

Weekly Cover: Aussie Aussie Aussie



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Jen Adams' three-bedroom row home in Baltimore's Locust Point neighbourhood contains a trove of lacrosse memorabilia, keepsakes of an iconic playing career that made her one of the most recognizable figures in the sport when she starred at Maryland and led Australia to junior and senior world championships.

Stashed away upstairs is a handwritten note from Sue "Melli" Sofarnos, the late Australian lacrosse legend who died unexpectedly in 2020 at age 59. Adams doesn't need to dig it out. She has the message memorized and has shared it countless times with her student-athletes at Loyola — especially those who want to become coaches themselves.

"People won't remember what you said or what you did, but people will always remember how you made them feel."

Sonia LaMonica keeps an emoji-filled text from Sofarnos. Next to green hearts, kissy faces and an Australian flag it reads, "No one cares how much you know unless they know you care."

Hannah Nielsen asks herself daily, "What would Melli do?"

"It's a shame I can't rely on her now," Nielsen said. "But the lessons she instilled in us last a long time."

If only Melli could see them now.

Adams, LaMonica and Nielsen were part of a wave of Australian imports who helped revolutionize college women's lacrosse in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They all grew up in Adelaide, attended Brighton Secondary School, came into the sport playing for the Brighton Lacrosse Club and competed together on the Australian team that stunned the U.S. on American soil in the 2005 world championship.

And now each of them runs her own NCAA Division I program. Adams, 43, is in her 16th season as the head coach at Loyola, where she has amassed more than 200 wins and nine conference championships. LaMonica, 43, is in her first season as the head coach at Virginia after a successful 14-year run at Towson. Nielsen, 37, is in her seventh season as the head coach at Michigan.

"Not in a million years could I have ever seen this, where we all are now," said LaMonica, who was teammates with Adams at Maryland and was an All-American attacker as a senior in 2003. "I think about it quite frequently, in all honesty. That's what keeps me grateful. Once this sport touches you, it lives inside you."

Adams, LaMonica and Nielsen almost never see each other from January through November. Social lives are a luxury most college lacrosse coaches can't afford given the demands of the season and recruiting.

It's only during Christmas break when they travel halfway around the world to where they grew up 10 minutes apart that Adams and Nielsen, in particular, get to reconnect.

If their teams continue performing like this, however, there's a good chance they'll see each other in the NCAA tournament. Maybe even championship weekend.

Loyola, Virginia and Michigan are three of the most battle-tested teams in NCAA Division I women's lacrosse right now, each ranking in the top 10 of this week's USA Lacrosse Division I Women's Top 20.

Led by Adams and Nielsen, respectively, the eighth-ranked Greyhounds and second-ranked Wolverines are undefeated. (Loyola plays at Syracuse later today.) LaMonica, meanwhile, has guided the seventh-ranked Cavaliers to a 9-2 start in her first season in Charlottesville — a pair of thrilling one-goal games against North Carolina and Syracuse away from joining her friends in the ranks of the unbeaten.

Someone mentioned to Nielsen recently that three of the top 10 teams in the land are coached by Aussies. It brought her back to her early days as LaMonica's assistant at Towson, when she lived with Adams in the Locust Point row home.

"Mornings of the Loyola-Towson games were just funny," Nielsen said. "Whoever won, you were sure something was on the line, be it dinner or something else."

Australian men's national team members Callum Robinson and Adam Sear also lived there for a period. Nielsen hired Sear as her assistant when she got the job at Michigan.

"I'm like passport control," Adams said. "The Australian safe house."

The youngest of the trio, Nielsen, a two-time Tewaaraton Award winner at Northwestern, said she learned a lot from the way Adams and long-time Loyola assistant coach Dana Dobbie "live and breathe lacrosse" and from the way LaMonica and her husband and assistant coach Mike LaMonica balance the demands of raising their three children with those of coaching.

“They’re like family to me,” she said.

Nielsen has played in two junior and five senior world championships with the Australian national team, most recently earning All-World honours at the 2022 World Lacrosse Women’s Championship at Towson. She made her senior team debut at age 17, playing alongside Adams and LaMonica at the peak of their careers.

Accompanied by an inflatable kangaroo, the Australian team developed a reputation for showing up to the field in flip flops and mismatched kits, draping their arms around each other while they sang off key the national anthem “Advance Australia Fair,” laughing until the opening draw and then brutalizing opponents with a fast, physical and skilled brand of lacrosse they never saw coming.

It certainly caught the more than 6,000 fans at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium by surprise when Adams had four goals and three assists to lead Australia to a 14-7 victory over the U.S. in the 2005 world championship final. Adams and LaMonica were named to the All-World Team.

Adams, who had graduated from Maryland four years earlier as the all-time points leader in NCAA Division I women’s lacrosse history (a mark since surpassed by Stony Brook’s Kylie Ohlmiller and North Carolina’s Jamie Ortega) and a four-time NCAA champion, was the tournament’s top scorer.

“Growing up in Australia taught me this, to own your identity as a team,” Adams said. “For us as Australians, we very much have that white-line fever when the whistle blows. But there’s also a free spirit and a bit of larrikin in us, which some might see as overly loose. We always looked at it as being overly who we were and locking into that identity. That ownership and buy-in are where great teams are formed.”



Adams (7), LaMonica (11) and Nielsen (8) played for the 2005 Australian team that upset the U.S. to win the gold medal in Annapolis, Md. Sofarnos (first row, first from left) was an assistant coach on the team.

LaMonica's memory of the 2005 world championship brought her back to Sofarnos and the meeting they had where they both cried as LaMonica shared that her husband's cousin's 5-year-old son had died days earlier.

That's when LaMonica learned the value of empathy. "When she looked at you, she looked right into your eyes and you felt seen," she said.

Earlier this month, the Sue Sofarnos Foundation committed \$25,000 to the Australian under-20 team competing in the 2024 World Lacrosse Women's U20 Championship in Hong Kong. The team includes four native Australians who either currently play or have committed to play for NCAA teams, including one (Miriam Soares-Jury) who will play for Adams at Loyola.

They need look no further than three of the game's top coaches to know what's possible from here.

"I'm always thinking about home. I miss Australia," LaMonica said. "But this has been just such a wild, fun ride that you just never know where sport can take you and where lacrosse can lead you. The three of us are such unique and strong examples of that."