Mac grad swims off with water polo honors

BY BRIAN JOHNSON

Recent Macalester College graduate Catherine Flint played four years of water polo in high school in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the sport has a strong following. So when Flint first mentioned to her friends that she was interested in attending college in Minnesota and competing in water polo here, they had a hard time taking her seriously.

"People said, 'You've got to be kidding me. It's really cold there,'" she recalled with a laugh. But Flint reasoned that other California natives were doing OK in Minnesota schools, so she thought she would "probably be fine, too."

It turned out to be a good move for Flint, who graduated this year after a standout career on the Macalester College women's water polo team. In 2012 she led the Scots in scoring and steals, and finished the season with all-America honorable mention honors.

Last month, the Collegiate Water Polo Association (CWPA) named Flint its 2012 Women's Varsity Division III Scholar-Athlete of the Year. It's the league's top award for a senior who has achieved success in the classroom (3.25 or higher GPA) and in the pool. It was also a nice honor for a school like Macalester, since water polo is much more established on the coasts.

Flint said she was surprised and honored to be selected. "I didn't know I was nominated or in the running," she said. "There are a lot of teams in Division III in California and on the East Coast, so it was definitely a pleasant surprise."

Macalester water polo coach Jennie Charlesworth said Flint was a strong leader who helped her teammates focus on their goals both in and out of the pool. "She's a great student-athlete," she said. "She was able to balance what she wanted to do academically with what she wanted to do in the pool."

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Flint led the Scots with 74 goals and 78 steals and was third on the team in assists with 26. Other top Macalester players this year included Ashley Burgin (56 goals, 67 steals, 39 assists) and Sarah Shoemaker (35, 59, 36). Goalkeeping duties were shared by Asia Phillips (133 saves, 30 steals) and Chloe Kadan (137, 53).

Macalester started slow this spring, but won nine of its last 11 contests en route to a 10-12 season. The Scots went on to win three out of four matches in the season-ending CWPA Division III championships in Grove City, Pennsylvania, to finish fifth. It was the third time in three years that Macalester had finished among the top six teams in the nation, including a fourth-place finish last season and a sixth-place mark in 2010.

This year's CWPA media guide described Macalester as a "program on the rise" in Division III water polo. "It's a strong season for us overall," Charlesworth said.

Since few Midwest colleges have water polo teams, the Scots do a lot of traveling to tournaments on both coasts and other far-off destinations. Macalester competed against conference rivals such as Wheaton (Illinois), Carthage (Wisconsin), Penn State- Behrend (Pennsylvania), Otta (New York) and Connecticut College.

Catherine Flint in action as the 2012 Macalester College's water polo team took on Mac alumnus. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER MITCHELL/SPO PHT PHOTO

Competitive water polo players.

"I love the sport," she said from her hometown in Palo Alto, California, as she watched one of her sisters in a match. "It's very physical and it's the most exhausting thing I've ever done. Scoring goals is so much fun. It's hard, but when you get the ball in the back of the net it's an incredible rewarding feeling."

Flint played four years of water polo at Haney Gunn High School in Palo Alto. She heard from a family connection that Macalester had strong academics and a water polo team, so she made a trip to Minnesota.

"When I visited I realized quickly it was the place I wanted to be," she said.

Like any collegiate athletic endeavor, water polo takes a serious time commitment. However, Flint said, one nice thing about playing in Division III is that the schedule allowed her to compete in club sports like crew and hockey, and still devote plenty of time to academics. She graduated with a double major in geography and education and finished with a 3.61 GPA.

Participating in club sports also proved to be a great way to stay in shape. "Water polo is really hard on your shoulders," she said. "Joining the crew team was a great way to train during the off season."

Flint graduated in May and is back in the Bay Area, where she works with disadvantaged middle school students in an after-school program. She also plans to continue to play water polo at the club level.

Flint said she would like to see water polo become more popular in Minnesota. The summer Olympics in London gave the sport international exposure, which doesn't hurt.

"With the Olympics, it's pretty exciting because water polo gets more coverage," Flint said. "People see it as a very physical, challenging sport. It's exciting that more and more people in Minnesota are learning what water polo is all about."