Special Feature

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Ellie Garrison. All photos Courtesy of Appalachian State University.

BOONE - Culture is a much-used word in sports, most prominently when a coach or new group of players hopes to change the direction of a particular program. It can mean becoming a closer team, listening and respecting the coaching staff's decisions, accepting a new role and thriving in that new role.

Wheatmore High School graduate Ellie Garrison, who just completed her junior year at Appalachian State University, went through the whole culture change this season and the Mountaineers responded with perhaps its most successful women's soccer season in history.

The Garrison-led Mountaineers (12-4-4, 6-2-2) concluded a record-breaking season that saw the team match the all-time wins record, finish among the top 70 teams nationally in RPI, while finishing third in the Sun Belt Conference standings and reaching the tournament semifinals for the first time since 2016.

It was a change of culture.

"Definitely my confidence has grown throughout the years," said Garrison, who responded with a team-high and single-season school record 12 goals after being moved to forward from her mid-attacking position she played in her first two seasons. "It has something to do with the team culture our coaches have instilled in us. Every person is rooting for the person beside them. It makes for a very healthy environment and one a team can thrive in.

"Our culture, we really didn't struggle, but it wasn't what it could have been my freshman and sophomore years. We were a very talented team one fall, but that didn't translate to chemistry. My coach made it a point this year. It was going to be all for one and one for all. That helped us."

Garrison's season was solid enough to earn her first-team all-conference honors.

Appalachian State concludes the 2026 season by allowing just 14 goals – the fewest in program history – across 20 matches, while also recording a program-record 11 shutouts. The Mountaineers offense scored 32 goals on the season, the most since 2013 and a 14-goal improvement from a season ago.



"This year at the forward spot, it was nice to get those opportunities," Garrison said. "When you're attacking mid, I didn't see myself as much as a scorer, more a creator for others. This year at forward, it was creating goal scoring opportunities for my teammates but also for myself.

"Every single game we play is a 90-minute battle," Garrison added. "There are no easy teams in the Sun Belt. (Setting the school record for goals) made it more possible having the teammates I do have. They set me up for opportunities. There was a very healthy culture this year."

After a stellar high school career at Wheatmore, a career that saw her win a state championship her junior season as she scored 77 goals and the Warriors finished 25-0. That was a prelude to her senior season when she won the North Carolina Golden Boot Award, given to the top high school player in the state, after scoring a record 96 goals.

She was a two-time all-state performer who finished with a state record 230 goals. While playing at the club level for the North Carolina Fusion, she led the team to the USYS State Championship, and helped her squad qualify for the National Playoffs each of the last two years.

She had numerous offers to continue her education and soccer career and chose Appalachian State from a long list that included James Madison, UNC Wilmington, Mississippi State, UNC Charlotte, William & Mary and UTSA.

"Coming on campus, I just loved this area, the coaches and I felt it was a place I could do well," she said.

She certainly has.



As a freshman, she started all 19 games, scoring four goals and adding five assists, finishing with 13 points, the most by any ASU freshman in the Sun Belt era. She scored her first point with an assist against Charlotte on Aug. 25 and scored her first two collegiate goals against Longwood on Aug. 29, being named the Sun Belt Offensive Player of the Week Sept. 3. She earned second-team All-Sun Belt honors.

As a sophomore, she started all 17 games, scoring five goals and finishing with 11 points. She also started to get a reputation for her clutch play down the stretch of matches. She scored two goals on Western Carolina at the season opener on Aug. 14, including the game-winner in the 89th minute. She scored the only goal in a

1-0 victory over Miami on Aug. 17 for the program's first win over an ACC opponent. She was named the Sun Belt Offensive Player of the Week in the opening week of the season. Four of her five goals were game-winners, which were tied for the most in the Sun Belt and ranked 40th nationally.



This year was even better as her 12 goals led the team and she added two assists for 26 points.

"It was last spring and we had about five games where we did really well and some of the girls saw that and decided to come back for their fifth year," said Garrison, who is majoring in Psychology and earning a minor in Criminal Justice.

The culture was changing.

"For me, it was specifically every single person understanding their role and embracing that role," Garrison said. "Whether you're coming off the bench or starting. The relationships we created this season. We faced adversity in games, had people injured, we fought through overtimes and while we fought through losing during a game. Heck, we were ranked eighth in our preseason conference poll and finished third."

ASU recorded a 1-0 sudden-death overtime win over Louisiana in the SBC Tournament this year before dropping a hard-fought 1-0 decision to Old Dominion in the semifinals.

It was quite a year for Garrison, who is getting quite used to having "quite a year" in her soccer career.