

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University. As one of the most decorated student athletes in the history of the Syracuse University women's lacrosse program, Katie Rowan Thomson helped grow the Orange into a perennial power during her four years on campus. An electrifying playmaker, Thomson finished her Syracuse career as the program's all time leader in points with 396 and assists with 164. A three-time all-American, Thomson's teams won the program's first-ever NCAA tournament game in 2007 and later reached its first Final Four in 2008.

Katie Rowan Thomson:

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John Boccacino:

Earlier this year, Thomson who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees from Syracuse became the first female lacrosse player and second female student athlete to have her jersey retired when her number 21 was raised to the Dome rafters in an emotional pre-game ceremony in February. On this 'Cuse Conversation, Thomson shares how she was blown away by the honor of having her jersey retired, her favorite memories from her time with the Orange, and how she's applying the lessons she learned at Syracuse to the next wave of talented Division I standouts in her current role as a head women's lacrosse coach at the University at Albany. Katie, thanks for making the time to join us today.

Katie Rowan Thomson:

I really appreciate you having me. This is going to be a lot of fun talking with you.

John Boccacino:

I got to admit, I am a huge lacrosse fan. And when we heard about the women who were getting that long overdue honor, of course, Felisha Legette-Jack was the first female student athlete to have her jersey retired. But when I heard yours was going to be up there as well, I couldn't wait to tell your story and dive into your lacrosse career. How does it feel? Has it sunk in yet that your famous jersey number 21 is high atop the rafters?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

It really hasn't fully sunk in yet, even though on that day it was so incredible. And I was really taken aback with emotions, seeing the jersey go up and just overwhelmed with memories with my amazing teammates and coaches and all of the moments that I had at Syracuse. It was such a positive experience. And I met and built relationships with so many amazing people throughout the whole university and the community. So I was really just trying to take it all in and reflect on all of those moments, but it's still taking some time to reflect through.

John Boccacino:

How did you find out the great news?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

So I was actually over at SU over the summer and the athletic director, John Wildhack surprised me with the news out in the lobby in Manley. And it was the last thing that I was expecting to hear. So I was just speechless hearing the news and very honored that SU would recognize me and female student athletes and women's lacrosse program in this way.

John Boccacino:

It's awesome to hear your humility show through because when I read the numbers out loud and I'm sure this never gets old for you kind of hearing your accolades, a team success and individual, but you are ninth on the Division I career list for points with 396, 11th in career assists with 164. You're part of a team sport, but you got to take a moment to recognize just how special your individual accolades were. What do you think made you so deserving of this honor?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Well, there's many other players that are just as deserving or more deserving and I truly and genuinely mean that. Like you said, it is a team sport and I fully recognize that and I would not be in the position that I am in without my teammates and coaches. And we had some really special groups throughout my time at SU. And I just loved building chemistry with my teammates. We had so much fun. And the goals were always team-oriented. And that was to make our mark on the program and make it to the final four, which we accomplished my junior year. And that is the biggest accomplishment that I walk away with is making it to the final four for the first time in school history.

John Boccacino:

Now, before we continue that stroll down memory lane, very few people listening, if any, on this podcast will ever know the true feeling and thrill and joy of seeing the number and having your name on the top go up to the top of the rafters inside the dome. What was that day like? And who'd you get to share that special day with?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Oh yeah, it was such a special weekend. Syracuse University, the athletic department just went above and beyond. I can't even begin to describe how special they made the weekend. And so many people took part in putting together just the perfect weekend. So I really am so grateful for everyone's efforts and times, and really making it such a professional and outstanding weekend. And I came from a game at Colgate. It was a snowy day, of course. And [crosstalk 00:06:16]-

John Boccacino:

Of course, it was.

Katie Rowan Thomson:

So after my game, I scooted over and we had a fantastic reception at Drumlins. And then the next day with the games, I was with my family, my parents and my sister. She flew in from California, which I'm so appreciative of. And my husband and daughter, I have a infant daughter who was her first time in the dome. So that was so special. So many of my dear friends and teammates and alumni came, as well as my UAlbany family surprised me, my team and fellow coaches and athletic directors came to surprise me, which was so overwhelming.

John Boccacino:

And yeah, no, it's great to hear the support that you had there clearly. We value our women's lacrosse program and you guys were really part of the table setters that got the program going to the status now where we're expected to compete for ACC Championships and final four births and get that national championship. But it wasn't always that case when it came to the success of the program. Describe for us the state of the women's lacrosse program when you first came on campus in the fall of 2006.

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Yeah. We were still a very young program. I believe it was 1998 that we first started. So, I mean, we were under 10 years old as a program when I stepped on campus. So we had really high expectations for ourselves. And Lisa Miller was our head coach and started the program. And she had such a great vision for what the program could be and look like. And she pushed us to accelerate and move forward as a program. And just learned so much from her in my first two years. And my freshman year, we didn't make the NCAA tournament. But then sophomore year, we did and we made it to the... We won the Big East Championship. It was the first Big East Championship that was hosted for women's lacrosse.

