

# Making Vandal history: Idaho sophomore Kayla Mortellaro is already in the UI record books

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By Sandra Kelly, Daily News staff writer

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At first glance, Kayla Mortellaro isn't intimidating at all. She's nice, funny and easy to be around. But put her on a golf course and it's a different story. She's still nice and funny,

but she's also one of the best collegiate golfers in the nation, and that makes her pretty intimidating.

Mortellaro is only a sophomore, but already the Vandal has left her mark in the Idaho history books. In her short career, she's won four titles, three during the 2009-2010 season and one her freshman year. She also has the highest ranking in school history at No. 9 in the nation, averaging at 72.01 in 24 rounds of golf this year.

Last year Mortellaro went to the NCAA regional tournament in Ohio, and though she didn't move on, it was a big tournament for such a young golfer.

"It was a strange experience," she said. "Most of the other people there are there as a team - it's still a team tournament, but all of sudden (they have) thrown in some individuals."

The Vandals just missed going as a team, so Mortellaro packed up her clubs and went alone. This year she's hoping to go with her teammates.

"The team this spring has improved every tournament," she said. "To make it to regionals as a team is a big goal. And to win the WAC and ultimately make it to nationals. Everything builds on each other."

Last week, Mortellaro won the UC Irvine Anteater Invitational where she carded a final-round 68 and had five birdies during her final round.

She finished with a one-over 214, beating Irvine's Hillary Packard by three strokes.

On Tuesday, she led the Vandals to a sixth-place finish at the Wyoming Desert Classic, finishing fifth with a four-over 220.

Success hasn't been an accident for Mortellaro.

She's logged thousands of hours on the links, and she has a work ethic that's rival to none.

She said she doesn't believe in just playing golf to get better, so instead of playing hole after hole, she'll spend hours working on one aspect of her game.

"You have to work on everything. You can't neglect anything. Sometimes we spend the entire two hours working on different short game shots," she said. "For me, I don't advocate hours on the driving range. For me and my game, that doesn't benefit me. In the summer I'll play nine holes, but on the course I'll concentrate on different things."

Mortellaro grew up in Phoenix, Ariz., and began playing golf because her dad not only liked golfing, but also thought it was a sport that would be challenging for a lifetime.

"My dad was really interested in golf, and he decided to get me involved in it," she said. "I ended up really liking it and being good at it. Now he quit golf and is focused on helping me."

The work paid off early. Mortellaro became the youngest player in Arizona history to win the Arizona State Amateur title when she won in 2004. She also won it in 2007 and was on the victorious 2007 Arizona State Women's Amateur Team.

When she decided to come to Idaho, a lot of people thought she was crazy, but so far the change has been good to her - though it took a while for her to get used to the weather.

"My freshman year, it was so cold," she said. "They had record snow and I'd never seen snow fall before, so it was a shock to the system."

Mortellaro admitted she still likes to play in warmer tournaments where she doesn't have to wear a jacket, but she loves playing for the Vandals and she enjoys her coaches and teammates.

"(The team has) so much fun together," she said. "Honestly, we do nothing and just laugh. We all have different personalities but respect each other and where we come from.

"I think as a team we're headed in a good direction."

Mortellaro is a public relations major (she had been in communications, but the program was cut), but like most athletes, she'd love to move the professional ranks, which means qualifying for the LPGA Tour.

"You have to get some money and enter Q School (Qualifying School) and (it's) based upon performance from there. However you stack up, you can get status exempt or nonexempt depending on how tournaments (go). Or you can go a different route and qualify for the Future's Tour developmental league and finish in the top 5 on the money list, and then you can advance to the LPGA."

Regardless of where golf takes Mortellaro, she said she's thrilled with all the opportunities the game has given her and she can't imagine a time when she won't be playing.

"You can't ever perfect it," she said. "You're always working to improve. Every swing is different. You always have something to work toward. It all falls on you."

The Vandals have next week off to prepare for the WAC Championships that begin April 19 in Mesa, Ariz.

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