



Arkansas senior journeys from South Africa to American collegiate tennis

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Another international talent has found a home in Fayetteville, not amongst the myriad of European talent, seven to be exact, on the Razorback tennis team.

Josuha Howard-Tripp, a senior from Johannesburg, South Africa, has been playing tennis since he was a young teenager.

One day, Howard-Tripp went into his family's attic, looking through some old belongings, when he came across an old tennis racket. He asked his father, who played professional tennis, if they could go play near some tennis courts that were five minutes away from their home.

"We started playing, and I really enjoyed it from day one," Howard-Tripp said. "It was kind of like one of those things that I could always do with my dad. That's how it began, and it kind of evolved from there once I started getting better, and I noticed that I had a little bit of talent."

At the end of his high school career, Howard-Tripp was thinking about playing collegiate tennis, but was also wanting to go professional, he said. Nestor Briceno, a former assistant coach for Arkansas, visited Howard-Tripp in South Africa to discuss ways how Howard-Tripp could advance his career.

"I really liked his coaching style," Howard-Tripp said. "He was almost like a mentor during those times. He opened doors for me and gave me an opportunity."

After speaking with

Arkansas head coach Andy Jackson, Howard-Tripp said he would like to play for the coaching staff. Jackson has coached top teams throughout his career, like Florida and Mississippi State, so Howard-Tripp thought Arkansas was a good place to go.

"I like having Josh around because he's a very high-quality person," Jackson said. "He's a good guy and he's a little bit quiet, reserved. He's got a really classic game style, a very good athlete. He's very strong and he's very consistent with his backhand. His forehand, he can hurt you more with."

In high school, Howard-Tripp participated in the Australian Open Junior Championships. He went 5-0 in singles matches at the Curro Junior ITF Week 1 and went 3-1 in doubles, falling in the finals.

Josh's family hired a coach to improve his game, but it was tough because tennis had lost popularity in South Africa. Howard-Tripp was not able to improve at a high level because attention had shifted to other sports, like rugby and cricket.

"We don't have the facilities (in South Africa) that we do here (at Arkansas)," Howard-Tripp said. "We had cracks in our courts and didn't have the best areas."

With rugby and cricket becoming the two main sports in South Africa, the tennis federations did not have much money to fund tennis events.

"Our government was kind of struggling," Howard-Tripp said, "so they wanted to put all the money towards those two main sports. They took a lot away from the smaller

sports like golf, tennis, sports that South Africans have done really well in the past, and they wanted to shift their attention towards something else."

Despite receiving little funding, tennis has not died in Howard-Tripp's home country. There is South African talent that is competing at the next level, who are simply being overshadowed by the multitude of other talent from countries all over the world.

"South Africa is, historically, one of the best tennis countries in the world," Jackson said. "It has deteriorated in the last 20 years, but so has the United States, because more of the countries in the world have been playing tennis, and it is the second most popular worldwide sport."

However, the South African tennis federations have been able to land more sponsors. The South African people are getting back into tennis again with hopes of having a national team, which Howard-Tripp wants to see and be a part of one day, he said.

Howard-Tripp said he would like to represent South Africa in the Davis Cup or ATP Cup. His dream is to graduate from Arkansas and then compete on the pro tour and eventually reach the Grand Slam level. Some of Howard-Tripp's friends are already training to make it on tour.

"(My friend) has gotten his rank up to 80 in the world and he's starting to do really well," Howard-Tripp said. "It's great motivation seeing him being able to do it, and it gives you hope that you have a chance of making it."

With high hopes for the 2020 season, Howard-Tripp is looking forward to the team exceeding expectations and performing at a high level in conference play.

"I think we're a really good team," Howard-Tripp said. "I think we can do really well and

bring a lot of fire in our matches with a lot of effort. I think if we can do that and put our hearts into it, I think we can do really good this season."

Jackson said he thinks the team is undefined because of its diversity, with the majority of the players coming from overseas to play in Fayetteville.

"A bunch of guys here are playing that have

never played before, like positions they've never played before," Jackson said. "They've worked really hard and have a good team chemistry. They've got good competitiveness on the court."

The Hogs defeated the No. 5 Baylor Bears in a massive upset Feb. 1 in Fayetteville.

Arkansas looks to build off the win with three months of tennis left to play.

"I want the fans to know that we really want them to come watch," Howard-Tripp said. "We really want them to be loud and support us to the best of their ability. The more people we can get in here, I would really appreciate that."

The Arkansas Razorbacks tennis team will face the Oklahoma Sooners in Norman, Oklahoma, on Friday, Feb. 7.



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Star soccer freshman has successful homecoming in first season

Antonio Tinajero
Contributing Reporter

One spring weekend in 2011, two former college track stars went where they have gone almost every weekend for five years: to watch their eldest daughter out on the pitch.

The Bentonville Boomers girls' club team attracted small crowds, mostly parents. But little did those crowds know that one of the elementary-age kids they cheered on every week would go on to lead the UA soccer team to its first Southeastern Conference championship and break records along the way almost a decade later. That young girl was Anna Podojil.

But it wasn't always a guarantee that Podojil would ever represent the state where she developed her love for soccer.

