to see us there instead of them."

She says coach Dale MacLeod, who

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recently resigned from the program after five years, has been a major factor in that.

"He had a pretty big role. Our record speaks for itself. Since he started here, we've made the final every year. The program has grown so much. He put a lot of time and effort into it."

Rugby is an uncompromising sport, and intense training is required to keep up. MacDonald's training routine speaks to that.

"I'm at the gym at least six days a week, if not seven. We have to do our own weights program, keep our cardio



Ashley MacDonald is a two-time AUS all star, an all-Canadian and an AUS rookie of the year to name a few.

Lewis photo

up, and do speed work. There's a lot of stuff. So it's two or three hours a day. I currently train with Eli Sport, with Eli MacEachern, since last fall. So it's a big time commitment, but it's what you love, so you do it."

As for future plans, MacDonald isn't yet sure what she wants to do, either rugby- or career-wise. She will complete her chemistry degree this year and is considering a career in pharmacy, physiotherapy, or sports medicine. As for rugby, MacDonald is looking at several options.

"I'm looking into transferring to

another university to finish my eligibility. I'll have to sit out a year because of CIS rules. School is a big thing, so I'm looking into programs too. There's new things coming up with the national team. So I'm not really sure. I might go to Europe or New Zealand to play. They have a semi-pro league in New Zealand."

No matter where her rugby career takes her, MacDonald will always remember her UPEI experience.

"I've had a wild four years and UPEI has been a huge part of it. I've had a fantastic time. I loved everything about it."

Former Rocket blueliner joins Panthers

Josh Lewis
Sports Editor

Former P.E.I. Rocket defenseman Jeff MacAulay has joined the UPEI Panthers for the second half of the season.

MacAulay also played with the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League's Rouyn-Noranda Huskies, Halifax Mooseheads and Quebec Remparts. He was cut in training camp last fall by the East Coast Hockey League's Victoria Salmon Kings.

The 21-year-old native of Souris Line

Road is happy to be back in his home province.

"It's a good feeling. I have lots of friends and family here and I'm comfortable in my surroundings. It's good to be at home."

MacAulay said Panthers head coach Dylan Taylor, along with several players, were also a factor in his decision to come home.

"UPEI has nice facilities. I've spoken with Dylan more than once between February and September and he gave me

the opportunity to play here."

MacAulay, a business major, is confident that his assets will help the Panthers in their push for a spot in the AUS playoffs.

"I can play in any situation, on the power-play, penalty kill," he says. "I also think I have an offensive upside, which should help the team out."

The six-foot, 200-pound rearguard said it didn't take him long to notice the differences between university hockey and major junior.

"It's good hockey. It's definitely a step up from junior. The players are bigger, stronger, and it's a faster pace."

MacAulay said his experience with the Salmon Kings drove home the need for a university education.

"It was definitely an eye-opener. The pro game is not a secure position. Guys get traded all the time. Some guys play for four different teams in one year.

"I thought about it and I saw the big picture, and education comes first. And playing hockey while getting my education is good."