



Celebrating 50 Years of Title IX

50 For 50:

Jessica Smith - Wichita Southeast

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KSHSAA

By Brad Hallier

In the spring of 1999, Jessica Smith hopped on a bus and headed west.

Then a freshman soccer player at Wichita Southeast, Smith was something of a myth around Kansas high school soccer.

It was the dawn of the digital age, but before social media as the world knows it now. For example, Facebook wouldn't be invented for five more years, YouTube for six more years, and recruiting service Hudl for seven more years.

Unless teams played against Smith, or coaches happened to see her while scouting, few people away from Wichita knew much about Smith.

At the time, Adam Hunter was a young soccer coach, leading the newly-launched Dodge City High School girls soccer team. Southeast was coming to town for a game, and although Hunter had heard about Smith, he had a wait-and-see approach.

“It was my first year coaching high school, in the spring of ’99, and Jessica was a freshman, but I heard from some people that there was this kid at Southeast High School named Jessica Smith who was a pretty good player,” said Hunter, who is now the head women’s soccer coach at Butler Community College. “Southeast didn’t have a soccer pedigree. They had some good boys teams, but they were never excellent in girls soccer. So I thought, ‘It’s Southeast. How good could this freshman kid be?’

“They get there, and first of all, she’s bigger than most of her teammates. She looks the part, with the way she had her uniform on, she had her wrists taped up, and I thought OK. The game gets going, and the next thing I know the game is over. It’s 5-0, and this Jessica Smith kid scored all five goals.”

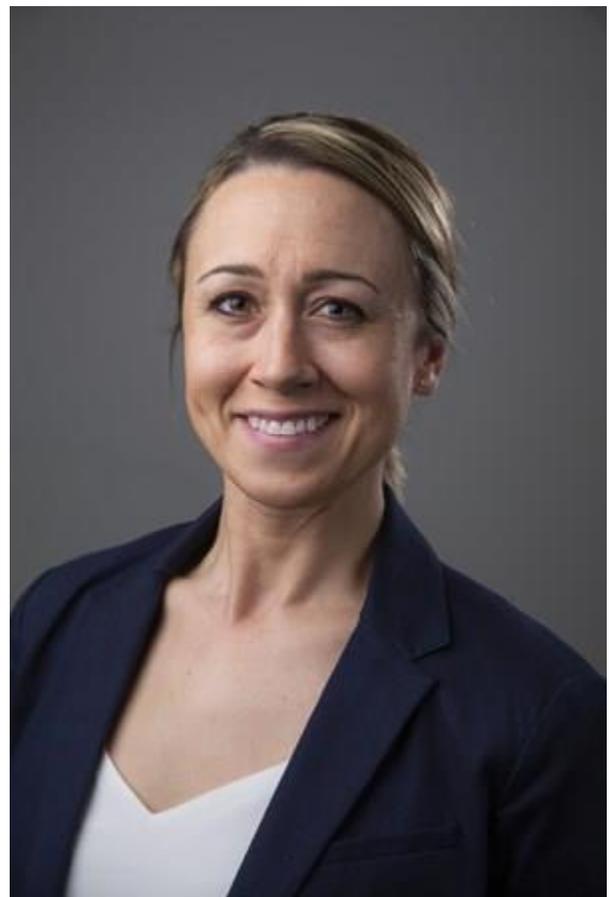
Those were five of the 128 high school goals Smith - now the head women’s soccer coach at the University of Missouri-Kansas City - scored during her four years at Southeast. At the time of her graduation, Smith’s mark was a state record.

Smith had been turning heads on the soccer field long before her freshman year, however. She played club soccer for Wichita-based Botofogo, for a team that was three years older. Smith also played for a Derby boys team.

“They didn’t like me at first,” Smith said with a laugh, referring to playing on a boys team. “But once they found out I could play soccer and I was good at it, they liked me better. It was a good experience for me, because I had to be a tough player physically, but it was better for me to move over to a female team.”

The current club girls soccer scene in Kansas is robust. Teams from Kansas City, Topeka and Wichita play at regional and national events.

Wichita-area players like Wichita Northwest’s Emily Jensen (UMKC) and Abril Lucio (Arkansas Little Rock), Newton’s Brookelynn Entz, Keila Gillispie and Kenzi Gillispie (Kansas State), Goddard’s Brooke Sullivan (Kansas State), Bishop Carroll’s Maguire Sullivan (Kansas State), Wichita East’s Brynn Walker (Jackson State), and Kapaun Mount Carmel’s Sierra Fury



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(Missouri State) now routinely dot NCAA Division 1 rosters.

Smith, however, was something of an anomaly when she signed to play at the University of Kansas.

“It’s night and day,” Smith said when asked to compare the Wichita-area girls soccer scene now to when she played. “You’re seeing a lot more players that you see play a high level of club. What that does (at high schools) is it raises the level of teammates who don’t play club soccer. And I’d say the high school experience is getting more competitive. When I played at Southeast, I had three teammates who played club soccer. Coach (Roland) Long would ask me to find players in the hallway, because they’re athletic and they would make varsity.

“There’s a lot more opportunity and competitiveness in leagues now, specifically in Wichita. When I was growing up there, there were not a ton of players going on to play at the next level. Now, tons of players are going on to play at the next level. There’s a desire for women to go on and play at the next level.”

Smith continued to blaze trails after leaving Southeast, where she led her team to a pair of regional titles. She was a starter for the Kansas Jayhawks in 2004 when they won their only Big 12 championship.

She later became an assistant coach at her alma mater, and after five years, moved a short distance down I-70 to become an assistant at Kansas State.

Now she’s at UMKC, where she’s in her second season coaching the Kangaroos.

Although Smith may have been just barely ahead of her time as a player, the strides women’s soccer has made since she graduated from Southeast have been tremendous.

Colleges from Washburn to Sterling to Garden City to Barclay have women’s soccer. The Jayhawks and Wildcats play in their own state-of-the-art, soccer-specific stadiums.

Scores of Wichita-area girls are playing collegiately, at all levels.

“So many players have come out in the last 10 years, and they’re so much better than I was,” Smith said. “Those things make me happy. I have a lot of pride in where I’m from. My soccer experience was growing up in Wichita, and it’s really fun to see how many awesome players are coming out now. It’s testament to the game growing.”

We are grateful to partner with WIN for KC, an organization with the mission to empower the lives of girls and women by advocating and promoting the lifetime value of sports through opportunities for participation and leadership development. WIN for KC and the KSHSAA believe involvement in activities and sports lay the ground work for supporting well-rounded citizens in our communities and beyond. For more on WIN for KC visit: <https://www.sportkc.org/win-for-kc>