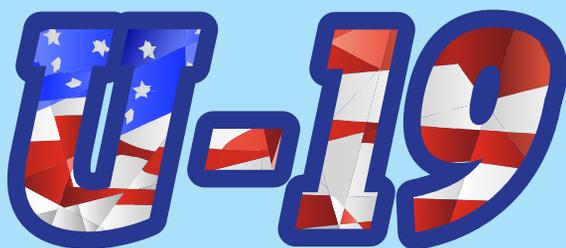


## In the Box:



## National Team Prepares to Take on the World

By: Jonathan Neeley

### ***“Put her in the box.”***

That’s what Chris Forsberg, the Seattle Youth Club Championship (YCC) U-19 Girls coach, used to tell Mia Bladin to do when he realized an opposing player was the key to her team’s offense. Bladin, Forsberg’s top defender, would just smile and nod.

### ***“Okay, I got it. In the box.”***

Ask around Seattle, the city that has won every single girls’ YCC title since the tournament’s 2005 inception along with six Westerns championships in the same span, and you’ll hear that Mia Bladin is the cream of the city’s very high-yield crop. She’s a versatile player with a combination of quickness, speed and field sense that makes her a shutdown defender and a potent offensive threat, regardless of who she’s lined up against.

As an example of Bladin putting an opponent “in the box,” Forsberg points to last year’s YCC final, where Bladin got the best of Nhi Nguyen, a freshman standout at the University of Colorado who will join Bladin as a member of the United States U-19 National Team that will compete at the World Junior Ultimate Championships in Lecco, Italy this July. “Watching the player she guarded try to beat Blades was an instructional video on frustration,” he says.

Junior Worlds girls’ coach Kyle Weisbrod, who was at YCC 2013 to scout talent for the team, also remembers Bladin going against Nguyen. “I was sold on Mia at YCC,” he says. “The only way Nhi could get open was on the break side.” Considering the time Weisbrod has spent around the game – he played on the U-19 National Teams in 1994 and ’96, attended Junior Worlds as an Ultimate Players Association representative in 2002, was the team’s general manager in ’04 and ’08, helped at tryout camp in 2010, and took over as head coach in 2012 – his verdict on Bladin is particularly meaningful:

“She’s the best defender at the youth level I’ve ever seen.”

What’s crazy is that you could easily argue that ultimate isn’t Bladin’s best sport. While she’s already built a great disc career – in middle school, she started playing at the Northwest School, a national powerhouse, and has captained teams to YCC, Westerns and state titles – Bladin has achieved even more as a center back on the soccer field. After beginning to play soccer at the age of five and reaching the premier level by the time she turned 10, Bladin made Washington’s Olympic Development Team – the top 18 girls in Washington born in 1996 – when she was 12; when she was 13, she made the Region IV ODP team, which took the best 18 players from 14 western states; a year later, Bladin was one of 36 girls in the country invited to US Youth Soccer’s National Development Camps.

“The level of intensity was crazy,” Bladin says of the camps, which are a precursor to the national team. “I’d never been more scared and excited for something in my life. I never thought soccer would take me that far.”

When Bladin was in ninth grade, coaches from the NCAA’s Pac-12 conference came calling, and while she wasn’t ready to commit to one school in particular, she knew then that she wanted to play at the Division I level. At a tournament in the summer of 2012, coaches from Harvard noticed Bladin and began to recruit her, and they held her attention because she wanted a school that valued academics as much as athletics. “After my first visit to Harvard,” Bladin says, “I knew I could see myself there. It seems intimidating in many ways, but the possibilities feel endless.”

The transition from gifted player to player whose gifts are opening Ivy League-sized doors is an exciting one. Bladin’s soccer in soccer poses an issue for her involvement in the

The 2014 World Junior Ultimate Championships, the pinnacle of youth ultimate competition, may be Mia Bladin’s last ultimate tournament. Photo: Brian Chu





The 2014 U.S. National Teams were selected from submitted applications followed by rigorous tryout camps led by some of the best coaches in the game.  
Photo: Christina Schmidt/Ulthipotos

other sport she loves. Junior Worlds, the biggest ultimate tournament of her life, might be her last. Bladin will attend Harvard soccer's pre-season training camp in August, a few weeks after Lecco, and once she's there, she wants her focus to be singular.

