

Former Division 1 pitcher thrives on team culture in her budding law career

By Brian Cox



As a former Division 1 collegiate softball pitcher, attorney Haellie Gordon is accustomed to the challenge of putting her team in the best position to win.

It seems only fitting that some of her earliest steps were on a softball diamond in the park behind her childhood home near Roanoke, Va.

It was a sign of things to come.

Growing up in Southwest Virginia, Gordon was surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains and an outdoorsy, close-knit community.



Haellie is a 2024 graduate of the University of Cincinnati College of Law where she served as a member of the College of Law Moot Court team.

Sports were a constant presence, especially on her father's side of the family. Her dad was a multi-sport college athlete – football, baseball, even wrestling – and he introduced Gordon to T-ball early, guiding her along while making sure the game never stopped being fun.

“He was definitely a big driver in my success,” she says, “but also in making sure I still enjoyed the sport so many years later.”

Gordon's childhood was shaped as much by responsibility as by recreation. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she lived primarily with her father. As the oldest of six siblings, she learned early that if she wanted something done – like schoolwork or a summer job – it was on her to make it happen.

“So early on, I kind of knew that if I wanted to get things done, I wasn't going to put that on someone else,” she says. “It was going to be something that I was going to manage.”

That sense of ownership carried over naturally to softball. Like many young athletes, Gordon tried several positions before one stuck. Pitching clicked for Gordon.

“I liked being in control of the situation,” she says, “but more importantly, I liked having my teammates' backs.”

By middle school, she told her dad she wanted to commit to pitching, and he responded by enrolling her in lessons and catching endless reps himself, despite the bruised knees and some lost fingernails.

What Gordon loved most about pitching was the responsibility that comes with the position.

“I like being able to have the team on my back and making sure that I'm taking care of everybody else,” she says.

That mentality required discipline, especially as her schedule filled with early-morning workouts, overlapping practices, travel ball, and other sports. She was up at 5 a.m. for training, often working jobs on top of it all. Burnout was a real risk, but Gordon credits her coaches and her father with keeping the pressure in perspective. Softball mattered, but it was still supposed to be joyful.

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In addition to playing softball for George Mason, Haellie was also awarded the School of Business's Emerging Business Leader Award in recognition of her distinguished representation of an outstanding undergraduate business student.

Recruited to George Mason University in Virginia, Gordon pitched all four years as a Division I starter, stepping into significant responsibility early in her college career. When injuries reshaped the pitching staff, she moved from a closer role into the starting rotation, learning how to manage games from the first pitch on. The experience taught her that even in a position that demands control, success depends on trust.

"There's just so many working parts," she says. "Even if I felt like I wasn't doing my best, I had someone behind me, in front of me, next to me that was going to pick up whatever I couldn't."

The balance of control paired with trust has become a defining feature of Gordon's approach to law. Even before college, she knew where she was headed. A visiting lawyer in her second-grade classroom sparked an idea that never quite went away. "That's what I want to do," she remembers thinking. With no lawyers in the family, the path wasn't obvious, but she landed her first legal job while still in high school through a softball connection, then continued building experience through college, including working at a major D.C. firm and later with U.S. Customs and Border Protection as a budget analyst during the height of the pandemic.

That particular role pushed Gordon far outside her comfort zone. Working on large-scale budgets for air and marine operations, she found herself in rooms with people she assumed

were far more seasoned and accomplished. Holding her own there changed her self-perception.

"I think I've learned a lot about myself in terms of putting myself outside of what I'm comfortable with and excelling in those positions," she says.

Colleagues encouraged her to pursue law school, even knowing they'd lose her in the process – a gesture she hasn't forgotten.

