SEEKING THE HARD ROAD

Orlando Tafoya Memorial Scholarship Encourages Softball's Breana Kostreba to Pursue both Sports and Professional Career

By Mara Rudolph

On the surface, the late Orlando Tafoya and Cal softball player Breana Kostreba may not appear to have much in common.

For starters, Tafoya was 80 when he passed away in 2011. Kostreba, a junior, is younger than even Tafoya's youngest daughter, Michele, known by many for her broadcast work on the NFL sidelines.

Orlando Tafoya was a track & field athlete for the Golden Bears, while Kostreba hates running. Instead, she prefers a bat and a glove as a starting utility player.



Breana Kostreba

How then could someone who attended Cal in the days of Pappy Waldorf and a 21-year-old young woman be kindred spirits?

The answer lies in complicated math equations, in efficient and functional designs and in a passion for engineering. When it came to choosing a recipient for the Orlando Tafoya Memorial Scholarship, Kostreba was the perfect fit.

A longtime Bay Area sports fan, Tafoya supported the Golden Bears, 49ers and Giants through and through, even after moving to Manhattan Beach after graduation. That included in times of crisis. Wilma, his wife of 56 years and college sweetheart, recalled a time when their house caught fire, and one of his main priorities was securing his season tickets.

"He made a mad dash to his desk and brought out his 49er season tickets," she said.

He was especially fond of the Cal track & field program, despite only participating as a freshman at Cal in the late 1940s.

"One of his greatest memories was competing in the Big Meet against Stanford's great pole vaulter at the time," Wilma said. "He didn't win anything great, and at the time he wasn't very proud of his track record, but he did earn his letter. It was just the fun of being there competing, running sprints and hurdles."

Equally as great to his love for sports was his love for engineering.

"He found engineering a challenging major and worked very hard on it," Wilma said.

After graduation, Orlando Tafoya found a job in aeronautical engineering, working with Douglas Aircraft and Lockheed Martin while still supporting his beloved Golden Bears and remaining involved in amateur sports, even coaching his kids through years of youth basketball and baseball. He suffered a stroke in 2005, and passed away in 2011.

"Toward the end of his life, we tried to think of all the things that were important to him," Wilma said. "I knew that engineering was, and he'd loved track & field and he was a Bear booster."

And so the Tafoyas – Wilma, son Matthew, and daughters Meg, Julie and Michele – created a scholarship in his honor, with the same stipulations. Preference would be given to a student enrolled in engineering interested in sports and, if possible, a track & field student-athlete.

"He would have wanted to share that you can both be an athlete and a professional," Wilma said. "He was an athlete his whole life, and sports were really his life outside of his profession."



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It goes without saying that at one of the world's top universities, admittance into the engineering program is challenging. Within the last three years, less than 20 percent of the College of Engineering's roughly 9,500 freshman applicants were admitted. It's even rarer to find a student-athlete who can manage the time commitment of such a demanding engineering major on top of exhausting practices, games and travel.

For Kostreba, it was a worthy commitment. Growing up, Kostreba was more into Legos than Barbie dolls, and enjoyed designing roller coasters and theme parks with the Roller Coaster Tycoon computer game. She made model cars, even a racing car, and once helped her dad build a retaining wall.



Kostreba was a perfect fit for the Orlando Tafoya Memorial Scholarship after excelling on the field and in her mechanical engineering classes.

"It's not exactly my major now, but I found that I've always enjoyed building stuff," she said.

At Aptos High School, Kostreba was a two-year member of the Aptos Robotic Club, where her team built underwater robots and qualified for national contests twice. In her senior year, Aptos claimed first place in the international Marine Advance Technology competition held at the NASA Johnson Space Center's Neutral Buoyancy Lab. The team built a model of a remotely operated vehicle, or ROV, that could stop the oil gushing from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon accident, and beat out students from 28 schools and nine different countries, including China, Russia and Scotland.

Kostreba even found her interest in math, science and engineering creeping its way into her softball swing, picking up a new style her Sorceror Softball club team coach suggested based on a double pendulum.

"It was based on physics. I found an interest in that," she said. "It was backed by science, and it made sense to me. That was easier for me to understand than it was for most people."

Kostreba even based her college entrance essay on it, which was fitting because she could not imagine a college career without softball. She saw Cal as the perfect fit for her journey, ready to rise to the challenge when head coach Diane Ninemire told Kostreba that she would be the softball program's first engineering major.

"Being in the softball community, I definitely knew that I had a high standard of education for myself," Kostreba said. "I knew going into it that it wasn't a common thing to go into and do a 'hard' major, especially in college when it's even more of a time commitment than high school travel ball."

So far, Kostreba's two-pronged commitments are paying off. On the diamond, she's one of Cal's leading power-hitters, batting over .320 as of the end of April. In the classroom, where she's pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering, her dedication has earned her the respect of classmates and professors alike.

"My classmates think me being a student-athlete and engineering major is cool, but they don't understand the commitment as much," Kostreba said. "But it is nice to be able to walk up to a professor and say 'I'm an athlete' and they say, 'Wow. In this major?' It feels nice to have people without even knowing you, respect you."

Tafoya's legacy lives on in Kostreba and keeps her motivated.

"Sometimes, it's tough and I wish I'd picked an easier major, but in the end I remind myself that it will all pay off," Kostreba said. "I would not be happy doing something else. My parents have always pushed me to do everything my best. If I had a different major or took the 'easy' path -- a less time-consuming major -- I wouldn't have been happy. I wouldn't have been proud."