"I made the decision to try to play D-I soccer back in ninth grade," says Bladin. "It's more for me than anything else. I don't know if I'll get more out of playing D-I soccer than I would playing ultimate in college, but personally it's something I have to achieve for myself."

Consider for a moment the maturity required of a comment like that – one that shows a clear grasp of long-term goal setting, commitment and sacrifice. Next, consider that those words are coming from an 18-year-old who is among the nation's absolute best in two different sports and who is going to Harvard in the fall. When it comes to the type of young person the USA Ultimate juniors system is trying to cultivate – next-level athletes with good heads on their shoulders – Bladin fits the bill.

"We want this to be a team that all these future leaders can look to," says Weisbrod, noting that the college women's division is currently loaded with talent that came up through the national team system. (In fact, four out of this year's five women's Callahan finalists, including winner Cassie Swafford, have played on at least one U.S. national team.) "It's about instilling something in these players that they take for the rest of their careers."

The balancing act Bladin pulls off is as impressive as her athletic skills: club soccer's formal schedule runs from December through May, but there are scrimmages and practices in the summer; school soccer runs five days per week from the end of August until November; club ultimate is all summer long; and school ultimate goes from March through the end of May. Northwest's curriculum is rigorous, and Bladin also serves as a project coordinator for the Youth Ultimate Project, an organization that puts on ultimate camps in Cambodia and is run entirely by high school and college students. "At times, I'm exhausted," she says. "You get into a vicious cycle where you stay up late doing homework because of practices, and the next day you're tired, but you have to go to practice again, and then you have to do homework." Still, Bladin carries herself with a grown-up poise, one indicative of a person who has deemed the cost of achievement to be worthwhile.

"Mia is an incredibly determined and tenacious person," says Heidi-Marie Wiggins, Bladin's ultimate coach at Northwest. But according to Wiggins, Bladin's broad view perspective is what sets her apart. "Mia gets the big picture," says Wiggins, pointing to a recent series of practices where Bladin informed her of a teammate's delicate personal situation and kept an eye on her during drills. "Freshmen approach her for skills questions and strategy clarification, and the other seniors seek her out as a confidant. She makes sacrifices in herself if she can help somebody out or make a connection. She has a special blend of competitive fire and compassion that allows her to make huge plays one moment and gently give feedback to a teammate the next."

While coaches and teammates in both sports have been supportive of Bladin, she has at times been faced with the difficult but inevitable choice between soccer and ultimate. At the Seattle Invite in early May, Bladin played sparingly on Saturday and not at all on Sunday because her club soccer team was playing in the state cup. "In past years, I've always put soccer first and ultimate second," says Bladin. "But it wasn't soccer over ultimate at that point, it was my last soccer game with my club team versus one tournament with ultimate. It's really not as simple as 'soccer comes before ultimate' or 'ultimate comes before soccer.' It's much more complicated. It's very circumstantial."

Without Bladin, Northwest didn't have an answer for Lakeside's Jaclyn Verzuh, a standout who is also joining Bladin on the National Team this summer; Lakeside won, 13-8. Wiggins notes, however, that Bladin still impacted the game by staying involved in huddles and animated on the sideline. Northwest got their shot at revenge two weeks later when they faced Lakeside in the state final, and with Bladin in the lineup this time, they came out on top, 12-10. Though Wiggins cites a number of difference-makers – another couple players who were out for the Invite returned and the implementation of a new zone look – she says Northwest would likely not have won without Bladin.