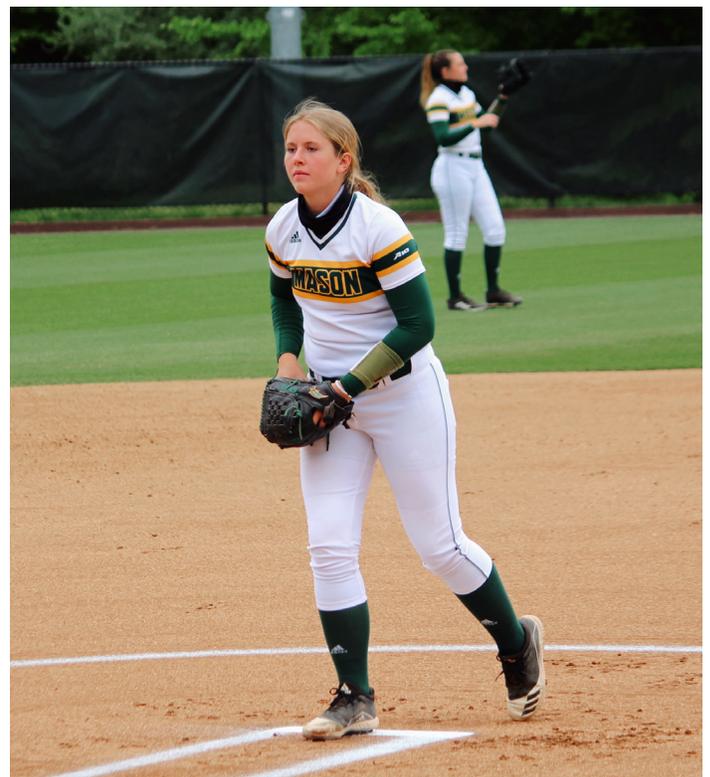
When it came time to choose a law school, Gordon ended up being drawn to the University of Cincinnati College of Law in Ohio, which offered a strong scholarship and proximity to her paternal grandparents. Though she'd only known Cincinnati through brief visits for the holidays, the city quickly felt like home.

"It was a good way for me to try something new, move somewhere new, but also have a support system that I didn't even have that much growing up. It's been really fun to strengthen those relationships," she says, noting the simple pleasure of being able to have dinner with her grandmother on a random weeknight.

Gordon joined the Cincinnati law firm of Manley Burke during her first year of law school, initially seeking a volunteer opportunity to get more connected to the city. The fit was immediate.

"I loved it," she says. "I immediately connected with the people here and the type of environment they are fostering."

What mattered most was the culture. After years in team sports, Gordon knew she didn't want a one-person show.



Haellie earned her bachelor's degree from George Mason University, where she was a starting pitcher for the university's Division I softball team and a Provost Scholar.

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“I’m very much a team person,” she says. “That was one of the big things I was looking for in a firm.”

At Manley Burke, Gordon found the same camaraderie she cherished on the softball field – along with early responsibility. She was drafting briefs, observing court proceedings, and interacting with judges sooner than many of her peers. Litigation, in particular, surprised her.

“I ended up falling in love with litigation,” she says. “It instilled a lot of confidence in me. I didn’t think I had it in me.”

The appeal is multifaceted. Gordon enjoys the writing – the briefs, the motion practice – as much as the strategic and interpersonal elements. She likes engaging opposing counsel, advocating zealously for clients who often come to the firm at difficult moments, and continuing to push herself as a public speaker. Teaching has become another outlet. As an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati, Gordon co-teaches a conflict and resolution course, sharpening her ability to communicate clearly and think on her feet.

“Being comfortable being uncomfortable,” she says.

Now a second-year associate, Gordon’s practice spans general civil litigation, including contractual disputes, employment matters, consumer issues, construction claims, and zoning and land-use work. She sees her role much like she once saw the pitching circle: support the team, stay prepared, and be ready when the ball is yours. Second-chair opportunities today, she hopes, will become first-chair roles in the years ahead – along with mentoring younger attorneys the way she has been mentored.

“I think everyone here has been more than a mentor to me,” says Gordon. “They’ve shown me the ropes and continue to show me how much they value me and believe in me.”



Haellie is also an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati where she teaches conflict and resolution.