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MASTERS-PLAYERS, HITCHENS & ZELENAK: Dynamic Duo on the Field and Sidelines

By Kathleen Harte Simone, Philafieldhockey.com Founder & Editor

The U.S. Women's Masters Teams will compete in the 2018 FIH Masters World Cup in Terrassa, Spain from July 27 to August 5, with more than 140 national teams expected to compete in age categories from Over-35 to Over-55. For O-50 athletes Nicky Hitchens and Denise Zelenak, who also coach side-by-side at Drexel University, it will be their fourth appearance at a World Cup but, like them, nothing about the experience is old.

"I am always excited to play hockey, but when you see your name up there listed under a USA Team, it is something very special," said Zelenak. "I truly appreciate having another opportunity to play while wearing the red, white and blue. Masters has taken me around the world, giving me some amazing memories and more friends than I can count. I am so proud to be a part of these teams and program."

Together, Zelenak and Hitchens steer Drexel University, a Division I program competing in the Colonial Athletic Association (CAA). Zelenak has been at the helm of the program for 23 years; Hitchens for 14 years, now as associate head coach. What differentiates this dynamic duo from other Division I coaches, in part, is their passion for playing the sport, in addition to coaching.

"The busier I am, the more stress I feel but I've never come away from a hockey event, training or a competition and regretted being there," noted Hitchens. "It is so rewarding to see so many friends and colleagues and to maintain hockey friendships. It's an important part of my life."

"I don't think why I play and the positives I've experienced have changed at all," added Zelenak. "There are no mirrors on the sidelines so when I play, I am ageless. It's after that I feel old!"

In addition to coaching the Dragons, high performance teams, Futures and club programs this spring, the two carve out time for personal training in addition to the masters training sessions comprised of twice-monthly practices and several tournaments.

Both focus on cardio and strength training at the gym 5-6 days a week, stickwork, and for Hitchens, playing squash is as effective as cross training. "It helps with my footwork, hand eye, cardio and my mental game as well. I have a great training partner [in Zelenak] so that helps keep me motivated when I'm tired or overwhelmed!"

As for actively participating in Drexel's practice sessions, Zelenak noted, "I haven't played full field much with the team for many years. I feel that it is important that they are the focus at practice, and I think when I used to step on the field the focus changed. Having said that, I do jump in during some drill sets to show and share player movements or skills but not in any competitive games."

The chemistry of the two is evident on the field. They read each other extremely well, trust each other and complement one other's play. The same applies to them as coaches on the sidelines.



"Nicky is my sister at heart," said Zelenak. "We are not the same in demeanor or personality, but we see things similarly and work hard to do things the right way. I also think playing sports for us is very similar, as we are both super competitive and have a strong commitment to whatever we choose to pursue. I also trust her implicitly."

"It's been really helpful to work with someone who is very different from me so that I can model behaviors and strategies that aren't my strong suit," added Hitchens. "Denise is a true student of the game, always watching film and living hockey, so I'm spoiled working with someone always in touch with what's current in the sport. She is much more comfortable at teaching broader concepts and strategies because of her teaching background; I'm more comfortable one-on-one."

As for Hitchens and Zelenak's World Cup goals, they don't differ at all. Put simply: the goal is to win.

"My personal goal is probably the same as the team goal, to win a medal and

improve on our last performance," said Hitchens. "In Australia we were fortunate to be coached by Denise [who also played] as she has coached as an adult many, many times and understands what it takes to work with 50-year-olds. Legendary coach Beth Bozman will be coaching the 50's this time around and I'm excited to see how far we can go."

The two also have similar personal goals to get stronger and more fit to fend off any injuries which Hitchens noted "seem to stick around much longer with age." "What you want to do and what you can do changes," added Zelenak. "We are only mortal and some parts of me don't work so well, but I will take what I can, whenever I can!"

The two represented USA at the 2014 FIH Masters Hockey World Cup in Rotterdam, The Netherlands (O-40), 2016 Masters Hockey World Cup in Canberra, Australia (O-45 bronze medal) and 2017 IMHA Masters Indoor World Cup in Krefeld, Germany (O-40).

"There are so many highlights but most of all, the time spent with teammates

and getting to know athletes from other countries is irreplaceable," said Hitchens. "Top moments would be winning the bronze in Australia in a shootout over South Africa; teams singing on the trolley from the venue to the city in Rotterdam; and singing the national anthem before our game against the Dutch in 2014."

"In Holland before our Dutch game, they sang their national anthem as a group and then asked us to do the same," added Zelenak. "It was not pretty but it was humbling, it reminded me how fortunate I am to be able represent our country."

With the World Cup on the horizon where the two will represent their country yet again, both Hitchens and Zelenak definitely don't see the tournament as the finale. Age does not define them. If anything, it motivates them to work even harder, while juggling family and coaching commitments, to be the best they can be.

"I can't imagine a future me without hockey," said Zelenak. "I continue to play because it is who I am. It's how I define my best self." **PH**



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