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Jess Belmont has slid back into a soccer career that she thought was over after she quit playing at Steinert. (Photo courtesy of Montclair Athletic Communications)

Belmont's soccer career gets second life at Montclair thanks to Koster

**By Rich Fisher
Sports Writer**

Oct. 19: There are two Steinert graduates on the Montclair State women's soccer team this fall, but if one weren't there, the other one wouldn't be either.

Sound complicated?

Welcome to the topsy-turvy athletic career of Jess Belmont, who is re-united as a soccer teammate with Melissa Koster.

Thanks to Koster.

"I thought my soccer days were over," Belmont said. "I did not think this would happen a year ago. It was very unexpected."

So what happened?

OK, here's the deal.

Koster has always been a soccer player first, with every other sport just for fun. This is where she is supposed to be in her freshman year of college. That's her story, nice and neat.

Belmont, however, is a little different. Her first love was softball, but that gave way to basketball and soccer by her sophomore year at Steinert. She became a Spartan 'keeper and did a stellar job, and was also a forward on the basketball team.

Although some observers felt soccer was her better sport, Belmont drew interest from Montclair in basketball. When she arrived in North Jersey as a freshman last year, hoops was her sport.

But she quickly soured on that, noting there was too much involved with basketball to allow her to be a student at well. So, nothing was her sport.

While all this was unraveling, Koster was being recruited by then first-year coach Pat Naughter. Koster thought Belmont was on the soccer team, and inquired about her during a visit.

"Kost asked coach how I was doing, and the coach had no idea who I was," Belmont said.

"He mentioned that they didn't have an actual goalie and that a field player was doing the job," Koster said. "I told him that the goalie from my high school team went here and she's good."

The next thing Belmont knew, Naughtner e-mailed her a request to try out for the team during spring practice.

"My thoughts were like 'This is crazy, it's college soccer!'" Belmont said. "I thought once I made my decision to be done, I would be done. But I got a second chance."

And she has taken advantage of it.

"I put in a good word and her talent did the rest," Koster said. "She played in the spring and now she's on the roster."

She is indeed. But Naughtner found some other goalies in the meantime as there are three on the roster.

East Brunswick grad Gina Policastro, who beat Steinert in the state tournament last year, started 15 of 16 games. Belmont started the other one, and has three appearances, allowing one goal and making four saves while notching a win in her start.

But she is not complaining. She and Koster have already taken a cross country trip, as Montclair played two games at Pacific Lutheran in Tacoma, Wash., and Montclair is riding high at 11-4-1.

"Playing at the college level is definitely a great experience," Belmont said. "The level of play is much better and faster. It's tough. I'm very competitive so I won't give up.

"It feels like Steinert during my sophomore year all over again. I just have to fight for my position. I am not content about sitting the bench. I want to play and I'm going to keep working until I get there even if it takes me all season."

The fact she is on the team speaks volumes for Belmont's ability, considering she had not played goalie for two years. That's a lot of rust to shake off.

"Not playing after a year had a pretty good effect on my play," she said. "I was rusty coming back, I felt a little behind and it got frustrating. But I just have to work my way back into it. I'm about where I left off in high school so now I just have to get better in order to play."

Koster, however, sees things a bit differently.

"Jess has been playing great so far," the scrappy midfielder said. "You couldn't tell that this was her first season at the college level. Even though she is not starting she practices every day like she is our starter. I think she expected to be rusty, but if you have the talent you never really lose touch with the game, that is how Jess is."

As for her first collegiate season, Koster has been fitting right in. She has played 13 games, starting 10, and has one assist while launching 13 shots.

"Kost is playing excellent," Belmont said. "She reads the field very well, she works hard and defends well, which makes her a dangerous player."

Koster estimates she gets between 75 to 90 minutes each game, which means she's on the field pretty much the whole time. And she's at a pretty important position.

"I've been playing center midfield and loving it," Koster said. "The girls are great and our coaches are so knowledgeable about the game. It is a tough transition from high school, but Steinert definitely got me prepared."

It got her prepared to recruit a former teammate as well. Even though she never knew she was doing it at the time.