

Portland Thorns' gritty midfielder Meleana Shim takes the long road home to Portland

By Jamie Goldberg

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The call that seemingly changed everything for Meleana Shim came at 7:45 on a Friday morning.

Houston Dash managing director Brian Ching told the 22-year-old that the Dash would be selecting her in the NWSL expansion draft.

Two days before, the Portland Thorns had announced that Shim would be unprotected heading into the draft, but the early-morning call still caught the young midfielder entirely off guard.

Over the last year, Shim's life already had undergone dramatic changes. She had gone undrafted in the 2013 NWSL college draft, made the Thorns through an open tryout, earned her way onto the field as a starter, scored five goals for Portland and won a championship in her first professional season.

Off the field, the Hawaii native had grown fond enough of the Rose City to call Portland her new home. She loved the rainy weather and relished trail runs in Forest Park. She had found a group of friends that loved yoga and art, and knew nothing of the world of professional athletics. And she had fallen in love and just signed a lease to live with a woman she had met at a Portland coffee shop.

On that early-January morning, Shim was supposed to catch a flight home to visit her family in Hawaii. Now, she hung up her cell phone and told her girlfriend, Maru Serricchio, the news.

The couple sat down on the couch at Serricchio's studio apartment in Northwest Portland and began to cry.

"I was in shock of the reality of her life," Serricchio says. "It didn't hit me until it happened that this is normal for her career. This can happen at any time."

Unlike other professional athletes who make hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to compete, players in the National Women's Soccer League play for modest salaries, driven by their love of the game and will to see a women's professional soccer league succeed in the United States.

Since the age of 6, Shim's trajectory had been pointing her toward the highest levels of women's soccer. For years, she played persistently and made enormous sacrifices for the sport. Her dedication never wavered. She couldn't get enough of soccer.

But Houston's draft call made Shim question whether she wanted to play soccer so badly that she would be willing to pack up and leave the place and the woman she loved.

"Soccer is something I hold very close to my heart," Shim says. "I was willing to sacrifice everything, including myself, for the sport. I had to take a step back and look at my life."

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In 1997, Jason Goodson decided to scour the island of Oahu for the best 6-, 7- and 8-year-old girls soccer players, hoping to create a competitive team that could stay together through their childhood development years.

In late summer, Goodson was heading to his car after a day of scouting when he noticed a tiny girl preparing for her game by kicking a soccer ball smoothly with her left foot against a wall. He decided to stay and watch her play.

But when the referee blew his whistle, the young girl immediately sat down in the center of field and refused to get up — the perfectionist didn't want to play a sport that she hadn't mastered.

Goodson was about to leave when the girl stood up, ran over and stole the ball from her own goalkeeper and proceeded to dribble up the field around all the other players and straight into the other goal.

For the rest of the match, Meleana Shim ran circles around her opponents.

"She just had a level of sophistication that was above and beyond anything I'd ever seen in such a young player," Goodson says. "It didn't take long to realize just how special she was."

At 6, Shim was the youngest player Goodson invited to join his squad, the Ho'okalakupua Football Academy. But Shim — whom everyone by then called "Mana," the Hawaiian word for life energy — quickly proved she could compete with players two years older.

And her competitive thirst was unquenchable. Though the team would practice five or six days a week, Shim was soon calling Goodson regularly to ask if he would train with her on days off.

"From a very young age, I always put in a lot of time just working with the ball and getting a good touch," Shim says. "Jason focused on technique before anything else. I really think that foundation has helped me because I'm confident and comfortable with the ball at my feet."

After practice one afternoon, a 7-year-old Shim ran to her father's car in excitement. The team had learned to juggle that day and Mana had juggled the ball 13 times — more than anybody else on the squad.

“13?” Sri Shim joked. “That’s not very many. I bet you can’t get to 25.”

For the next three hours, Sri leaned against his parked car as a determined Mana juggled the soccer ball over and over again, trying to get 25 touches before it hit the ground.

As the sun set, Mana asked her dad to turn on the car headlights so she could meet her goal. When she finally reached 25, she told her dad they could go home.