Conflict between soccer and ultimate nearly kept Bladin from trying out for the Junior Worlds team in the first place because she feared playing might detract from soccer training and wondered if the Harvard coaches would even allow it. Still, she applied at Weisbrod's urging, not wanting to harbor regrets. She was surprised at how much she enjoyed tryouts – she says she has rarely been pushed to such

physical and emotional limits while also feeling such a high level of teamwork and camaraderie – and with the Harvard coaches' blessing, she accepted her spot on the team.

From here, the road to success in Lecco looks more like a finals week study session than a goodbye party. The U.S. U-19 girls haven't won gold since beating Canada in the 2006 final, returning with silver medals in 2012 and 2010 and a bronze in 2008. Ending the drought is a high priority for a country where ultimate was born, where the most people play and where the international standard for the sport is



The U.S. needs strong coaches to keep up with the growth of ultimate around the world. Here, head women's coach Kyle Weisbrod explains a drill to eager tryouts. Photo: Christina Schmidt/Ulthiphotos

set. USA Ultimate lists national team success as a key goal in its strategic plan, and that makes sense: gold medals go over well with everyone from membership magazine readers to parents of potential new players to ESPN executives considering TV contracts.

Weisbrod and assistant coaches Jamie Nuwer and Moses Rifkin placed a premium on defense while selecting the team, and Weisbrod says Bladin's specialties will be particularly useful against Colombia, the two-time defending champion who relies on aggressive play and an upbeat emotional tempo. "We were looking for players who can contain players and react on a dime and [who have] really great marks," says Weisbrod. "Mia is near the top."

Joining Bladin is a cast of players Weisbrod says gave tryouts unprecedented depth. In addition to the team's five returners from 2012, Weisbrod notes Hayley Wahlroos' recent SportsCenter appearance while playing for Oregon at the College Championships – the first ever by a female ultimate player – that Leah Ferris "crushed all of our athletic measurement testing," and that Verzuh is "six feet, 170 pounds, lifts heavy and lays out fully."

"I have no idea who the world is bringing to this," says Forsberg, the Seattle YCC coach, going on to highlight Alissa and Linnea Soo, two twins on the team who have played

soccer with Bladin since middle school. "But between the Soos and Blades, the U.S.A. team is bringing athletes that will make a difference. Players like them could change the game."

For her part, Bladin is happy to focus on ultimate, even if just for a short while. She says she's looking to push her own level of play as well as develop relationships with teammates from across the country and players from all over the world. "I'm never going to be in a situation like this again," she says. "Getting to play an international ultimate tournament at that level is something not many people get to experience, and something I wanted."

The ultimate community should hope this isn't goodbye for Bladin. Players like her don't just benefit their teams, but rather entire communities, and with ultimate providing a brighter limelight than soccer because there's a smaller talent pool, Bladin could serve as a role model for players at all levels for years to come.

There is the hope that Bladin won't actually have to walk away: Piper Curtis, another Junior Worlds teammate, plays Division I soccer for Dartmouth while also playing for the ultimate team, and the Soos are optimistic that they can play both sports at Whitman College (Whitman is Division III). Beyond this year's U-19 team, there's a long list of female athletes who have pulled off varsity/ultimate double duty, ranging from Molly Boyd, a soccer player at Washington who was a star defender for Element, to Callahan winner Miranda Roth, who played basketball at Carleton (also D-III). If the Harvard soccer coaches give the okay, and the ultimate team is flexible in its attendance demands, Bladin could make it happen as well.

Realistically, Bladin is not entirely sure how things will pan out. "I'm not going to say no, and I'm not going to say yes," she says. "While I would love to play ultimate at Harvard, college soccer is my priority and my dream, and I know that means having to sacrifice things that are important to me." And even if she does stop playing ultimate this fall, Bladin can always come back. "I don't look at my decision as giving up ultimate forever. I feel confident that one day down the road, I will come back to the sport."

For now, she's looking at the summer with the same balance of practicality and positivity that has brought her this far. "It has not set in that Junior Worlds will be my final ultimate tournament. Emotionally, it's difficult to imagine. But I think I have the power to choose the emotion that comes from this being my final tournament. Instead of dwelling on the fact that this is my last chance and being disappointed or sad that there may be nothing more beyond this, I choose to embrace the fact that I've been given an extra opportunity to play and look at Worlds as the best possible way to conclude this part of my ultimate career."

