

Matt Turner continues unique New Jersey goalkeeper tradition at World Cup



When the United States Men's National Team competed at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar earlier this month, one of the most prominent players was a goalkeeper from New Jersey.

Matt Turner, a Park Ridge native and 2012 graduate of St. Joseph Regional in Montvale, was that player. And his presence in goal for all four games became a part of a unique tradition of graduates from NJSIAA schools starting for the United States on the world's biggest stage.

The United States has competed at the World Cup eight times since 1990. In five of those tournaments, the starter in goal has been a graduate of a New Jersey high school. Tony Meola from Kearny was in net in 1990 and '94 (and served as a backup in 2002). Tim Howard of North Brunswick was the starting goalkeeper in 2010 and 2014 (as well as a backup who did not see time in 2006), all before Turner was the choice to start this year for the tournament currently taking place in Qatar.

If that's not impressive enough, there's another very notable common thread among the three players - each was an outstanding multi-sport athlete in high school.



Photo courtesy of Saint Joseph Regional High School



United States Men's National Team Head Shot

When the United States qualified for the World Cup in 1990 in Italy for the first time in 40 years, Meola played every minute in the team's three games. Likewise, he had a prominent role four years later, when the United States advanced beyond the group stage playing on its home soil. But before any of that, Meola starred in both soccer and baseball at Kearny. He was part of a undefeated Group 4 state championship team during his career, and even scored 33 goals playing forward as a senior in 1986. He was good enough in baseball to play both sports at the University of Virginia and was even drafted by the New York Yankees coming out of high school.

Howard leads all United States goalkeepers with 121 all-time appearances with the national team. After being an unused sub at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, he started all four games for the USA in South Africa in 2010 and again in Brazil in 2014. When the USA bowed out in 2014 with a 2-1 loss to Belgium in the first round of the knockout phase, he set an all-time World Cup record by making 15 saves.

In addition to his play in goal, Howard was an accomplished field player at North Brunswick, where

he graduated in 1997. Beyond soccer, he excelled in basketball - which he has often cited as his first love while growing up - and as senior was a team captain who led fifth-seeded North Brunswick to its first Greater Middlesex Conference Tournament basketball championship.

The multi-sport New Jersey goalkeeper tradition continued with the emergence of Turner this year, who has mentioned Howard as one of his influences.

After earning the role of starting goalkeeper, the 28 year-old Turner allowed no goals during the run of play in the USA's three group stage matches. Wales scored on a penalty kick and he had clean sheets in a scoreless draw with England and 1-0 win over Iran.

Turner's path to a starter with the national team was even more impressive - and unusual - than the ones carved by Meola and Howard in the past.

Other than some casual play as a youngster, he did not play serious soccer until he was 14. He also didn't start at St. Joseph until midway through his junior year. That's because his main sport growing up was baseball, where he was primarily a second baseman and shortstop. He also played basketball. Soccer was more of a way of staying in shape before those seasons.

As he began to play more soccer, his interest level grew with it, and his natural ability playing goalkeeper also started to become evident, in part because it required some of the same hand-eye skills that he developed as a middle infielder. By the time he was a senior, his presence was huge. St. Joseph wasn't an elite team, but his play allowed his team stay close in games.

As he stated in a prior interview:

"I didn't want to do nothing in the fall, so I just decided 'You know what, I have a background in soccer, I'm just going to go out for the team and see how it goes'."

But even then, he started out in high school as a field player. On the second day of practice, the starting goalkeeper suffered an injury. He stepped up, and even though it took time to become a starter, the



Photo courtesy of Saint Joseph Regional High School

seeds were planted and the rest became history.

"All of my best friends were on that team, and all the guys were playing the game because we loved it", he said. "We watched the Premier League, we watched US soccer, and then we would try to recreate those things on the field. It was just a lot of fun, and it made it fun to be around the sport. That's what sort of drove my passion - the connections it made with other people and just the fun I had."

Playing for a non-powerhouse high school team had one other benefit - it allowed him to face plenty of shots. He made over 200 saves as a senior, and the constant action helped to speed his development.

After St. Joseph, he made the team at Fairfield University as a walk-on, and once again waited his turn to become a starter. After college, he caught on with the New England Revolution in MLS, where his rapid ascent to his current role with the national team took off, even though there were further up and down moments along the way. There were plenty of instances where he could chosen to end his dream.

It's been an overall story that hopes can motivate others. That's a point he made in another interview prior to the World Cup.

"I just hope it goes to show somebody someday if they're wavering whether or not to play a sport or thinking it's too late to do something," he said. "Either sports-wise or in their personal life or anything - that they can still achieve it."