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Southern Staff Stories: Lena Lutzeier, Women's Tennis

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The whirlwind journey of Georgia Southern graduate assistant women's tennis coach Lena Lutzeier began in 2015, when a young native of Blaustein, Germany, journeyed to Savannah, Georgia, to begin her collegiate tennis career at Armstrong State University.

Fast forward to five years later, and the latest stop for Lena has her in Statesboro, returning to the South Georgia area which has become her American home.

How she got here, and the stops she has made in between, have given her tremendous experiences that she believes she can pass on to the surging Eagle women's tennis program.



Freshman Phenom

Lena came to Armstrong State to play for head coach Sean McCaffrey, in his first season at the helm of the Pirates. Once ranked as high as No. 53 in her native Germany, it did not take her long to make an impact on the court. She went 30-2 in singles and 39-2 in doubles that season, with her final win one of the most important of her life.

"Just thinking about it, I'm getting goosebumps," Lutzeier said. "I have those pictures in front of me. So many people ask me how it felt, and I don't know how to explain it. I've never felt that way before, or after."

That experience came on a hot, late-afternoon day in May in Surprise, Arizona. Top-ranked Armstrong State was facing second-ranked Barry University in the 2015 NCAA Division II National Championship match. With the Pirates leading by a 4-2 team score, Lutzeier broke the serve of No. 4-ranked Sonja Larsen and clinched the victory with a 6-3, 6-4 win, touching off a celebration that few thought would happen in the first year of both Lena and Coach McCaffrey's time at Armstrong State.

"Somehow, coach put us together, made it possible to to work as a team," Lutzeier said. "It was one of the happiest days of our lives. Other than the yellow fuzzy ball, we had nothing in common. But for one second, we made a lot of people happy, just by playing tennis. It was a really unique moment. At the time, I didn't think it was possible to feel like this."

The Next Stop

For three years, Lena put together a Hall of Fame career at Armstrong State, earning Peach Belt Conference Player of the Year honors twice, going 96-7 in singles and 112-10 in doubles and earning ITA All-American honors all three seasons.

When the Armstrong-Georgia Southern merger was completed in 2017, Lena still had a year of eligibility left. So she transferred to Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, where she played at the top of the lineup for the Sharks, going 22-1 in singles and finishing as the No. 1-ranked player in NCAA Division II.

"It was a big step to go there," Lutzeier said. "I didn't really think further than that. It's always hard when you play three years against a school, and suddenly you go there. I was scared that nobody would accept me, all alone on this island. But I'm happy that I got to play there. I met a lot of people, and I learned a lot of new lessons that I wouldn't have learned."

Following her season with the Sharks, Lena faced a decision that many collegiate seniors face. What to do next?

"After I finished college tennis, I had one semester left to study," Lutzeier said. "I took that semester to practice every day. I also gave lessons while practicing myself. I was on the court, 8-10 hours every day, and I still didn't get tired of tennis! So I thought, 'Maybe it's the right thing to do.'"





