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Erin Matson: the 23-year-old coach making field hockey history at UNC

Last year Erin Matson led the UNC Tar Heels to the NCAA field hockey title as a student-athlete. Now the 23-year-old has done it again as a coach who's just barely older than her players





📷 North Carolina head coach Erin Matson is lifted up by her team after defeating the Northwestern Wildcats for the national championship at Karen Shelton Stadium last month in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Photograph: Jamie Schwaberow/NCAA Photos/Getty Images

Loretta Hunt *in Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

Sun 10 Dec 2023 03.30 EST

Sleep eludes Erin Matson. It's been three weeks since the University of North Carolina's most decorated field hockey player-turned-head coach shepherded her players to an NCAA championship victory in her debut season; the 23-year-old is [believed to be the youngest ever college coach](#) to win a national title. Still, the interview requests haven't stopped rolling in, even as Matson's other coaching duties beckon her attention. Matson isn't complaining, though.

"Field hockey doesn't get this kind of coverage at all," says Matson, who led the UNC team to four [NCAA](#) titles over five seasons as a student-athlete. US field hockey is having a moment, and far be it from Matson to hold it back. Much like the way she plowed through her opponents on the field, Matson only knows one direction and that's forward.

"She's the best thing that's happened to field hockey since we won the 1984 [Olympic] bronze medal," said former UNC coach Karen Shelton, who handed the reins over to Matson at the end of her own storied 42-year career at the Chapel Hill school. More than anyone, Shelton has a keen understanding of the pressures and pitfalls of such a heavy endeavor at such a tender age; Shelton was only 24 when she took the helm at UNC and eventually built it into the premier collegiate program in the country and home to 11 NCAA titles.

Hailing from Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Matson was introduced to the sport when her mother, a former goaltender for Yale, took her uncommonly coordinated six-year-old to a local clinic. Erin cradled the stick like it had never left her hands before, taking to the motions quickly and confidently. She was a natural, though she also excelled at softball

and basketball. Field hockey eventually won out, the crisp smack that came from wood connecting with hard plastic too enticing a sound to give up.

Be it luck, destiny or a bit of both, the Matsons lived one hour from the WC Eagles facility, the top youth club in the nation. At age nine, Erin made the team, joining 14- and 15-year-olds without so much as the blink of an eye.



📷 UNC field hockey coach Erin Matson celebrates after her team's win over the Northwestern Wildcats for the national title last month in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Photograph: Jamie Schwaberow/NCAA Photos/Getty Images

Coach Shelton watched the nine-year-old Matson for the first time at the WC Eagles facility, punching above her weight. By age 13, Matson was introduced to international play, debuting at the junior Pan-American games. She became a member of the US national team at age 17.

At age 15, Matson and her parents made an unofficial visit to UNC. Matson had always made it clear that she wanted to play there under Shelton, but wisely, the trio tried to keep her options open, making appointments with other schools. But it was always going to be UNC, that determination solidified by a solo run Matson took across campus to clear her thoughts.

Matson flourished with Shelton and the Tar Heels, the top-scoring midfielder able to anticipate other's reactions to create paths to the goal, fast and fluid like Lionel Messi. By the end of her tenure, the three-time team captain would accumulate five ACC championship wins, become a three-time recipient of the Honda Sport Award for field hockey and notch the all-time scoring records in both ACC history and NCAA tournament play. (She's also competed on the international stage, winning her first international cap for the US shortly after her 17th birthday and helping the Americans reach the podium at the Pan-Am Games four years ago in Peru.)

Upon graduation, Matson could've played professionally abroad. Her talent would've made it a lucrative endeavor.

"I just didn't want to leave Carolina," Matson says. "And I knew I loved coaching. I knew I had a knack for it. And I knew I could help the sport, which has given me so many opportunities. I'd knew I helped the sport as a player, and I knew I could still help more."

Through a convergence of circumstances, Matson mapped a path to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Shelton would coach one more season, a fifth for Matson and others who'd been granted the extra eligibility in response to the Covid pandemic. Could Matson slide into the coveted job in that time?

The man who'd need convincing was Bubba Cunningham, the university's director of athletics for the last decade. Matson had interacted with Cunningham at games and on speaking panels, but she hardly had a coaching resume to hand him outside of teaching at kids' camps and clinics.

"Dare to be brilliant," Shelton had advised Matson and her teammates throughout her UNC career. With that mantra echoing in her head, Erin entered Cunningham's office and asked for the job.

"It wasn't like I was a stranger walking into his office asking for it, but it definitely caught him off guard," said Matson. For starters, Matson was about to lead the team into her final season. Would she have the focus, let alone the time, to interview for the position?

Matson entered the interview pool among other coaches with decades of experience, understanding that she'd be observed and scrutinized that much more in every phase of her final season.

"[I hoped Cunningham would say,] 'OK, she came to me in August, but she's leading her team greatly and not allowing it to affect the locker room atmosphere,'" said Matson. "'OK, she asked for the job, but she's still taking care of business on the field.' It was all just staying true to my word, and then he'd know I'm not too crazy."

The Tar Heels ended an undefeated season that November in Connecticut, challenging their Northwestern rivals who'd knocked them out of the first round of the NCAA tournament the previous year and snapped their three-year championship streak. A frenetic battle between baby blue and dark purple ended in double overtime, with Peyton Worth hooking in a shot with her back to the goal to inch UNC's victory.

📷 North Carolina's Erin Matson competes as a player during the 2022 NCAA final in Storrs, Connecticut. She was a part of three undefeated seasons during her five-year playing career in Chapel Hill. Photograph: Jeffrey A Camarati/JEFFREY A. CAMARATI

Athletic director Cunningham had seen enough. He offered Matson the head coaching position, graciously admitting that he hadn't even thought to consider a 22-year-old candidate until she marched into his office and threw her hat in the ring.

Shelton met with her star player after her December retirement, not surprised to hear that Matson had already been in motion, picking the brains of the other Carolina coaches, querying them on their individual journeys.

"She'd set up meetings with different players on the team, just to let them know that she was going to do this and to see if she had their support, which she did," says Shelton. "Erin was willing to do the dirty work, the recovery runs and support runs off the ball, where you're sometimes unrewarded. That's what leadership is about, and she did that since day one."

UNC announced Matson's hiring last January. Twenty-three players returned for the 2023 season, many of them Matson's friends that she'd spent time with away from the grass. She'd lived off-campus with a couple

of them. Speculation over that transition evaporated as the season progressed, replaced by the type of enthusiasm only a sports college generates. But to win the NCAA title in her first year as a collegiate coach? That's daring to be brilliant and accomplishing it.

Matson's adeptness at time management and organization - skills she thanks both her parents for teaching her along the way - is still in full effect three weeks after the season's close. She's fitting every opportunity to speak about the sport between her coaching duties, which move back into recruitment. Sleep will come soon. Matson can feel it.

"It's more just reminding myself, you know why I do this, why we all do this," she says. "Like we just love this place. We love this sport. So, if it's paying off for the sport and future Tar Heels and current players, then we're doing something right."

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