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Olympic hopes for hockey ace

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'As a child I always had aspirations to go to the Olympics and represent my sport at the highest level, but not until recently did I realise that I wanted to do this as a full-time occupation for the foreseeable future'. So says Susie Gilbert, final year Geography student and women's Olympic hockey hopeful.

Susie Gilbert in action

The 23 year-old from Lichfield has a place on both the England and GB women hockey squads, and is part of the centralised training programme based at Bisham Abbey National Sports Centre where the women's team train together four times a week. 'It is such an opportunity to do something I enjoy and am passionate about on a daily basis, and what makes it better is I get to train with my friends every day.'

The training has to be balanced with her University studies and her commitment to Birmingham's women's hockey team. This involved a lot of travelling back and forth up the M40, but Susie reveals her secret to managing her hectic schedule. 'It's getting the balance right, you have to be disciplined with your time and making sure I don't do too much hockey or too much Uni work, and making sure I have time to relax because otherwise it can get a bit too much.'

So how does someone with so little free time relax? 'I chill out by seeing my friends, going shopping, going to the cinema, having a girlie evening and painting our nails, or doing a bit of pottery painting. I do that quite a lot at the moment! I went with my friends for my birthday earlier in the year and now we have been a few times to have a cup of tea and a chat.

'Making time to do that means that when it comes to having to be focused and get two hours of work in-between training you feel fresh and focused, rather than becoming resentful.'

Susie - who won three bronze medals with England hockey in 2010 for the Champions Trophy, World Cup and the Commonwealth Games - credits the University of Birmingham for her being able to commit fully to both her passion and her studies. 'The University as a whole has been fantastic, supporting my commitment to the centralised training programme and giving me the opportunity to pursue the goals I want to achieve both in sport and academically.

'My schedule is a little more relaxed this year as I split my final year, so this academic year I am just concentrating on my dissertation.'

'It helped that I have been able to choose modules I find interesting, so if I haven't been able to get back for the lectures I would at least enjoy reading around the topic. The lecturers for those modules have been great. If I need to meet them to discuss anything or didn't quite understand something they were happy to meet me or chat over email.

'I do try to be very conscientious though as it works both ways. If they see you are prepared to work hard then they will give you support. They have been fantastic in that respect and have helped me massively. They understand the value of sport to Birmingham, the same as sport has to appreciate the academic side.'

Susie has also had a lot of support from the University of Birmingham Sport department which, although she is not an official scholar, has helped her with her training. 'I still play for the University women's hockey team on a Saturday and they have been fantastic with me as when I'm in Birmingham I use their facilities to train a lot of the time.

'Phil Gooderham, our head coach, has been amazing. I just love coming back to play for Birmingham as it's nice to see all your friends from Uni, plus I love the red dresses we play in!'

'It is a different environment down in Bisham Abbey as we have fun but it is very intense and focused. Coming back to Birmingham means training in a different way, the intensity and focus is still there it is a bit more relaxed and a different kind of fun. It's good to go back and forth to have a change of scenery and get back on campus.'

It was a combination of the leafy campus and Phil that drew Susie to applying to Birmingham. 'When I came to the Open Day the campus was just an unbelievable sight, plus I knew Phil from when I played for Cannock and he had been my twin brother Tim's county coach. I knew what he wanted to do with the team.

'It wasn't a hard choice to make and it was number one choice on my UCAS form!'

In between all her University commitments there is the small matter of this year's Olympics to contend with. 'For the next few months I've got to work hard, train hard and get myself in the best possible shape for selection, but there is some tough competition so just getting in the squad would be an achievement. Looking beyond the summer I would just still love to be playing hockey if my body holds up and looking forward to the 2014 World Cup and then Rio in 2016.'

What part will the University play in her life after she graduates? 'Whether I continue playing for the Uni as part of the hockey club or not, I have been give invaluable support by them which I can never forget. It has been a massive part of my life for the last three and a half to four years so it would be great to give that support back in any way I possibly can.

'I'll definitely be coming back as an alumna to visit.'

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