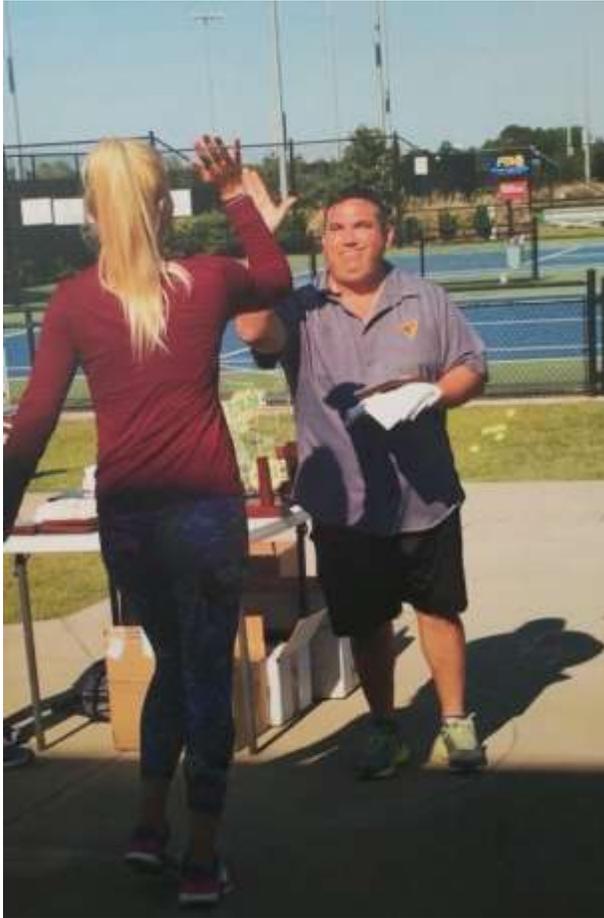
The Professional

Lena called her parents in Blaustein and told them that she would like to start playing professionally, to see where that would take her.

"I went home in February to live and start playing in tournaments," Lutzweiler said. "I had made some money teaching lessons, and I used that to go play. I thought, 'If I do good, the money will last longer. If I don't, well, at least I had the good experience.'"

From March to August in 2019, Lena played in several tournaments in Egypt, Tunisia and her native Germany. She reached the semifinals in the ITF \$15,000 tournament in Tunisia and also advanced to the quarterfinals in a pair of other tournaments. Lena also paired with a Swiss player, Nina Stadler, and another fellow German, Natalia Siedliska, to advance to the finals in a tournament each.

While she was playing, not only for the Sharks, but professionally as well, Lena had a pair of very interested observers following her progress - from Georgia Southern.



The Statesboro Connection

Coach McCaffrey has made it a habit to keep in touch with several of his former Armstrong State players since the merger, and Lena was no exception.

"That communication never stopped, even when I came here," Coach McCaffrey said. "With any new situation, there were some growing pains. But we were utilizing each other to become comfortable in our new surroundings. And even though now, she was on a team at a different school, we still wanted to keep that relationship we had built. I didn't want to interfere with another program, so I just tried to keep us all optimistic."

Paula Boixader, a fifth-year senior for the Eagles this season, was a freshman in 2017 at Armstrong State and was Lena's doubles partner. She, too, was following her progress from more than 4,500 miles away.

"The thing is that, she was not just my doubles partner," Boixader said. "She was also like my big sister. We were really close to each other. And so Coach [McCaffrey] would

always be like 'We have to watch Lena!' At the beginning, it was more often, but we never lost that relationship we had."

"Even when she played professionally, a lot of times I would watch her," Coach McCaffrey said. "She would send a picture of the draw, and circle where she had won. I would then look at who she was playing next, and go on YouTube to watch their matches. I would watch for hours. It's something I enjoy doing. I'd take down notes, and send those to her. Then I'd follow the live stats the next day.

"She'd be down 4-3 and I'd tell my wife, 'If she can just get a break of serve here, she'll win 7-5, 6-3.' Then she'd win, 7-5, 6-3," Coach McCaffrey says with a laugh. "I don't know how much money it made her. She didn't give me any of it! But I loved being able to follow what she was doing, and keeping track of that."

"I was in constant contact with Coach, when I was in Hawaii," Lutzeier said. "He helped me a lot, and I never felt I was alone. He also texted me many times after my professional matches. I knew I could always text him when something went wrong. 'I couldn't hit my forehand!' 'Well, let me see what you did,' he would say. And in the beginning, I talked a lot with Paula, FaceTiming every week. I always knew both of them were behind me."

The thing is, she was not just my doubles partner. She was also like my big sister. We were really close to each other.

Georgia Southern fifth-year senior Paula Boixader on Lena Lutzeier

Another Journey Home

Shoulder surgery put a halt to Lena's playing career, so again she faced a decision. And when Coach McCaffrey had a graduate assistant coaching spot open with the Eagles, it was an easy call for both of them to make.

