



Minnesota Crookston Senior Malia Pula Finds Home in the Sport of Softball

5/16/2020 12:19:00 PM
By Shawn D. Smith, Director of Athletic Communication

"Playing the game I love is like home to me," those were the words University of Minnesota Crookston softball senior [Malia Pula](#) used to describe softball, a sport that has been in her life since second grade. It has been a sport that took her around California and the country playing softball to a youth A sport where she would compete at the junior college level and learn everything she would ever want to know about softball from her head coach and former USA Olympian Vicky Galindo. It would be a sport that would take Pula away from the comforts of her home in Gilroy, Calif., located outside of San Jose, Calif., a city of over a million in the Bay Area, to Crookston, Minn., to continue her collegiate career.

Though her softball career came to a halt all too early due to COVID-19, it has still been a sport that has given so much back to Pula. She has gotten the chance to play the sport she loved for the last 16 years at a high level, something many young girls dream of. Now she will be able to focus on other dreams of coaching. It is another dream she has had since she was in second grade. Though she wishes she could continue to play softball, Pula can't wait to start her career in her own classroom.

Pula's softball journey starts back in Northern California where her dad, Tullgas Pula, was looking to get his two children involved in as many sports as possible. The younger Pula tried out several sports, but it was softball that stuck, and softball that would remain.

"We tried out basketball, soccer, volleyball, and finally I tried out for softball," Pula said. "The next thing you know I was playing softball for the next 16 years. I was playing little league and then travel ball. It's wasn't for my dad putting us out there I wouldn't have played softball!"

Pula would continue to play softball up through middle school, and even after other practices and trying to play other sports, she would run to another softball practice to continue to play the sport she loved. Her love of softball continued into high school where she earned a starting spot as a freshman for Evergreen Valley HS. She had the chance to play a sport she loved with some of her best friends. It was a great experience until her senior year when her favorite coach quit and she started scrambling and trying to figure out her next steps.

"By the time my senior year came my head coach that I really loved, he quit before our senior season," Pula recalled. "I remember being so upset and telling my mom, you know what, I don't think I want to play softball anymore, I want to go to baseball. I wanted to try out for the baseball team. My mom got around that I was going to try out for the baseball team. I got called into the principal's office and the athletic director had to explain to me that I could not play baseball. They took me out of class and said you cannot play baseball, you have to play softball next year. I had said, I am going to try out for the baseball team. I wanted to be the first girl to play on the baseball team, unfortunately that didn't happen. They hired a new softball coach and finished out my senior year playing softball."

Pula had a successful prep career at Evergreen Valley HS, but she had made a decision early on that she wasn't ready to make the jump to four year college. It was a big step, and as a soft described home body, she wasn't ready to leave what she was comfortable with.

"I told myself that I wasn't ready for that drastic change," Pula said. "I was a home body from the start. I knew that I wasn't going to do that. It is a lot of responsibility, leaving home and leaving my family."

It was during her last senior game that her future began to come into focus. Galindo, the head coach at West Valley College in Stockton, Calif., was watching Pula play, and she came up and offered her a chance to continue her softball career at the junior college level.

"With my JUCO, I got recruited by Coach Vicky Galindo," Pula stated. "She is one of my favorite coaches of all time. She played for the US Olympic team in Japan. My last game of my senior year, she was watching us play and she came up to me and offered me a spot to play on her JUCO team. My junior college was West Valley Community College. Without traffic it was only 25 minutes to get there, but with traffic it took an hour and 30 minutes every day. So I would have to wake up at 5 a.m. to make sure I made my 10 a.m. class, but to be able to make it without getting stuck in traffic. My freshman year I learned everything from Vicky Galindo. She taught me how to swing properly, I wasn't always the best softball player, and I always told myself nobody is perfect in this game. She taught me to always be confident. When I started hitting the ball and learning from her, my batting average always stayed above .350."

Pula had a strong sophomore season at West Valley College, hitting .370 with eight home runs and 29 RBIs, 23 runs scored, and four stolen bases. She had made it known to Coach Galindo that she was ready to leave California and take the next step in her life. After reaching out to several coaches, it was a school that Coach Galindo had told her about, Minnesota Crookston that drew her focus to continue her collegiate softball journey.

