

Excerpt From Lauren Gregg's New Book

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by Tim Nash

Being Competitive

The following is excerpted with permission from "The Champion Within", a new book by U.S. National Team assistant coach Lauren Gregg, a former All-America at UNC. The book is due out in June. To order your copy now, call JTC Sports at 1-800-551-9721 or go to <http://www.jtcsports.com>.

Which is more important to you, making friends or becoming the best player you possibly can? That's a dilemma many girls face as they attempt to advance to the next level. However, it doesn't have to be an either/or choice. You can do both.

"I remember growing up, I wanted to win, but not at all costs," says Carla Overbeck. "You had friends on the team and you wanted everyone to like you. It was hard. It's part mentality and part process. Just knowing that it's okay if you beat this person because you are trying to make her better. When I got to school, I certainly did want to win, but I didn't win a one-v-one my entire freshman year. I had to learn, and I learned from the other players around me. When you see someone going after it in practice, it's contagious. When you see someone busting their hump, you want to do it too."

You can put a hard, clean tackle on your best friend and remain buddies. You can destroy your teammate in a one-v-one drill and laugh about it later, and you can be destroyed in a team-wide competition without ending up hating your fellow players. This situation is a daily occurrence on the U.S. National Team, but at other levels being popular replaces often replaces being good. One of the best examples of friendly, yet fierce competition is the Tisha Venturini vs. Angela Kelly wars at University of North Carolina practices.

Angela Kelly, a four-year teammate and roommate of Tisha at Carolina, played for the Canadian National Team in the 1995 World Cup. For UNC, Tisha played attacking midfielder; Angie played defensive midfielder. In practices, they were frequently matched up against each other, often to the horror of their coach, Anson Dorrance. They would hammer each other to the point, where Dorrance would cringe at every thunderous tackle or violent mid-air collision. He just knew a season-ending injury would occur at any moment.

"Lots of girls are afraid if they make a hard tackle they are going to make the other girl mad," says Tisha Venturini. "Or they're afraid if they score a goal, their teammates will get mad. But me and Ange are great friends. We went at each other hard, very hard. But with us, it was more about respect than anything else. We were going to work each other hard and not give the other one an easy way out. A lot of little kids are ashamed of working their hardest or afraid of winning. But we go out and try to make the other player work hard, and to do that you have to give it your best. When we go against each other, we are like, 'I'm going to give you my best shot to help you out.'"

There is no substitute for intensity. The most effective training environment is the one where players are going full-speed, tackling hard and trying to win every single competition with which they are faced. April Heinrichs, the former captain of the U.S. National Team and an All-America at the University of North Carolina, was the ultimate practice player. Whenever she stepped on the field, she was there to win. Even in what some would call meaningless situations, April was competing like a world championship was riding on it because, in her mind, it was.

Along the way, she angered some of her teammates with her aggressiveness in practice. "Why is she playing so hard," they thought. "It's just a practice." But April's play soon became the standard upon which the U.S. National Team and UNC were founded. "April refused to sacrifice her own level of excellence just to be popular and wonderfully mediocre," says her former coach, Anson Dorrance. "I admired her tremendously for that. She became the standard that we tried to live by."

You probably all know players like April, players who seem to give it their all and play all-out in seemingly meaningless situations. When you talk to your friends about these players, you usually say, "... but off the field, she's really nice." It boils down to setting standards for yourself and living by them.

"I think players have to be mature enough to understand that on the field it's okay to be a different person," says Cindy Parlow, who joined the UNC program as a 17-year-old. "It's okay to go in hard for a tackle, knock someone down and not help them back up. They have to realize that it's nothing personal. But off the field, you have to come back together again,

be friends and forget about that tackle ... and maybe even joke about it. That's just the level of maturity that you have to have."

It is not an easy process to begin, but once you establish your standards, it becomes easier and eventually second-nature.

"I found it hard, especially when I came to Carolina," says Cindy. "I didn't know many of the players, so my first thought was to prove myself on the field, then people would respect me. I was very, very shy. I still am, and I didn't talk much. When I came to school, I think people might have taken my shyness as stand-offish or arrogant."

Laurie Schwoy had to prove herself almost immediately when she arrived at UNC. Much in the same way April Heinrichs did, Laurie established herself as someone who would not back down. "I was having a heading duel with a senior, and she said she won but she really didn't," says Laurie. "So we had some controversy."

The easy thing for Laurie to do would have been to bow to the senior's popularity and sink back into the group of intimidated freshmen. She chose another way. "Anson asked me if she won, and I said no," remembers Laurie. "So we had another duel, and the whole team was chanting her name because she was the senior and I was the newcomer. It was scary, and I was nervous because they all wanted me to lose. They weren't pulling for me. But you just have to go for it, be bold and show your personality."

Laurie won the duel.

"The Champion Within" is a 300-page soccer training book written for players. The most comprehensive training book ever compiled, "The Champion Within" features contribution from over 30 U.S. Women's National Team players, including former UNC players Mia Hamm, Carla Overbeck, Kristine Lilly, April Heinrichs, Shannon Higgins Cirovski, Cindy Parlow, Siri Mullinix, Tiffany Roberts, and Tracey Bates Leone, as well as chapters written by UNC coach Anson Dorrance, national team coach Tony DiCicco and three team doctors.

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