

Four daughters of Humboldt: Boynton, Franco, Jacobs and Romberg are all D-I athletes

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Neil Tarpey/The Times-Standard

December's dark days have arrived, so it's a good time to catch up on the whereabouts and exploits of four shining lights.

These young women all played prep varsity basketball in Humboldt County during the past two seasons before moving on to NCAA Division I sports at four different universities.

In alphabetical order ...

Tara Boynton

After playing three years of both varsity basketball and soccer at Ferndale High, Boynton left to play Division I soccer this fall at Fresno State University.

At first Boynton thought she was going to red-shirt her freshman year, but less than two months before the season Bulldogs head coach Brian Zwaschka told her that she would be on the team.

Although she began the season on the bench, Boynton's abilities as a forward up top "to hold off players and feed the ball to my teammates," she

said, eventually earned the former Wildcat a starting spot in nine matches.

Fresno State surprised a few people in the Western Athletic Conference postseason tournament held at Louisiana Tech. The Bulldogs shut out the WAC's top three seeds, San Jose State, Utah State and Idaho to capture an NCAA tournament berth for the fourth time in Fresno State history.

In the opening-round WAC win over Idaho, Boynton took the first shot on goal of the match and then assisted on the Bulldogs' first goal.

During Boynton's first semester, her biggest challenge was "having to

balance school and studies with soccer."

Boynton, a criminology major, had to carve out time to study not only while juggling daily practice with classes, but especially when the team left on road trips at 6 a.m. on Friday mornings and not return until Sunday nights.

Those long road trips provided some of the most fun she had during the season.

"I think the best thing was traveling with the girls," said Boynton. "I definitely felt like it was a big family, especially after being the youngest and growing up with three older brothers."

Boynton appreciated the Ferndale community and her parents for being so supportive. She stated that her mom's second-grade class even made her a poster before the NCAA tournament.

With 11 Fresno State seniors graduating, Boynton will be one of the returning veterans next fall. And with a gym workout, a running workout and nutritional guidelines to follow during the off-

season, she will be ready.

"Everything has been worth it," said Boynton.

Mallorie Franco

The only sophomore of the quartet, Franco starred in basketball, volleyball, track and field, and soccer at Fortuna High before going on to Sacramento State University.

"Last year a big challenge was being a freshman on my own, not having my family as support," said Franco. "I was the youngest freshman on the team and I felt nervous."

What a difference a year makes, both off and on the court.

"This year I have way more confidence," said Franco, who now sometimes plays the role of big sister for this year's five freshmen. "I know how they feel because I was just there last year."

Last year Franco came off the bench in 25 games for the Hornets, but this season she has already started seven times.

She currently averages 8.2 points per game while shooting an accurate 46 percent from the floor. Franco is second on the team in rebounding (5.5 rpg) and is third on the team in both steals and blocked shots.

Franco noted "how much dedication" it takes to stay focused.

"There's classes, study hall, practice, weight training. By the time I get home I'm completely exhausted," said Franco.

"Luckily for me, my coach (Jamie Craighead) is big

on study hall. On road trips we still have required study hall," said Franco, who earned academic all-Big Sky Conference honors last year.

Speaking of road trips, Franco noted the Hornets enjoy traveling to games at Eastern Washington and Idaho State -- "we have a big fan base up there" -- but prior to that play in tough environments at Montana State and Montana University.

As a freshman, Franco lived in the dorms, which helped her meet athletes on other teams. This year she lives with two teammates in a townhouse off-campus.

"Definitely the fun is that we're a family and have fun," said Franco, "whether we're playing cards, watching sports on TV, or going to the movies, playing mini-golf."

Besides basketball, Franco competed on the Sac State track and field team last year. For an interesting perspective on that, check out www.statehornet.com/sports/franco-moonlights.

Kelsey Jacobs

Jacobs' stellar prep career -- including soccer, long jump, triple jump and basketball honors -- at Fortuna High came to an abrupt end when she suffered a severe ACL injury in a home game against Eureka on Jan. 14, 2010.

After a successful surgery and hard work rehabbing the injury, Jacobs started her collegiate basketball career this fall at Wichita State University.

"I'm physically 100 percent good," said Jacobs. "I feel strong, but it's been my biggest challenge coming off the injury. They say it takes a full year for the mental part, to accept that I can jump high enough."

In limited action -- Jacobs has started one game so far -- she has displayed flashes of her rebounding and shot-blocking skills that made her an all-around threat while playing for the Huskies.

Several of the major adjustments Jacobs has made so far pertain to crowds, talent and tempo.

WSU plays its home games at Charles Koch Arena, a 10,500-seat facility, which can get downright noisy when the Shockers take the floor.

Although Jacobs is now more used to playing in front of that many people, she said, "That was nerve-wracking my first few games."

Jacobs also noted the overall talent and accelerated pace of D-1 basketball.

"Everybody's been a star of their high school teams, so you're playing with so much talent and it's very competitive," said Jacobs. "And at that level the tempo is picked up about 10 times what you used to play at."

The Shockers (6-5) are coached by second-year head coach Jody Adams, who was the starting point guard on Tennessee's 1991 NCAA championship team.

WSU assistant coach Bridgette Gordon is not only another former Tennessee NCAA champion -- she played on the Volunteers 1987 and 1989 title teams -- but also a 2007 inductee of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

Jacobs is thoroughly enjoying being part of the WSU women's team.

"The most fun is hanging out with my teammates," said Jacobs. "They are hilarious. They're my very favorite people."

Sage Romberg

While at McKinleyville High, Romberg was named the Big 5 Most Valuable Player in basketball all four seasons and captured the golf crown three times before finishing second as a senior.

Romberg took her hoops game up the road from McKinleyville to Pullman, Wash., where she is one of three players to have started every game for Washington State.

With the Cougars off to a 2-10 start, Romberg said, "We've been in a bit of a slump but the last game was a better one for us. We do have a tough preseason schedule, and we're learning as a team."

What has she learned about herself?

"I've been learning a lot. How to play defense. Boxing out better and not just thinking I'm going to jump up and get it because there's other athletic girls going for the ball."

Romberg started her collegiate career in a big way, scoring 15 first-half points -- including a trio of 3-pointers -- for a team-high 19 points against St. Mary's.

She has scored in double-digits in two other games, 13 against Long Beach State and 11 against Gonzaga, and pulled down 11 rebounds against Nevada.

Although she currently stands second on the team in both scoring (8.4 points per game) and rebounding (5.4 rpg), her coaches want her to do more.

"The biggest challenge has been figuring out my place on the team and what jobs I need to do when I'm on the court," said Romberg. "The coaches say

my job is to be an aggressive offensive player and get more shots off. Also to get rebounds and help the team run.”

Romberg, like Boynton, has enjoyed being around and traveling with new teammates.

“It’s been really fun getting to know a new group of girls,” said Romberg. “And we got to play in Hawaii; I’m grateful about that.”

The Cougars’ three games at the Wakiki Beach Marriott Rainbow Wahine Showdown included a matchup against No. 14 North Carolina in which, despite the loss, Romberg scored eight and had seven rebounds.

The team’s Pac-10 conference schedule starts on Dec. 31 with a home game in Pullman against USC.

“I love Pullman,” said Romberg. “It’s little but it’s totally a college town. And a big city like Spokane is only an hour away.”