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'Country girl' Givan finds path to stardom in soccerBy **Billy Watkins**
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Givan

Kenny White, a member of the United States Soccer Federation's instructional staff, can't tell the story without pausing a few times to laugh.

Yet his message is clear: Ridgeland High superstar forward Rachel Givan, who soon will sign scholarship papers with the University of North Carolina, separates herself from the pack in more ways than one.

"About three years ago, Rachel was at a camp in California with all the great players her age from across the country," White says. "As a way to break the ice, each girl is asked to stand up and say a few words about themselves.

"When it came around to Rachel's turn, she got up - and Rachel is really shy until you get to know her - and said, 'Well ... I shot my first deer this year.' You should've seen those girls from New York and California. It sort of threw them off. Then somebody asked her who she was with when she killed it, and they were expecting her to say her daddy. But she said, 'My boyfriend. We were on a date.'

"Right then, it was pretty obvious that Rachel is comfortable with who she is and where she's from. She's not easily intimidated."

And with good reason. Givan, a senior honor roll student and The Clarion-Ledger's 2006 co-Sportsperson of the Year, has led Ridgeland to four consecutive Class 4A state championships and was a starter on the 2005 Under-17 United States national team. Yes, she has worn a jersey with "USA" across the front and helped beat the likes of Japan.

"I was talking the other day to (a Major League Soccer) coach about the X-factor, the thing that separates good players and the special players," White says. "Whatever the X-factor is, Rachel has it. A lot of people may be as good an athlete or possess the same amount of talent, but Rachel just seems to do more with it than most."

Says Ridgeland coach Josh Avenmarg: "She's gifted in every way possible - speed, quickness, strength, power, agility. All the stuff world-class athletes have. But she does so many things you can't teach - the way she can read what's going on and is about to happen next, subtle moves to get off a shot or break away from a defender. Her instinct is unbelievable.

"Plus," Avenmarg adds, "let's not ignore the fact that she's a beautiful young woman."

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His point: Marketing moguls are going to be swarming the blonde-haired Givan if she can reach her ultimate goal - a roster spot on the "big" national team, which represents the United States in the Olympics.

Givan's path wasn't planned by pushy parents desiring stardom for their child.

"The truth is, when Rachel was little, we didn't know anything about soccer," says her dad, Keith Givan. "We had a neighbor who was president of the local soccer league, so we signed up all three of our daughters."

Rachel was 8. Ginny, now a junior nursing major at Mississippi University for Women, was 10. Kelsey, a talented junior for Ridgeland's Lady Titans, was 7.

"I remember her coach at the time (David Johnson) pulled me aside one day and said that Rachel was 'uniquely talented,' " Keith Givan says. "Honestly, I didn't think a whole lot about it."

But there were signs of Givan's superior athletic skills. The same year she signed up for soccer, she began swimming competitively.

"We didn't even own a pool," says her mom, Teresa. But Rachel was beating most members of Jackson's prestigious Sunkist Swim Team, especially in the freestyle events.

"They wanted her to swim more, but she simply didn't have the time," Teresa says.

When Rachel was a member of the Olde Towne Middle School basketball team, Keith noticed his daughter "just looked different doing things on the court than the other kids."

The same was true on the soccer field by the time she was 14, and camps all over the country requested her presence. At that point, soccer had become more than a recreational sport to Givan.

It was her calling.

She has played tournaments from Massachusetts to Brazil and received the star treatment at every stop.

But a recent trip to Mexico stands out to her.

"It's unbelievable how much they care about soccer down there," Givan says. "They would put us on a bus, and we'd drive to these towns and play for 10 minutes. Then we'd sign autographs for an hour, then head to the next town.

"At the hotel (in Mexico City), people would have their picture taken with us. Then they'd go get the pictures developed and bring them back for us to sign.

"At schools, they would give us flowers and line the halls as we walked in. It seemed unreal."

Still, Givan hasn't given in to her star status. She remains the country girl who drives a green Toyota Tacoma pickup and watches professional bull riding on television.

Her room is decorated in camouflage and adorned with homecoming court banners, cowboy hats - and pictures of guys in cowboy hats.

"She still likes to come home, put on her camouflage and the muddiest pair of boots she can find and go mud riding," Keith Givan says.

And through it all, she has remained dedicated to her high school team. Twice, she flew home from out-of-state tournaments with the U.S. national team to play in the state championship game for Ridgeland.

"I try not to be a ball hog (on the high school team)," she says. "But sometimes you just have to get things done.

"It's hard ... before a game I'll say, 'Let's score early,' and (a teammate) will say, 'How about you score early.' "

Which she has done on demand. During the Brooke Welch Memorial Tournament a couple of weeks ago, played in honor of Givan's Ridgeland High teammate who was killed in a four-wheeler accident in 2005, Givan heard Welch's mother plead from the stands, "Get me a goal, Rachel." Ridgeland was tied 1-1 with a team from Miami.

"I was right next to the bench when she yelled it, and it was a real physical game," Givan recalls. "They threw it in, and I was able to get the ball at my feet. I knew I was going to take a shot."

She weaved through defenders and let go a thunderous kick. Twenty yards away, the goalie had no chance. Ridgeland won 2-1.

That is an example of her competitive drive, which was verified by her commitment to North Carolina.

The Lady Tar Heels recently won their 18th NCAA national championship. Seven freshmen started the title game, and 15 of the 26 players this year were freshmen and sophomores.

"I wanted to play with the best," Givan says, "and I think it will help me get where I want to go."

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