So we made it to the NCAA tournament and we won our first NCAA game in 2007. So just to be a part of that was a huge accomplishment. And then we wanted to keep going and keep building and build on the foundation from the starting alumni and groups that started the program literally from scratch. And we built it up. And that junior year, we made it to the first final four. The following year, we lost in the quarter finals. But that was when we were really starting to set those expectations that we were going to be in that mix year after year. And the program has just done an amazing job taking off. And under Gary, and now Kayla, that is the expectation year after year.

John Boccacino:

Was there a seminal moment, seminal win for the Orange women that really told the team, "We're on the rise. We're a team to be reckoned with."?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Yeah. So there's a few. We had a great and exciting win over Georgetown. And that was such a big rivalry across all the sports at Syracuse. So that was like a signature win. And then in 2008, beating UNC in the dome. That was another signature win for us where we're like: Hey, we belong here and this is just the beginning of something great for the Syracuse women's lacrosse program.

John Boccacino:

Anytime you beat Georgetown, it's a highlight. I mean-

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Oh, yeah.

John Boccacino:

It doesn't matter what the sport, it doesn't matter how good or how bad your team happens to be, you beat Georgetown, that can really set the stage for the rest of the career and the rest of the year for your team out there. It's so great to hear you talk about the humble origins of this program. What made you want to come to Syracuse in the first place? I mean, you studied inclusive education and sociology and you're juggling a sport, women's lacrosse, kind of take us through your mindset as to why the Orange.

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Oh, there's so many reasons. The first thing is absolutely the people. When I came and I met the coaching staff, when I met the team and got to stay overnight, Jill DePetris bachelor was my host and she's the head coach at Villanova. And we're still such great friends. She's just the warmest and kindest and welcoming person. And her and her roommates and teammates just made it feel like home for me. And then, like you said, the education piece was really important for me. Since I can remember, I wanted to be an elementary and special education teacher. So Syracuse has such a great program for inclusive education. And that was so important to me. So getting a great education and having a certification for teaching post-graduation was on my radar all along.

So that program really set up nicely for me. And even though it's not what I'm doing now and I didn't go into teaching, all of the lessons that I learned throughout the education program helped me every single day as a coach, because as a coach, I'm here to teach the game and reach my players in different ways and learn to connect with them. And everyone responds differently to different coaching methods. So it's my opportunity to learn my players and see how they can best be taught and guided. So it ended up being an easy choice because of the team, the program and the proximity to home because my family is so important to me and I wanted the opportunity to get to see them and have my parents and family come to as many games as possible and they did.

John Boccacino:

I would actually argue, Katie, that your career is solely educational-based when it comes to teaching because you're teaching these 18 to 21 year olds who already have a proficiency for the game to enhance their careers and become a better student athlete. And I love the word student athlete because we know that you guys have to maintain good grades in the classroom, otherwise you can't play. So you are an educator. And how would you say your time at Syracuse, and specifically under coach Gait? What did you learn from him about being a coach that's helped you with your career?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Oh, I just love coach Gait's approach to connecting with people. He's so calm and professional and wants to get to know his players and connect with them on the field and off the field. So building those relationships and that trust is something that I learned through both coach Miller, coach Gait, and the incredible assistant coaches that I've had. So those are some big takeaways. And just creating a really positive environment for the players, building helping create that environment where they can build their confidence and play with confidence and really go out there and take some risks and not be afraid to make mistakes, but learn from any mistakes that happened, but to take risks, be creative and just continue to grow as a player and as a person.

John Boccacino:

You were an attacker who was quite proficient at both finding the back of the net and setting up your teammates. Again, we mentioned all the great assists. You seem to have a clutch gene because the crack research I did told me you had a school record 45 points in post-season NCAA tournament play. What was it about playing in the post-season that helped you elevate your game?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

I just love competition. And my team was so important to me and is so important to me that I just wanted to be able to do my job, which at the time was helping create plays on the offensive end, setting

up players, being a really reliable teammate. And those pressure situations, I just wanted so badly to help us reach our goals that I went in really confidently, really prepared. I did the work prior so that you could help put our team in any positive situation that was possible.

John Boccacino:

I read an article by the way, speaking about your coach, coach Gait, who really got to share the spotlight with you too on that day in February when your jersey was retired. I saw you were quoted saying that he changed the game for you. Can you elaborate on that a little bit for us?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Absolutely. I mean, I just went out and picked up my stick and played. And I learned so much from my previous coaches, Lisa Miller, John Battaglino, but Gary has such an eye for the game and creates sticks. I mean, he is the person behind all of the women's sticks that are out there. Him and his brother have elevated the stringing and the stick heads and the shafts and the tilt to the head. So he really made me think about my stick work a lot differently. So I think that my stick work elevated and just playing really loosely and creatively. He really brought that to Syracuse into our group.

