

GIRLS WATER POLO



STEPHEN CARR — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Wilson water polo standout Sarah Sheldon has committed to play at UCLA.

Head and shoulders above

Sheldon, 6-2, has committed to UCLA

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Long Beach Wilson senior water polo player Sarah Sheldon is making a huge impact for the Bruins this season.

The six-foot-two utility player is a force on both ends of the pool, rising out of the water and firing over defenders on offense, and using her length to disrupt passes. Against Long Beach Poly last week, she plucked two errant Jack-rabbit passes out of the air as easily as Odell Beckham hauling in a pass in the NFL.

Her journey to the center of the spotlight - and to using her natural gifts - hasn't been a short one, but it has been a classic Long Beach tale.

Sheldon is a unique talent, but her path to becoming a Bruin certainly isn't. Like countless water polo players before, she went to Rogers Middle School, dreaming about suiting up at Wilson.

A swimmer since she was 7 years old, it was happenstance in middle school that Sheldon ended up donning a water polo cap.

"I was in sixth grade when I saw water polo practice and I thought it would be fun to try," said Sheldon. Her first coach that year was Jeff Nesmith, the Bruins' current coach.

Sheldon always had her height, reaching 6-2 while still at Rogers.

And while some kids grow up looking up to football or basketball players, Sheldon is a product of the shore, and always dreamed of being an aquatic star, so her heroes were local-grown.

"So many athletes I look up to have graduated from Wilson," she says. "Going into school, I was already a huge fan of Lauren Wenger, and suiting up was like, 'Wow, I could do what she did.' It's cool continuing that legacy."

Sheldon has drawn frequent comparison to the Olympic silver and gold medalist.

Sheldon's height actually once worked against her to an extent. She spent her first two years playing water polo in goal, often a default spot for taller players, especially girls.

"But I still loved to score, so I would be taking shots from the cage," she said. The thing was, with her arm strength, she was actually scoring, including one game where she had a hat trick. "After that, it was, 'OK, maybe you should get out of the cage.'"

In the field, her height remained an advantage, but it's really only this year that she's begun to realize her full potential.

"This year, her strength is catching up with her length," said Nesmith.

The coach took the program over in December after the mid-season resignation of Katie Hedley. His presence has been a godsend for Sheldon, working with her on exercises to strengthen her core and develop her legs.

"I've changed so much in how I play from last year to this year, and I got a lot of that from Nezzie," said Sheldon. "I'm finally using my legs."

Of course, Sheldon's presence has also been a godsend for Nesmith, who had a lot of work to do implementing his own offensive and defensive system in the middle of a varsity schedule. Having a UCLA-bound senior whom he was already familiar with certainly helped.

"She's a dominant player, and she's hard to guard," Nesmith says. "There's not a lot of people who can do that one-on-one. She has all the tools to succeed at the next level."

That's why the Bruins were so high on her as well. If Sheldon continues to get stronger, her potential is nearly unlimited. UCLA coach Brandon Brooks is confident that she will.

"Sarah has impressed me with her desire to be a great player," he said, adding, "She has size that can't be taught."

Sheldon was thrilled to sign with the Bruins, cutting short her recruitment process and committing to UCLA the weekend after she visited.

"It's great being signed and having everything set," she says. "Knowing what's going to happen next year, that takes a lot of stress off."

Of course, there's still the matter of this year, first.

"Our goal is to win CIF this year, and I think we have a real opportunity to do so," she said.

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