

# THE GO-

## Abby Wambach's realization of what she could be transformed her game. Is the highly touted WUSA draft prospect America's next star striker?

**A**bby Wambach was among the country's elite college forwards a year ago, a skilled technician big enough to dominate young defenders and consistently able to find the net.

She was nothing more.

That the University of Florida senior now stands poised for something special is testament to the transformation her game has undergone since last March.

Wambach, expected to be the No. 1, 2 or 3 selection in February's WUSA draft, announced her arrival with a superb showing at the Nordic Cup U-21 championships last summer, then netted a Division I-best 31 goals to lead the Gators to the NCAA College Cup final four.

She's on April Heinrichs' radar, and those who've witnessed her combination of size — she's a stocky 5-foot-10 — and skill are anticipating big things.

"Abby is a consummate goalscorer — she's a prototypical goalscorer," says U.S. under-21 coach Jerry Smith, whose Santa Clara squad edged Florida in the NCAA semis. "She's got great size, great power, can shoot the ball with both feet, can volley the ball, is strong in the air. ... She reminds me of [Danielle] Fotopoulos, [Cindy] Parlow — other great scorers."

### FOTOPOULOS COMPARISONS.

Heinrichs, the U.S. women's coach, praises Wambach's "charisma as a leader" and "strength of personality" on the field. She gave the 21-year-old from Pittsford, N.Y., her international debut in September's U.S. Cup romp over Germany and called her back for this month's camp.

Wambach most often draws comparison with Fotopoulos, who was a Florida senior when Wambach was a freshman. Both are big, physical players who scored scads of goals in college (Fotopoulos 118, Wambach 96), but their gifts are dissimilar. Fotopoulos'

game is more physical than that of Wambach, who is stronger technically.

They could again be teammates — Carolina, for whom Fotopoulos scored nine goals in 2001, owns the first pick in the WUSA draft. Courage coach Marcia McDermott won't tip her hand, but Wambach, North Carolina winger Jena Kluegel and Santa Clara defender Danielle Slaton are obvious candidates.

Washington Freedom coach Jim Gabarra, choosing second, makes no secret of his affection. "[Wambach] was kind of who we targeted before the college season," he says. "I think she'd be a good fit for us."

**'NEVER SEEN THIS SIDE.'** Wambach scored 19 goals as a freshman, when Florida won the NCAA title, then netted 23 in both her sophomore and junior seasons. She was a dominant forward, but, she admits, was "halfway going through the motions."

Smith was the prod, convincing Wambach during a U-21 camp last March that she could be something very special if she put her heart into it.

"The main thing Jerry did," Wambach says, "he made me see the potential of my game and made me want to go after it."

She improved her fitness, paid better attention to what she ate and worked feverishly on her game, especially her mental game. "What I did mostly," she says, "was concentrate my life [on] soccer."

The work paid off in the Nordic Cup triumph in July, in which she scored three goals but missed the final after two yellow cards.

"People told me they'd never seen this side of Abby Wambach ...," Smith says. "She was by far the best striker at the Nordic Cup. No doubt in my mind she was our most dangerous weapon."

BY SCOTT FRENCH

Heinrichs agreed; Wambach was one of five collegians called in for the abbreviated U.S. Cup and one of eight in the January camp. She and Penn State junior Christie Welsh are the only strikers among them.

**IMMEDIATE IMPACT.** Wambach, Gabarra says, is one of very few college seniors capable of making an immediate impression in the WUSA.

"I don't think very many players right out of college last year had an impact right away," he says. "It's a difficult thing to ask of anyone, but she's shown with the U-21s and Florida that she can bring something to this league. She can have an impact right away."

All Wambach is looking for "is to get picked to go to a team. I'm going to dedicate myself to getting fit, play a lot of soccer before preseason, and hopefully make an impact on the team. Maybe after the first year I'll have different goals for myself, but right now it's just making an impact on my team [and] making my game into a better one."

Heinrichs appreciates that approach.

"We have to be careful not to overture Abby Wambach," the U.S. coach says. "She's an under-21 player who's recently found success at the under-21 [level]. ... Especially when you're a *woman* — she's a *woman* against younger players in smaller bodies. In the WUSA, with the women's national team: These are *women*."

"Abby is a strong, powerful woman, and when she matches up against the strong, powerful women in the WUSA, that will be the tell-all" ■



# TO GIRL



**Abby Wambach** scored 96 goals in 93 games for the Gators, leading NCAA Division I with 31 goals and 14 assists in 2001.

STEPHEN MORTON/UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA