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Carli Lloyd: From California's Powerhouse to Global Playmaker

By Maddy Chen



Carli Lloyd is one of UC Berkeley's most recognized indoor volleyball players, having led Cal to the NCAA championship finals in 2010 and later representing Team USA in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games as Cal's first indoor volleyball Olympian. This setter continues making plays overseas in the professional world and is an inspiration to athletes all around the globe.

Carli started playing volleyball when she was 11 years old. Her father passed away when she was very young, so her uncle became a mentor and father figure to her. Her mother was a middle school PE teacher and had coached Carli's older siblings in volleyball. Originally a track athlete, she tried out for volleyball in 6th grade and she fell in love with being a part of a team.

Being an Olympian was always Carli's dream, but it wasn't always clear which sport she wanted to pursue. She imagined herself playing beach volleyball, inspired by her idols Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh playing at the Olympics. Her vision started changing when she began playing indoor volleyball, and for a while she even wanted to be a multi-sport athlete and ran track too. Even becoming a setter wasn't an easy decision; Carli chose to sacrifice her attacker position and commit to becoming a full-time setter who could make it to a Division I college. Before attending Fallbrook Union High School, she had her eyes set on

starting as a freshman on the school's varsity team. As she played, her sights shifted to earning a full ride to college as a starting freshman. Once she got to Cal, the Olympics were finally in her sights.

Choosing to play at Cal was not a difficult decision for Carli. She did not have a particular school in mind but was motivated to earn a scholarship to help her family. She visited the UC Berkeley campus in her junior year. "I loved it from the minute I walked on campus, I loved the vibe, it was super calming and it was beautiful. I felt really good there," the Bonsall, California, native recalls. "With a volleyball standpoint, [I] could potentially start right away and help the program make history... I think that competitor in me was looking for that challenge, to do something that hadn't been done yet." Carli stayed true to her word and led Cal to record seasons.

She and her uncle also met coach Rich Feller, Cal's most successful volleyball coach in program history. Right away, she had a good feeling about him. Rich had that same warm, welcoming feeling her uncle did.

"From the first year, I felt very comfortable with having someone that cared about me not just as a volleyball player. I needed that since I was used to having a family member as a coach for a very long time," Carli comments. "Rich was a super positive guy and [had] a lot of positive energy. He loved his job and it made it easy to go and work for him every day."

As a student-athlete, Carli faced the challenge of balancing early morning practices, late study sessions, and taking tests on the road. "I felt that I needed to put more of my effort into volleyball. I needed to perform and help this program and almost wanted to set academics to the side, but I couldn't, it had to be a priority."

Rich describes Carli as "one of the hardest working, pure athletes, and a very good setter. She got better and better each year and rose to the occasion and took us to the precipice of the final four and then the actual finals."

During her senior year, she led the team as captain. It occasionally made her nervous because she was a great leader by action, but not as confident with her words. Carli reflects on her growth as a leader saying, "Rich trusting that [position] in me gave me more confidence to be more of what I could be, speaking my mind more. It was challenging, but I learned how to trust myself more. I had great leaders before me. Angie Pressey was one of the coolest players and captains and I was really lucky to have her my freshman year as a role model. I took a lot from her."

Carli was also grateful to have Meagan Schmitt, her best friend and roommate for 3 years, leading by her side. "We would speak one-on-one together and then face the team," Carli says, explaining their leadership dynamic. "We're all equals and have to invest in the team—learning how to get everyone to have a voice was also really important to the team's

success.”

“Coordination between players is so important because they are so close on the court—having a team that understands each other and has leaders is really important,” Rich adds.

During Carli’s time at Cal, the team advanced farther and farther in the NCAA tournament each year. They were told that it would be difficult to repeat their success, but they always had a drive to improve. “I believed so much on what we had built there, the base of our team, we were so united and so motivated to do great things every year, so by that final four, the ride was so cool.” It was heartbreaking to lose to Penn State for the 4th year in a row, but “both teams are putting in everything they got, but at the end of the day someone has to lose.” In 2010, Cal saw its best season with a 30–4 record, finishing first in the Pac-10 and getting to the NCAA championship finals.

The game that stands out to her the most, though, was the semifinal win against USC and her last win with her Cal team. “We wanted so badly to face USC again because we had lost both times in conference, and when we got matched up against them in the semis, we were so ready—we knew it was coming, we had prepared for them. That moment, that’s what we were going for.”

By her senior year, Carli finished second on Cal’s all-time assists list. She was also named the 2010 AVCA Player of the Year and is Cal’s only recipient to this day. This recognition was impactful for Carli on a personal level. “I really wasn’t expecting to get that award. I didn’t know that I was receiving that award and I wasn’t prepared for that moment, but it was something that has impacted my family so much, like my uncle. I remember his face at the awards banquet and that [award] reflects the work that my family put into me becoming that player that I am.”

Shortly after graduating in 2011, Carli joined the US national team and was an alternate for the 2012 London Olympics. In 2015, she was on the US Women’s Volleyball Team that claimed gold in both the Pan American Games and Pan American Cup and was named the Most Valuable Player and Best Setter for both tournaments. She stayed with the team to compete at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where Team USA claimed the bronze medal.

Carli spoke about her experience moving from an alternate to a player on the final roster. “You can make the [team] roster, but you really want to get on the final roster to start. Before that summer, I had been told that ‘we won’t be having you back in the gym, we needed to cut the roster down.’ I went into that year knowing that I probably wasn’t going to be back in the national gym.”

Nevertheless, Carli got a call in the middle of April informing her she had an open tryout. On June 30th, 2016, the head coach told her she was going to the Olympics.

Team USA's first match was against Puerto Rico on August 6, Carli's birthday. Being Carli's first match, it was a really memorable experience. "I remember looking up into the stands and seeing my family and I cried. Literally, the match was about to start, and I was super emotional."

Team USA had an impressive performance and claimed the bronze medal that year. "I remember looking at my uncle at the ceremony and looking at him with this crazy, all-consuming sensation of 'I did it. We did this.' It was so hard and took so long, and four months before that I would have said my chances? Maybe 5%," Carli says, reflecting on the moment she received her medal. "It was a really surreal experience."

Alongside playing for Team USA for nine summers, Carli has also spent the last nine winter seasons playing professional volleyball overseas. "I didn't really know about [playing professionally] until late in college," Carli says. "When I found out about the professional leagues, I wanted to play in Italy, in Brazil. I had heard about the tradition of volleyball over there."

Carli played professionally in Italy her first three years after college, having been scouted by an Italian agent during one of her matches. The agent contacted her parents and wanted to fly her out to Italy to show her the professional leagues. She and her uncle attended a semifinals match, and she immediately knew that she wanted to play there. "One of the things that drew me there was the passion for volleyball in Italy; you can't even compare what it's like in the US to in Italy," Carli describes. "It's a great atmosphere to play in; by far the coolest atmosphere I've played in."

One of the most influential teams during Carli's professional experience was her first season in Italy, where her team did something never done before: it won three championships in one season. It was also really exciting for Carli because she had never played for a foreign team before—she even had a Czech teammate translating for her during training, but quickly "fell in love with playing professionally."

"You have to sacrifice a lot being away and there aren't a ton of girls here playing for ten years and making it. That season was really amazing and a great group of foreign girls together, this beautiful family, [the] culture of volleyball with this team, it stuck with me."

Since, Carli has also played in Azerbaijan, Brazil, and Turkey. The incredible experiences of being part of a team is why Carli keeps playing volleyball. "[The] camaraderie of a successful team is hard to come by, it's really powerful," the setter explains. "Volleyball is super technical and there's so many intricacies of how it works, so when you have success over a long period of time with a team or program, you just know there was a lot of hard work that went into that."

Playing around the globe has also expanded Carli's perspective on life. Growing up in a small town, Carli's family would often take kids in, so she was constantly surrounded with different ethnicities and foods. In Italy, she fell in love with the culture and became fluent studying Italian on her own. "One thing I love about Italy is that it brings families together; they take time away from work to sit down at the table for an hour and a half to eat lunch together," Carli says.

Part of her love for culture includes getting to know people and hearing their stories. At Berkeley, she studied Social Welfare with a minor in Education because she wanted to become a teacher and loved working with people. Now, she is really interested in the psychology that goes into being an athlete, from mindset to self-love, to self-growth. These topics weren't discussed when she was younger, leading her to create her new website showupwithme.com. Her motto is about "showing up" regardless of any circumstances and giving it her all.

When faced with people who didn't believe that she or her team could do great things, she immediately responds, "Who do [they] think [they] are, to tell me what we're capable of? It's interesting that a lot of my successes with teams...are typically 'underdog,' or 'not supposed to' [teams]. There's some good in that, there's some freedom because you don't have as much pressure, but there's also a lot of uncertainty—if someone's like, 'if you look at the roster, you're not supposed to win,' well, I'm like, I don't believe you."

Carli has built this mentality over the years to help navigate the pressures of being a successful volleyball player. Thinking of how negative comments affect many athletes, Carli reflects how "it can affect us, but then we learn from it, we grow, and at some point, we're choosing the story we want to believe instead of being told what we need to believe."

"I was lucky with my mom and uncle, they believed in me and instilled that in me, and taught me about goal-setting and if you want something, then you need to be able to make the right choices for it. They were great for me, but I definitely have worked on my mindset and every day I work on it still," Carli says. "Our minds are just incredible things that can constantly change, and when we're young, we don't realize what you're choosing to think about, and as we get older, we are more aware of it."

If she could only be remembered for one thing, it would be "that I encourage the people around me to be who they want to be," Carli answers. "Looking back, I just wish that everyone would understand that we all have choices and we won't be perfect all the time, but life gives you opportunities to overcome, and those moments usually spike you up and you become better afterwards, but sometimes we get paralyzed by fear by this anxiety of not being perfect."

"I feel like there's so much beauty in showing up fully and embracing who you are, and it took me a long time to get there and to see that and believe in myself and my path. For women it

can be paralyzing with the pressure of 'you need to be this,' 'you should be this,' and then we lose the truth of who we think we truly should be. I love when someone can just be who they are, and it's hard as athletes sometimes. You can be yourself and you should be encouraged to be all that you are and not what someone else needs of you."

Carli Lloyd's tough journey to success is inspiring to those around her, and she continues to bring her positive attitude to the court. Her hard work and dedication brought her incredible success at Cal and then at the Olympics. Best of luck to Carli as she plays for the Italian club Pomí Casalmaggiore in Italy this upcoming season. Go Bears!