“I was so stubborn,” Mana says. “It was so ridiculous, but that’s how I am. Once I put my mind to something, it’s happening.”

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Around the time Shim turned 13, Goodson left Hawaii to take a job in Arizona coaching one of the top youth clubs in the nation, the Sereno Soccer Club.

Shim was devastated.

Without Goodson, Shim felt her progress stifled. She was entering high school and knew she needed to continue to up her game to earn an elusive college scholarship.

The summer before her junior year in high school, Shim was supposed to head to the mainland for a weeklong camp in Idaho with the Olympic Development Program.

She packed two suitcases. Then, the 15-year-old told her parents she wouldn't be coming home.

“I told them I was going to live on the mainland and play soccer,” Shim says. “I wanted a good college scholarship, and to get that I needed to play games every weekend for a serious team.”

College coaches don't spend much time scouting in Hawaii, Shim says. She knew if she stayed on the island, she would end up at the University of Hawaii, a mediocre soccer school, but the only college her parents could afford.

“The decision was all her own,” Sri Shim says. “Both her mother and I fully supported her in her soccer because she was very driven and passionate about it.”

Shim played in San Ramon, Calif., for three months before deciding she needed to find a more competitive team. She called Goodson, and soon after Shim was sitting at San Francisco International Airport wondering if she was crazy.

She had booked a flight to Arizona and was planning to play under Goodson for the Sereno Soccer Club and live with the family of Ellen Parker, a girl she had met briefly at camp in Idaho and who would go on to play soccer at the University of Portland.

Finally, Shim stepped onto the plane.

She would spend the next year being homeschooled and playing soccer in Arizona. But the move led to a scholarship offer to play for Santa Clara University.

“Mana’s always had this desire and sheer determination,” Goodson says. “You knew she was going to play at the highest levels.”

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In January 2013, Shim was nestled in a corner of a Starbucks in Los Gatos, Calif., 15 minutes from the Santa Clara campus, staring at her computer screen.

She watched the final picks of the NWSL college draft go by, her hope fading with each selection. When it became clear that she wasn’t getting drafted, Shim shut off her phone to avoid the inevitable calls from her parents.

“If the pro coaches had been more fully aware of Mana’s ability, she would have been drafted,” says Santa Clara coach Jerry Smith. “She’s one of the most skillful and tactical players I’ve had a chance to work with. For me, there wasn’t ever any doubt she was going to play in the league.”

The upside of not getting drafted was that Shim could choose her team as she pursued open tryouts.

She looked at the rosters of all eight NWSL squads and concluded that Portland was the strongest. So, she booked a ticket to the Northwest.

“I like to challenge myself and I’m OK with failure,” Shim says. “I made a commitment to myself that I would continue to pursue my soccer career if I could make the best team in the league. I don’t like to make the safe decisions.”

Shim recalls the overwhelming number of players who attended tryouts in Portland. The 5-foot-4 attacker found it difficult to play alongside so many different athletes, of varying skill level, who were all competing for an elusive roster spot.

But through the melee, Thorns coach Cindy Parlow Cone saw something in the small midfielder. She called Shim the next morning to invite her to preseason. Within a week, the Thorns had signed her to a contract.

“Once she gets on the field,” says Lolly Shim, Mana’s mother, “she’s so technically good that people want her there.”

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Shim's first months as a professional athlete didn't start out as planned.

She got very sick, and for a while thought she had mononucleosis. She couldn't practice or travel for the first few weeks of the season. And even when she returned to the field, she found herself competing for playing time in an already very crowded midfield.

Cone had moved Canadian national team star Christine Sinclair to the midfield, and Shim realized that there was a seemingly open spot at forward alongside U.S. national team star Alex Morgan.

Shim hardly knew Morgan, but she sent her a text anyway.

"I said, 'I'm going to try to play forward with you,'" Shim says. "'Can you give me any tips?' She wrote up this whole thing and really talked with me and was so helpful when she didn't need to be."

On May 4, Shim made her first start against the Washington Spirit, playing with Morgan at forward.

Shim had moved back to midfield by July, when she scored four crucial goals in consecutive games, including the game-winner in a 2-1 victory over Boston.