"I wanted to see the other side of athletics," Lutzeier said about starting her coaching journey. "When I was an athlete, all I knew was that I had to get into the van, go to the match, go play and get that point. That's it. So I was curious. I wanted to see what work that Coach is doing, how much work it is, and what we all have to think about."

"For me, it was a no-brainer," Coach McCaffrey said. "Once I found out she had an interest, I dropped everything else and said, 'We have to find a way to make this work.' She has a special place in my heart on a personal level because of what we've shared with our past, but she's genuinely a really good coach. She sees things that I may not see, and shares those things openly."

"I just wanted to see how I can have an impact on other people, and not just tennis, but on their lives," Lutzeier said. "And when I heard that Paula was getting a fifth year of eligibility, that was another big motivation to come see her one more time."

The two doubles partners now faced a new relationship, that of player and coach. Paula welcomes that new relationship this season and knows it will make her better on and off the court.

"We're really close to each other," Boixader said. "Now, for her to come here, I know there's things we can't do because she's my coach. But it's so nice now that we've started competing again to have someone on the court with me that I've known for so long. I know she has my back no matter what. She's always willing to come out and work with me."

"I never was nervous about the relationship," Coach McCaffrey said. "Lena will tell you how it is. She's not going to step lightly around sharing what Paula needs to do to become a better player, and a better person. In other situations, with a dynamic like that, you'd be concerned that maybe they'd be too easy on their friend. But Lena is tougher at times on Paula than she might be on others."

For me, it was a no-brainer. Once I found out she had an interest, I dropped everything else and said, 'We have to find a way to make this work.'

Head Coach Sean McCaffrey on bringing Lena to Georgia Southern

The Next Level

With all three reunited, the sky is the limit for Eagle women's tennis. A feeling that pervaded the entire process of bringing Lena back to Georgia.

"We want to win championships," Coach McCaffrey said. "And that's what she knows how to do. We did a pretty good job of that at Armstrong. She has a desire to win, she hates losing as much as I do. As a coach, I don't pretend to have all the answers. But when you have someone who completes you as a coach, that makes up for the unanswered things you have, that is just next level."

"They really complement each other," Boixader said. "If one is mad, the other can calm them down. They know what the other is thinking, and as players, we can see that."

"When I was in the hospital," Coach McCaffrey said about his bout with COVID-19 over the Summer. "I didn't know what was happening with the team. I was out of it. But once I heard that Lena was running things, I was able to go back to sleep. I had no question that everything would be perfect. And it was."

The beginning of the 2021 Spring season for the Eagles has been filled with normal tennis issues - such as weather delays and postponements. But one moment in late January proved just how much the addition of Lena has been to the Georgia Southern program.

"I continue to make changes each year, in terms of enhancing how we're doing things," Coach McCaffrey said. "I want to treat every single match this year like it's a championship match. And when I was coaching at the College of Charleston, I had some of those same feelings that I had when Lena was on the court winning against Barry. Some of the same emotions."

Georgia Southern won that match against the Cougars on January 24th by a 5-2 score, defeating the College of Charleston for the first time in 19 tries. A streak that dated back 21 years.



The Future

"I think we're the strongest we've ever been," Boixader said. "We have so many players, and each of them can be in the lineup. You have to fight for your spot, be competitive in practice so you can be competitive in your matches. I think we're going to do well this year. I'm really excited."

"I don't start a season immediately thinking anything but optimism," Coach McCaffrey said. "I started planning on winning a Sun Belt Conference championship last year on March 13th. We were all devastated then when we couldn't finish the season, because we were on the right path, especially with what we had accomplished the year before by getting to the Sun Belt Tournament final. I agree with Paula. This is the strongest team we've had."

"While I'm still getting into things, I think we have a really strong team," Lutzeier said. "We have a lot of different challenges that are sometimes hard to handle, and I'm learning from Coach every single day. But I think we are on the right track. I'm super excited to start winning matches and ready to make history."

From someone who has had a hand in making history in her brief but stellar career, Lena will have a huge part to play in the next chapter of Georgia Southern women's tennis.