"My sophomore year of college I had gone up to my JUCO coach and told her that I wanted to continue to play softball," Pula said. "She knew a lot of coaches at the Division I and Division II level. She had mentioned to me that there is this school University of Minnesota Crookston. It is connected to the big school, the U of M. She had another student athlete attend Minnesota Crookston, Khalyn Neumann. She went there and she told me that she really loved it there. It is a small city and it is a small school, however you will still get out. Starting getting me out to coaches and learn it at the Minnesota Crookston coach. I got a call and I remember telling him that I think I am ready to leave home and start this new change in my life. The coach was telling me that they have a great education program. He got me a visit out to the school May 1, 2018. Then I got my school done, I finished everything and finished with a 2.5 GPA. I got accepted to the university and the next thing you know I was signing up for classes and getting ready to come in the fall."

Pula arrived in Crookston, Minn., in August of 2018. It was a beautiful late summer day in Minnesota and she loved it as first but then some homesickness set in that made it tough on her transition away from what she had known in Northern California. It was softball, her education, and her family that fueled her forward and helped make the transition easier.

"The first couple of months in Crookston were very challenging for me," Pula said about her first months as a student at Minnesota Crookston. "I was very homesick. I remember I would just sit myself. I am here to make my family proud of me for leaving and coming all the way from San Jose, Calif., to Crookston, Minn. I dug down and said I am doing this for my education and I am doing this for my family. Those were my biggest pushes. I was very homesick, however my teammates and my roommates were big supporters for me. Softball has always been there for me. I remember I would go to class and the next thing I would look forward to every day was going to softball practice. I knew every time that I am at softball that nothing else should be on my mind. Playing the game I love is like home to me."

[Jenna Owen](#), who had taken over as softball coach that summer, helped Pula with her transition, along with the friends she made at Minnesota Crookston on the team and through the dorms on campus. She quickly learned just how special Minnesota Crookston is, and began to realize that she wouldn't get the same experience back home in California.

"Coach Owen was very nice to me," Pula said of her head coach at Minnesota Crookston. "He always made sure if I ever needed anything or needed someone to talk to that I felt comfortable calling the girls or calling him. I met a lot of people from the west coast. They made it like family too. With the dorm life, I was able to hang out with a lot of people. I met tons of friends, especially the international students. They were super funny and super friendly. It was just a different atmosphere that I got like where I am from. It is a very comforting and welcoming type of feeling. I really enjoyed that. If I were to go back home to California, I know that it wouldn't be like that."

Pula had a strong junior year for the Golden Eagles, hitting .287 with 23 runs scored, 10 doubles, four home runs and a team high 27 RBIs. Pula helped Minnesota Crookston to a school record 13 wins. Pula and her fellow seniors were excited about their senior seasons. They had big goals set for what they thought the team could accomplish.

"Coming into senior year we had big goals, me and the other seniors, Mika, Paige, Tavis, and Proctor," Pula stated. "We just wanted to end our senior seasons with a bang. We wanted to make it to the playoffs. The team got in a lot of freshmen recruits, and right after the first couple of fall games we thought that might really be able to be a good challenge to the other teams out there. Our confidence is pretty tough. We all thought to ourselves that we can make it. If we truly work hard as a team. Coming in for me, I tried to put the fact that it was my last year behind me and not truly focus on it. Sometimes it would dawn on me that this is going to be my last year and what I am going to do with my life afterwards. I remember I would put in a ton of work in the morning at 6:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. There were a lot of freshmen, and Coach Owen made it seem like none of us have a set position. We all had to earn our position on the team. Just because I did great hitting last year doesn't mean that I am going to get that starting spot. I need to prove myself. It should always be that way. Nobody should ever feel like they are entitled to a position."

The Golden Eagles had started with a 4-10 mark, one of the best starts the program has ever had. They had big wins under their belt in dome tournaments in Minot, N.D., and were about ready to start their eight game trip to Winter Haven, Fla. That is when everything changed due to COVID-19. Within a matter of hours, it went from not being able to travel to Florida, to no collegiate sports across the nation. It was a tough time for all student athletes across the country, but especially for seniors who were unsure what this meant for the end of their careers in the sports they had grown up playing.