A month later, she was in the starting lineup when the Thorns beat the Western New York Flash 2-0 to win the inaugural NWSL championship in front of thousands of fans in Rochester, N.Y.

By then, Shim had solidified herself as a critical starter and a fan favorite.

"Mana's tough," Thorns midfielder Allie Long says. "She's a fighter."

Shim's success as an NWSL rookie helped earn her a call-up to the U-23 U.S. women's national team camp in December and then a call-up to a tournament in Spain in early March.

And in Spain, Shim made an impression. She scored just before halftime to help the U.S. U-23 team beat Norway 2-1 to win the Six Nations Tournament.

"She's more of a cerebral player and a technical player than most of the other players we have," says U-23 coach Steve Swanson. "Mana makes the players around her better. Players like her are worth their weight in gold."

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Shim's apartment, where she now lives with Serricchio, sits on top of a hill in Northwest Portland. On a clear day, the couple can look out from their dining room table and see Mount Hood etched in the distance.

The couple have covered the walls with Serricchio's paintings and photos, including a black-and-white painting of Shim. Books line a wall, next to a collection of old cameras. On the table, the women display a Scrabble board that they created out of a cardboard sign.

The only hints that a pro soccer player lives in the apartment come from the neatly lined row of brightly colored sneakers and cleats that sit in a shoe rack by the door, and the Portland Thorns scarf that hangs on the coat rack.

"To me, soccer is a part of my life, but it's not the end all, be all," Shim says. "I try to incorporate other things and have balance."

Shim has been practicing twice a day for the last two weeks. She sits on the couch nestled against Serricchio as she drinks tea and rests her legs.

"Any time something comes up, a miscommunication or frustration, we're like, 'at least we're not in different states,' " Shim says. "Let's just be thankful for that."

In the week after Houston drafted Shim, she tried and failed three times to make the trip to Hawaii to visit her family.

On one attempt, she got as far as checking her baggage before realizing that she wasn't in the right emotional state to leave Portland. Her bag flew to Hawaii alone and the airline shipped it back to her the next day.

Shim has dreams of one day competing for the U.S. women's senior national team, and to do that, she knows she has to be willing to drop everything for the sport.

But Shim had never expected her life in Portland to be just a pit stop along the way. And when Houston called, she wasn't prepared.

"My future was being determined for me," Shim says. "I wasn't ready to go."

Luckily, Shim never had to leave.

Exactly one week after Houston drafted her, the Thorns took an unexpected timeout in the second round of the NWSL college draft. A few minutes later, Shim received a text on her phone. It was Thorns coach Paul Riley welcoming her back to Portland.

"We didn't want to lose her in the first place," Riley says. "Since Houston drafted her, our priority had been to get her back."

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It's late February and dozens of fans are gathered at Bazi Brasserie in Southeast Portland, talking excitedly in small groups about the Portland Thorns, when Shim walks into the dark bar with Serricchio at her side.

The bar breaks out in applause.

The fans have gathered to celebrate and reminisce about the Thorns' NWSL title one last time before the 2014 season begins. When Shim heard about the event, she volunteered to attend.

"The reality is players come and go," Shim says. "I could easily be going to Houston this year. There are a lot of players who were on the team last year that aren't on the team this year. But I think that what we could all say is that the city of Portland deserves another championship."

Shim makes her way through the bar, stopping to talk with each small group of supporters. She's supposed to stay for an hour, but nearly two hours later she's still chatting with fans.

"Mana is probably the warmest, most bubbly and kind person you'll ever meet," says Rachel Van Hollebeke, a Thorns defender and member of the U.S. women's national team. "She's really easygoing and just has a love for life that's really contagious."

Shim poses for a photo with Thorns fan Luke Fritz. Behind her is the 2013 NWSL championship banner, with Shim's signature in the center.

"It's amazing to think about everything that's happened this year," Fritz says. "Especially for you."

"It's been crazy," Shim says. And then she smiles.

After Shim's circuitous journey, she is finally where she wants to be, ready to settle down in Portland, the adopted city that she adores, and just play the sport that she loves unconditionally.