



I Play for England: Sofia M

Being selected for England this season was unimaginable when I broke my ankle. Everyone kept saying I had another year to be selected; but that wasn't good enough for me: I was determined to get back for the England trials. Rehab felt like forever and at times it felt frustrating being restricted and unable to participate in any sport whatsoever. However, when I was able to complete upper body strengthening, I was thrilled that I could start challenging my body through physical activity again.

Three months later, with two of my surgeries complete, I was back on the pitch to start training again. I was back in my element and motivated to get selected for Futures Cup (the first England trial of many). I trained daily and played every minute of every match, even when my ankle was in agony, as I had a point to prove to show the scouts that I was ready.

The highlight of the Futures Cup was reaching the final of the competition, and playing the Scotland national team. Despite the heat being 30 degrees, we managed to get the 2-1 win and we were crowned Futures Cup Champions.

A few weeks later I found out that I was selected for the England trials, which was a two-day camp. I loved being able to play with people who had similar ambitions and just to have a fantastic game which was of a high level. Yet again, the dreaded feeling of suspense weighed over me as I waited impatiently at home to see if I would make it through to the final trial. I did! This time it was a three-day camp. I was nervous, but the love of hockey made the three days go so fast. I made the most of it – this could be my last opportunity – and learnt so much.

Once it was over, all I could do was sit and wait for the news, which felt like forever. The email arrived...and I was selected! I was over the moon and it was such a thrilling feeling to have the opportunity to play for your country and say that 'I play for England'.

As an England player, you have training days and training camps where you train as a team and work out what you do best together. We would have presentations and meetings talking

about how we will play against other teams and the different challenges at becoming an England player, but the best part was to play our first match against Ireland.

In addition to being roughly a year younger to everyone else, I was also placed in a position I never played before. I was determined to not let this faze me. Five minutes into the game, adrenalin wiping away my nerves, I saw an opportunity to win the ball and I ran towards one of the centre backs who was being passed the ball. As she miscontrolled, I volleyed it into the back of the net and scored the first goal. It was a fantastic game, which we won 5-0 and I could return knowing I had had a good game, being a year younger and scored the first goal on my first cap. Knowing that I could achieve all this a year young caused pure exhilaration. I was excited for our next match against the Dutch (who are the best country for hockey in the world).

The COVID-19 lockdown caused my matches to be cancelled and my year of experience was over. At first, I was gutted but I took this as an opportunity to work on my fitness and skills. It has been very hard not being able to play hockey but as a gift my parents bought me a patch of astroturf where I am able to practise my skills at home.

For the future, I want to play for the England women's hockey team, and I aspire to play in the Olympics. I will work my absolute hardest to get there, no matter what, especially as these past few years have been extremely tough for me.

People ask me what it takes to be an England player. It is purely about how hard you work and how much you want to improve. So, if I hear someone trains four times a week, I will work every day. If I hear someone did 20 reps, I will do 40 reps. I remember watching Michael Jordan's series *The Last Dance* in which he said, 'Some people want it to happen, some wish it could happen, others make it happen.' For those who aspire to be a professional athlete, if you believe in yourself and you work hard, there is nothing that you cannot achieve – just have faith.