Maybe calling Junior Worlds Bladin's last ultimate tournament doesn't do the possibilities justice. Maybe it's just her last for a while.

The World Junior Ultimate Championships are held every two years at locations around the globe. The event is hosted by the World Flying Disc Federation and showcases the best youth ultimate the world has to offer.

The 2014 World Junior Ultimate Championships will be held in Lecco, Italy, July 20-26.



## Under-19 United States National Teams



### Open

**Chase Sparling-Beckley** – Head Coach – Portland, Ore.  
**George Stubbs** – Assistant Coach – Somerville, Mass.  
**Sam O'Brien** – Assistant Coach – Minneapolis, Minn.

**Steven Benaloh** – Redmond, Wash.  
**Emmett Blau** – Bedford, N.Y.  
**Samuel Cook** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Sebastian Di Francesco** – Atlanta, Ga.  
**Brett Gramann** – Austin, Texas  
**Nathan Haskell** – Atlanta, Ga.  
**Mac Hecht** – Newton, Mass.  
**Ryan Hiser** – Vero Beach, Fla.  
**Levi Jacobs** – Bargersville, Ind.  
**Natan Lee-Engel** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Sam Lehman** – Mercer Island, Wash.  
**Connor Matthews** – Eugene, Ore.  
**Terrence Mitchell** – Durham, N.C.  
**Josiah Mort** – Atascadero, Calif.  
**Eli Motycka** – Nashville, Tenn.  
**Anders Olsen** – Atlanta, Ga.  
**Alexander Olson** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Aaron Peterschmidt** – Albany, Ore.  
**Jake Ritmire** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Dominic Schuster** – Cincinnati, Ohio  
**Charles Schuweiler** – St. Cloud, Minn.  
**Scott Trimble** – Gibsonia, Penn.  
**Tristan Van de Moortele** – Minneapolis, Minn.  
**Sol Yanuck** – Chapel Hill, N.C.

#### Alternates:

**Alex Kunzer** – Shoreview, Minn.  
**Andrew Lehmberg** – Westfield, N.J.  
**Walker Matthews** – Durham, N.C.  
**Wyatt Mekler** – Minnetonka, Minn.  
**Grant Mitchell** – Bellevue, Wash.  
**Jack Shanahan** – Naperville, Ill.

### Women's

**Kyle Weisbrod** – Head Coach – Seattle, Wash.  
**Jamie Nuwer** – Assistant Coach – San Francisco, Calif.  
**Moses Rifkin** – Assistant Coach – Seattle, Wash.

**Sarafina Angstadt-Leto** – Eugene, Ore.  
**Mia Bladin** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Piper Curtis** – Hanover, N.H.  
**Hallie Dunham** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Leah Farris** – Atascadero, Calif.  
**Zoe Freedman-Coleman** – Amherst, Mass.  
**Frances Gellert** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Caitlin Go** – Stanford, Calif.  
**Sadie Jezierski** – Westfield, N.J.  
**Nhi Nguyen** – Superior, Colo.  
**Tiffany Phan** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Clea Poklemba** – Corvallis, Ore.  
**Claire Revere** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Alissa Soo** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Linnea Soo** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Jane Jurheim** – Wynnewood, Penn.  
**Jaclyn Verzuh** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Hayley Wahlroos** – Eugene, Ore.  
**Julianna Werffeli** – Kirkland, Wash.  
**Monisha White** – Stanford, Calif.  
**Angela Zhu** – Hanover, N.H.

#### Alternates:

**Gabrielle Aufderheide** – Eugene, Ore.  
**Madeline Gilbert** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Ella Hansen** – Seattle, Wash.  
**Carolyn Normile** – Wynnewood, Penn.  
**Sarah Sparks** – Falmouth, Maine