"When the season got canceled and we had the meeting with the vice chancellor, me and a couple of other seniors were crying," Pula recalled. "I was crying. I couldn't hold my tears back as strong as I am. It was the fact that this is what we worked hard for. This is what I worked hard for every day. This is what I want to do right after I am done with class. This is what I look forward to every weekend, to be able to take a road trip somewhere to play a couple of games. To have that taken away was the worst feeling in the world. I remember I would be in the classroom, I would go to study hall and would do everything just so I could play softball. I would say I took softball for granted."

Pula had a tough time at first adjusting to life without softball. She was lost, but she has started to come to terms with the end of her softball career. The thing that has driven her is a focus on the next step in her career, becoming a teacher.

"I was actually pretty lost," Pula said regarding her initial reaction to softball being canceled and classes moving online for the rest of the semester. "I didn't really know what to do. I had no energy to work out or get out of the room for a walk. Now I am okay. It is kind of hard knowing that I can't play next year because I need to student teach. I know I have an extra year that would be great to me. I think I am ready for the next stage in my life which is graduating and getting job teaching. I am looking forward to that. I worked so hard in the classroom and my time is almost here to be the teacher I want to be. I am really proud of myself for getting this far. I didn't get to finish my season, but I told myself that playing four years of college is probably my biggest accomplishment right now."

Pula is also planning to help out the softball team next year in any way possible, whether it is hitting infield to her former teammates and throwing some bullpen. But her focus now turns from finishing out her education, something that is very excited about. Along with a lifelong love of softball, she has also had a lifelong love of education which has driven her to want to be a teacher. She will finish out school in the fall, and then will student teach in the spring of 2021. After that she is open to staying in the area to start her teaching career, with a possibility of eventually moving back to the west coast.

"When I graduate I would love to stay in Crookston for maybe a couple of years to start my teaching career," Pula said. "I have been in a lot of classrooms in the area and I absolutely love how the schools are, and how they are run and how much support is within the school systems. It would be great to start somewhere small and not so overcrowded that it would be in California. Maybe after a couple of years moving to Hawaii or California. We will see how it all pans out. I am very excited to start my career as a teacher. I have wanted to be a teacher since I was in second grade. I love school and being in school keeps me safe. I love to learn."

Her lifelong love of learning has continued at Minnesota Crookston, where she has loved the experience and tutelage that she has been given by her professors. They have helped her out along the way and have shown her a loving attitude that she hopes to reflect in her classes once she has a classroom of her own.

"They have been very helpful and supportive," Pula said regarding her professors at Minnesota Crookston. "I am very thankful for the professors in the education department. When I found out that my grandma was passing I had a couple more weeks left of school. I needed to finish my classes. I went up to my professor Connie Carmut and I told her that I needed to go home and see my grandmother before she passes. She asked me, 'are you sure you want to go? you have two more weeks left.' I said, 'Connie, I need to go.' What they did for me, they were so helpful. They had to set up extra classes for me via zoom. They had to go to the help centers and make extra time for me to take my finals. They did all of this extra work for me to be able to go home. They were very helpful to me when I first arrived here. They are just amazing teachers. They really take the time to get to know you and see what you need help in. I really love Connie Carmut, she is an amazing teacher. She has been very supportive of me. She is just a great teacher. Sheri Daniels is a great teacher. She really believes in all of us. You can tell that the way she used to teach her younger students is how she teaches us. You can see her loving attitude and how much we love her and how her influences on us are going to be in our classrooms."

So while Pula's softball journey as a player has ended it has been a great ride that has provided her many opportunities along the way. Now her focus turns to her next journey molding the next generation of young minds and hopefully inspiring her students like she has been inspired by her professors and coaches along the way. To what is worth the deal ending for Pula. Upon thinking she would trade the experience she has had at Minnesota Crookston for anything in the world. And she will always have the memories of softball and her friends and teammates along the way to bring her back home.

Related Stories

Minnesota Crookston Softball Loses Pair to Put Bow on 2024
04.28.24

Golden Eagles Lose in Heartbreaking Fashion to Dragons in Pair of Doubleheaders
04.28.24

Golden Eagle Softball Fights Hard, but Falls to Division I North Dakota on Wednesday
04.24.24

Minnesota Crookston Softball Doubleheader with Dragons Moved to Thursday
04.24.24