John Boccacino:

And we couldn't be more thankful and more proud of what he's doing with the current team. And also of course, what you're doing at University at Albany, watching your career take off as a coach. When did you realize coaching was the next step for you in this evolution as a lacrosse player?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Oh, well, it was, again, definitely not the plan. I even stayed at Syracuse for my graduate year. I was a volunteer in 2010 with the team as I went to get my master's in literacy education. Again, thinking I was going to go into teaching, either reading, special education or elementary. And at that time, there weren't a lot of teaching jobs with how the economy was going. So there just weren't opening. So I was planning on substitute teaching and getting hopefully my foot in the door somehow, but things. That was just the plan. And at University at Albany, my previous high school coach and Syracuse assistant coach, John Battaglino was the head coach here at the time. And this is home for me. This is where I grew up. So I was heading home to substitute teach or continue looking for a teaching job.

And he had an opening on his staff and he was like: Katie, why don't you come over? You can check it out. Just come over one practice. You can hop in the drill or check out the team. And I was like: Okay. I'm not subbing today so I'll pop over. And have a lot of fun that day. And he's like: Why don't you come back tomorrow? I was like: Okay, I'll come back tomorrow. I was missing lacrosse because it was my first true experience away. So I just kept coming back for a few days. And he was like: You know what? If you're interested, you can have this position. And I was like: Maybe I should get my first steady job and not rely on subbing.

So I accepted, but I was like: If anything comes up where I'm able to teach, I'm going to have to go back to that because I just spent my last five years preparing for this opportunity. So I just got deeper and deeper in coaching year after year. I was like: Maybe I should look for a teaching job. And then I just couldn't step away from coaching. And here I am. But as we talked about today, I am teaching. I got my master's in higher education when I was at Wagner College. So I really do feel as though I am making an impact. I try to make an impact on young players and I'm just combining my love for teaching and lacrosse.

John Boccacino:

Yeah. So let's talk about that, making an impact when it comes to the lives of student athletes. We all know that 18 to 21 year olds can have... They're at the crossroads when it comes to their development. They're still learning who they are and what they want to do and how they want to accomplish their goals. And you add in excelling on the lacrosse field too. It's not an easy task. How do you reach these student athletes?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Just by building trust with them and really showing in different ways how much we care and how much I care about them, and not just as a lacrosse player, but first and foremost as a person. So just really connecting with them, finding ways to learn about them and just make those individual connections. And that's something that I continue to build off of. And just creating that level of trust and belief in one another. And when that happens then, and they know that you care about them, they'll keep opening up. They'll come to you for guidance. They'll come to you when they need a shoulder to lean on and to talk through things. So that's my first priority always is to be there for my players to help guide them in life, and then be their lacrosse coach second, and help them find their way on the field as well.

John Boccacino:

How much does it help your relatability in building up that trust that you can rely on your decorated career with the Orange and proving that you can walk the walk and talk the talk?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Yeah. I definitely draw on my experiences throughout the years playing for SU, for team USA, for a year in a professional startup league, and now coaching at different universities and institutions. I really try to draw upon those experiences and use that to help my student athletes every day. So I do think that those experiences help me relate to the players in how they're feeling in different situations.

John Boccacino:

Now I want to bring back a little comment. We were talking about, again, Gary Gait, who's now currently the men's lacrosse coach here at Syracuse. He switched over from being the women's coach to the men's coach. Did you ever get a chance to go head to head against him taking the Danes against the Orange?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

I did, yeah. We played them for... They had two years. And I even took my Wagner College team to play them in my first year there. So I've unfortunately had to go head to head against him, but he's such a great role model and just icon lacrosse player and coach. So it was always a lot of fun.

John Boccacino:

Was that kind of a pinch me moment when it comes to your career coming full circle?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Yeah. It's unbelievable. Oh my gosh, I'm standing across the box, the substitution box from Gary who is just the greatest of all time and someone that I got to play for and coach with. So it's just unbelievable. He's such a great coach, but an even better person.

John Boccacino:

Now I want to bring you again full circle to you're becoming the second women, second female student athlete to have her jersey retired by Syracuse athletics following Felisha Legette-Jack. It's a long overdue honor. How do you hope the university builds upon this moment because there's so many other worthy female student athletes that deserve the recognition?

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Absolutely. I mean, so many people are deserving, both male and female, and I am just really excited because I do think that this is just the start to SU recognizing females in this way. And just so appreciative of the honor and recognition. And I think what they're doing is really setting a standard for institutions across the nation to really honor females who may get overlooked or at times, this deserved recognition.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's certainly been an honor getting to tell your story here to our Orange community here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. With the exception of when Albany takes on Syracuse, we wish you nothing but the best of luck in your coaching career, Katie.

Katie Rowan Thomson:

Thank you so much. This was a lot of fun.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.