A Rush from Olympus

Harvard's world-beating skaters dominate the ice.

This isn't their first team effort, not by a long shot. "For so many years, they have spent so much time on the same sheet of ice together that each knows where the other is all the time," says Katey Stone, head coach of women's ice hockey. "They know when the other one will head into an open space on the ice, when the puck should get there and at what speed. When Angela is about to shoot from the point, Julie is already adjusting in front of the net to the place where the rebound should be, if there is one."

Such coordination is deadly to opponents, as proven by the damage Olympians Angela Ruggiero '02 ('04) and Julie Chu '06 have done to teams from all over the world. Skating for the United States, the duo brought home silver medals from the 2002 Salt Lake City Games (Ruggiero also has a gold from Nagano in 1998). Along with their Crimson teammates, they are now dominating the domestic ice: after 16 games, Harvard, 15-1 overall and 7-0 in the ECAC, was the top-ranked women's team in America. Through that point, Harvard had the nation's top offense, averaging nearly 7 goals per game, as well as the top defense, with a one goal per game average; goalie Jessica Ruddock '04 leads the country in that category. Harvard also has the country's top-rated power play and is number one in penalty killing. Individually, at mid-season, Ruggiero had 15 goals and 31 assists for 46 points, while Chu recorded 21 goals and 21 assists for 42 points; they are the nation's second and third leading scorers.

The country's top scorer is a third Olympian, Jennifer Botterill '02 ('03), who had tallied 22 goals and 33 assists for 55 points. Botterill took a silver at Nagano and a gold at Salt Lake City, skating for Canada, and also won the 2001 Kazmeier Award, given to the supreme individual player in women's collegiate hockey in the United States (see "The Unstoppable Botterill," January-February 2001, page 80). The three stars form the core of one of Harvard's best teams ever.

They have gone through the ECAC conference like a demolition crew, burying Dartmouth (9-2) and New Hampshire (7-1), then ranked fourth. In a 9-0 blowout of Wayne State, Ruggiero tied a Harvard record by netting five goals. The mayhem climaxed in a 17-2 obliteration of Boston College that set a single-game Harvard scoring record. That night, Botterill set another Harvard single-game record with 10 points on three goals and seven assists; Chu added four goals and four assists, and Ruggiero two goals and five assists.

Harvard's lone defeat was an early 4-3 loss to Minnesota, the day after the Crimson had vanquished the defending national champions, Minnesota-Duluth, 2-1. Harvard, Minnesota, Minnesota-Duluth, and Dartmouth are the top contenders for the NCAA title, which Minnesota-Duluth has held for the past two seasons. This year the tournament will be on their home ice.

Chu and Ruggiero both took to hockey early and played as the only girls on boys' teams for several years. Both attended Choate Rosemary Hall and lettered in three sports. They didn't skate together there, but did team up on a girls' select team, the Connecticut Polar Bears, which won the national championship in 1995, when Ruggiero was 15 and Chu 13, and...
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Contrasting the two, their coach says of Ruggiero, a defender: “She’s very powerful, very succinct. Angela has great strength coupled with tremendous agility.” As for Chu, who played center for the U.S. team and plays right wing at Harvard, “Julie will run down any puck,” says Stone. “She will never be out-hustled. She’s unselfish—she’s very much a playmaker.” Botterill calls Ruggiero “one of the most dominant defenders in all of women’s hockey—she’s an intimidating force out there,” and says Chu “floats on the ice. Julie is a smooth player, who has such great vision and soft hands. She makes plays and also has the ability to finish.”

Known to teammates as “Chuey,” Julie Chu grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut. Her father, Wah, a computer software consultant, came to New York City from Hong Kong; his mother was from a village in Canton. Mother Miriam is half Chinese and half Puerto Rican. Chu is the sole Asian-American woman on the U.S. team, and as such is something of a role model. At one hockey camp, the mother of a young Asian girl approached her to relate her daughter’s remark: “Mom, there’s someone out there who looks like me.” Chu notes that, with women’s hockey growing so fast, “There’ll be more diversity in the sport. But as far as hockey goes—we’re athletes. The puck doesn’t care where you come from.”

Although her parents were not athletic, Chu’s older siblings Richard and Christopher both played hockey: the former for Skidmore College, the latter for the Polar Bears. Julie began figure skating at eight, but that phase lasted only about two months, since she quickly fell in love with hockey. “It’s incredible what you can do on the ice,” she says. “Obviously, playing hockey isn’t the most natural thing in the world, but when you are out there, everything actually feels so natural.”