Podojil is a native of Cincinnati, Ohio, and moved back to "The Queen City" in 2012 where she remained until she graduated high school in . As a highly touted high school athlete, Anna Podojil had a plethora of collegiate options to choose from.

"As a kid, I always dreamed about being on the (Razorback) soccer team," she said. "When I was being recruited, Arkansas was still developing as a program, and I was getting looks from top-20 colleges, but I just had a gut feeling to come back here."

Her commitment to play at Arkansas proved the Razorbacks could draw elite national prospects for soccer. After all, her two Ohio Gatorade Player of the Year awards, two Ohio state championships (the first in Indian Hill High School

history) and her high school's career scoring record of 117 goals speak for themselves.

In college, she became the first player in program history to be named a United Soccer Coaches' (USC) National Player of the Week, which she won twice. She was also the first to win SEC Freshman of the Year, and she took home an USC All-American honor. She led the Hogs with 14 goals, ranking third nationally among freshmen while also contributing seven assists.

In Anna Podojil's first year as a team member, the Razorbacks achieved an all-time program high national ranking of No. 6, defeated the No. 1 team in the country, North Carolina, returned to a fourth-straight SEC tournament title match and won the SEC regular-season title for the first time ever. She was the focal point

of Arkansas's high-achieving offense—impressive considering her freshman status.

"Everyone knew about her, so she wasn't really under the radar," Razorback soccer coach Colby Hale said. "She's what you see: fast, athletic and dynamic."

"It's been really nice because none of the success has gone to her head. She's just a real humble, funny, normal person."

Anna Podojil doesn't consider herself the star, but rather gives all the credit to her teammates on the pitch, she said. It is something her teammates are pretty used to.

"She's had so much success as a freshman and never once have I heard her talk about it," Reagan Swindall, Podojil's teammate and roommate, said. "Anna never brags about herself."

Podojil's down-to-earth demeanor and humility has been a staple of her personality since childhood, back when she was

still gliding up and down Bentonville pitches and attending Razorback sporting events with her family in their spare time, she said.

It was her parents who helped become an elite athlete and provided her with the opportunity to live in Arkansas. Rebecca and Dan Podojil were both track stars at Miami University in Ohio, where they met, and it was Dan's job that took the family to Arkansas.

"Dan and I were excited to get back to the Midwest," Rebecca Podojil said. "Neither of us are from the south, but when Anna started her college recruitment process we were like 'I bet she's going to pick Arkansas.' It kind of became like a joke in the house. We knew it was always her dream."

Rebecca Podojil said they never put pressure on any of their children to play any

sport, but rather let them figure out their own interests. It's a stretch, however, to think that Anna didn't inherit any running abilities from her parents.

That wasn't the case. Anna ran the 400 meters in 53.67 seconds her senior year and took home an Ohio state championship. For comparison, 51.17 seconds was the fastest time by a female high school track athlete last year.

All of this success during her senior year came after Anna suffered an ACL tear at a soccer showcase her junior year. She had to miss the entire track season that year as a result.

"I knew right when it happened," Anna Podojil said. "I cut really hard during a game and everything in my right knee just gave out. It was a difficult few months, but I knew I had to trust the process."

With an injury as serious as an ACL tear—one that can hamper or even end athletes' careers—it was Anna's positive thinking and great attitude in recovery, as well as a great surgeon, that fueled her senior year comeback domination.

Anna made the trip to visit Indianapolis Colts' orthopedic surgeon, Tom Klootwyk, the same doctor her mother went to when she suffered the same injury in college. She was back on the field in no time, only rehabilitating for about five months. According to Mayo Clinic, the average recovery time for an ACL injury is about nine months, though it may take up to 12 months for an athlete to return to their sport.

"She really didn't let that injury get to her," Rebecca Podojil said. "She just did what she had to do to get back and moved on."

With Arkansas' second-round elimination in the NCAA Tournament in December 2019 to North Carolina State,

Anna's first soccer season as a Razorback has come to an end. She's now setting her sights toward following in her parents' footsteps and running college track for the Razorbacks in the spring.

Arkansas' soccer team has recently become a national threat, but Lance Harter's women's track team is a force to be reckoned with. The Hogs are the defending national champions in cross country, outdoor and indoor track, boasting five national titles overall.

"A big goal that I have is winning an SEC championship in both soccer and track," Anna Podojil said. "Not many people are dual-sport college athletes."

Anna said she still doesn't know whether or not she will continue soccer after college, although her past call-ups to U.S. U-18 National Team training camps suggest she has the talent and national attention to play beyond her collegiate years, and her teammates know it.

"I don't think there is a ceiling for Anna," Swindall said. "She's an amazing athlete and I think she's proven that. Everything she's accomplished this year as a freshman, people can only dream of doing. I think Anna can do anything she puts her mind to."

Arkansas has a valuable dual-sport talent at its disposal in Anna Podojil. The state is lucky to have her considering she went on a myriad of college recruiting visits in high school. But on the contrary, it's Anna who considers herself lucky just to be back in the Natural State.

"She visited probably 20 colleges, and you could just tell once she stepped on the UofA campus, she just felt like she was going back home," Rebecca Podojil said.



Sadie Rucker Staff Photographer

Anna Podojil (right) plays during the Razorbacks' game against Mississippi State on Oct. 13.