

How Clara Morrison became Syracuse's primary substitute



Elizabeth Billman | Asst. Photo Editor

Clara Morrison is Syracuse's top option off the bench and has learned a new position since joining the Orange.

By Andrew Crane (/writers/andrew-crane/) ASST. COPY EDITOR

Clara Morrison waved her right arm frantically, trying to attract Chiara Gutsche's attention from the sideline. It was early in the first quarter of Syracuse's Oct. 12 game against North Carolina, nearing the 11-minute mark — right around the time Morrison typically enters — and after a few seconds, Gutsche glanced over.

"Gutsche," Morrison yelled, "when you get a chance." The junior nodded slightly and jogged over to the sideline. Morrison sprinted on and joined the rush.

Minutes later, Morrison jumped and thrust her arms in the air. To her left and right, Morrison's Syracuse teammates did the same. The ball had entered the shooting circle onto Morrison's stick, and her shot had deflected off a Tar Heel foot, earning the Orange a penalty corner. Even though Charlotte de Vries' ensuing shot sailed wide left, Morrison had still generated a scoring opportunity for SU.

Starting with this year's season-opener against Vermont, the freshman has carved out a role in No. 15 Syracuse's (9-5, 1-3 Atlantic Coast) lineup. Three times, that's meant starting. But in others, it's substantial time off the bench — Morrison's played more than 30 minutes in six of the last seven games. Whichever role she plays, Syracuse has leaned on Morrison to generate chances for a sometimes-dormant offense at a position she has limited experience with.

"Clara's just starting to understand the roles and responsibilities of a forward, playing two sides of the ball," Syracuse head coach Ange Bradley said. "And that takes a while."

Those extended minutes are dividends of a pre-freshman year position switch from center midfield to forward, resulting in Morrison becoming the primary substitution on an Orange roster looking for a return to the NCAA tournament. She starred for St. John's College (Washington D.C.) High School and played up multiple age groups with the Washington Wolves, her club team. She had two prominent roles then, and now at Syracuse, she's starting to do the same.

As a 17-year-old freshman, Morrison has watched SU veterans Gutsche and Sarah Luby rotate through drills, and has picked up their motions as forwards. It was a stark difference from high school, when Morrison was responsible for finding passing lanes in the midfield, not creating them.

"She likes the chess game of it," Morrison's mother, Kimberly, said. "She sees not just the first pass, but if you have two options, she sees which option has the better second pass."

Morrison started in high school in center midfield, traditionally the "quarterback" of a field hockey offense, said Corey Kelly, Morrison's high school coach. Morrison led the Cadets to four consecutive Washington Catholic Athletic Conference championships, including three-straight wins — a complete turnaround for the program. Her stick skills made her ball movement indispensable and created rushes that regularly ended in goals.

"Before the Clara-era, we were an afterthought just because we were not very good," Kelly said. "But she really built the program that it is today."

When she arrived at Syracuse, though, Bradley told Morrison she'd play forward. She'd learn how to work with SU's other forwards to move off the ball and generate driving and passing lanes. If she could adapt quickly, she could earn playing time immediately on an inexperienced SU roster.

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Clara Morrison has played in all 14 games for Syracuse this season

Kevin Camelo | Co-Digital Editor

Being a younger player, even for a collegiate first-year, wasn't a deterrent for Morrison — it hadn't been for her entire field hockey career. In her first tournament, Morrison was a third grader playing against sixth graders. When she first joined the Wolves at age 11 as a practice-player only, she faced 19-year-olds.

During a showcase at James Madison her first year with the Wolves, Morrison positioned herself on the left post and awaited a tip-in. She swung her stick when the ball arrived but missed. Morrison remembers an older defender on the opposing team pulled her aside. "Just hold your stick there, you don't have to swing," she advised Morrison. On the next rush, Morrison again paused near the left post. She held her stick out and kept it still as the ball ricocheted off it and into the cage.

As Morrison developed, Syracuse started to show interest. After an eighth-grade tournament held by WC Eagles, she got an invite less than a week later for a clinic at Syracuse. Once she committed to the Orange as a sophomore, Wolves head coach Gloria Nantulya gave Morrison her blue No. 12 jersey from her sophomore season (2005) with the Orange.

Morrison wore the jersey to bed before important high school games, and still wears the number as a freshman for SU.

"A lot of the structures (in high school and club) were similar to how we play here," Morrison said. "Just like running the drills, getting me prepared for the intensity and preparing me for what a practice here would be like."

Kelly and Kimberly fill each other in on Morrison's progress almost daily in the parking lot after Morrison's younger sister Leah's field hockey practice.

And on the Monday after Syracuse's two-game, mid-October trip to Berkeley, California, they had new topics: Morrison's first starts and shots on goal. Her role kept getting larger, and now the scoring opportunities have started to come. She's chipped balls past the midfield line. Led attacks down the sidelines. Deflected shot attempts from opponents. Traits of a "crutch" player — what Nantulya called Morrison's ability to contribute in any aspect — have surfaced.

"You're going to grow, you're going to get there," Kimberly reminds her daughter.

After getting subbed out after the first quarter against North Carolina, Morrison walked in place on the sidelines as play continued in the second, stick firmly grasped in her hand. At the 12-minute mark, she jogged over toward the center line. Morrison raised her right arm and began to scan the field for Gutsche.