Chu looks up to her relatives, like a grandmother who worked in sweatshops to help the family, and also admires athletes like versatile New York Rangers defender Brian Leetch. She is versatile herself; at Choate Rosemary Hall she was, like Ruggiero, a soccer goalie. She also played first base for the softball team and in batting, “Julie’s a great, great teammate,” Ruggiero says. “She gets better every year. I was so excited when I heard she was coming here.”

Ruggiero grew up in Simi Valley, California, and hails from a hockey family: her father, Bill, was a goalie. Her younger brother, Billy, tended goal on the Pasadena Maple Leafs club team that had Angela skating with the boys, and he later turned semi-pro. “There were only about 10 rinks in California when I started,” she says. “When [Wayne] Gretzky came [to play for the LA Kings] in 1988, that made the sport popular.” In a way, being the only girl in a boys’ league helped Ruggiero develop as a player. “I always felt I had to prove myself on the ice,” she recalls. “Kids would call me names as soon as they saw my big ponytail. But at age 10 I was a head taller than the boys. I was always aggressive. They introduced checking when I was 11. I liked throwing checks.”

Ruggiero came east to Choate Rosemary Hall, and played with the Connecticut Polar Bears national championship teams in 1995, 1996, and 1997. Besides goal-tending in soccer, she threw the discus, javelin, and shot put; she set Choate records in all three field events and a New England shot-put mark of 39 feet, 10 inches.

She has been on national ice hockey teams since she was 15. Two years later, in 1998, she was the youngest member of the American squad that played in places like Finland and Sweden and eventually beat Canada 3-1 at Nagano to win gold. “That year was amazing,” she says. “Everything came true for me.”

She settled on Harvard for several reasons, including the fact that “the kids on the team here are so balanced—they’re balanced off the ice. It’s not like a scholarship school,” the government concentrator says. “We’ve got poets on the team, people who are into the guitar, or really into their courses. On the U.S. team, our life is hockey. Here, the students bring a lot of other things to the rink.”

They don’t bring body-checking, since women’s hockey disallows it. Nonetheless, as a freshman, Ruggiero had the most penalty minutes on the team. “I may have set a record,” she laughs. “A 110-pound girl would fly off me and hit the ice. I had to learn techniques to hold them up so they don’t fall—if they fall, you get a penalty.” Her time in the box has decreased, but her defense has only improved, and Ruggiero is proud of the Crimson’s stingy one-goaler-per-game average.

If Harvard wins the national title, the next goal for some of the team, Chu and Ruggiero included, may well be the World Championships in Beijing. Farther down the road, the two longtime friends may become teammates again in 2006 in Torino, Italy, where an Olympic gold medal would make a nice graduation present for Chu. After her own graduation next year, Ruggiero plans to play hockey overseas for a while, but once the next Olympics have ended, she wryly observes, “I’ll just be a 26-year-old without a job.”

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Winter Sports

Men’s Basketball

The hoopsters (10-7, 2-2 Ivy) started well and twice dominated Dartmouth, but lost games to Ivy powers Princeton (67-61) and Pennsylvania (75-59). Seniors Patrick Harvey and Brady Merlino, 1996. They reunited on the U.S. national team for the 2002 World Championships.

Contrasting the two, their coach says of Ruggiero, a defender: “She’s very powerful, very succinct. Angela has great strength coupled with tremendous agility.” As for Chu, who played center for the U.S. team and plays right wing at Harvard, “Julie will run down any puck,” says Stone. “She will never be out-hustled. She’s unselfish—she’s very much a playmaker.” Botterill calls Ruggiero “one of the most dominant defenders in all of women’s hockey—she’s an intimidating force out there,” and says Chu “floats on the ice. Julie is a smooth player, who has such great vision and soft hands. She makes plays and also has the ability to finish.”

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Women’s Basketball

Looking to repeat as Ivy champions, the netwomen (12-4, 4-0 Ivy) crushed Princeton, 78-42, and dispatched 2001 Ivy champion Penn, 80-71, with Hana Peljto ’04 tossing in a season-high 32 points. Peljto leads the squad in scoring (20.8 points per game) and rebounding (10 boards per game). Reka Cserny ’05 has contributed 13.6 points per game.

Men’s Hockey

At midterm, the stickmen (13-5-2 overall, 1-2-3-0 ECAC) were tied with Cornell atop the ECAC. The Crimson overpowered Yale twice, 6-3 and 6-2, were upset 2-1 by lowly Princeton, but took out Brown, 3-1, after exams. Tim Petit ’04 led the ECAC in scoring with 9 goals and 17 assists.