

# Work, Play,





# Love

Growing up in Crestwood, **Lori Chalupny** dreamed of being a professional soccer player long before a team to play on even existed. She's realized her dream and then some—earning Olympic gold in 2008 and a lead spot on her hometown's new team, Saint Louis Athletica. As she takes the field this month, we take a look back at how she made it happen.

**By Margaret Bauer**  
**Photographs by Whitney Curtis**

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**C**ertain questions arise when you win an Olympic gold medal. There are some things everyone asks: “How does it feel?” “What was it like?” Then, after a moment: “Where do you keep that thing?” For many athletes, the answer to that last one is “in a safe.” Or “in a lead-walled vault deep underground.”

Not so with Lori Chalupny (pronounced ka-LUP-nee). Her father, Ken, laughs. “She’s gotta take that medal wherever she goes, you know? People want to see that,” he says. “People say, ‘Where’s it at, in the safety deposit box?’ She’s like, ‘No, it’s right here in my purse!’”

After helping the U.S. Women’s National Team to Olympic victory against Brazil last August, Chalupny (known to teammates as “Chalupa” or “Chupa”) returned home and attempted to get reacquainted with everyday life. She spent Christmas with her family—the first holiday any of them can remember spending together in recent years—as well as many nights at *her* home, a condo in Brentwood she purchased more than a year ago, on her 24th birthday. In between training sessions, she relaxed, hung out with her dog, Mr. Eko, watched movies, tried out her new pasta-maker, drove her own car.

But as St. Louis’ lone representative on the U.S. Women’s National Team, Chalupny has a lot of hopes riding on her soccer career—and a lot of people outside of her immediate family who want to see that gold medal. So the young phenom made the rounds of local TV shows, drove down to KMOX to talk to Charlie Brennan, presented the M.A.C. Hermann Trophy. (She hasn’t gotten to throw out the first pitch at a Cardinals game yet, but says it’s at the top of her wish list.)

In September, she visited her alma mater, Nerinx Hall, to retire her old No. 5 jersey. The girls there asked all kinds of questions, ranging from the serious (queries about her diet and career) to the starstruck (whether she’s met Michael Phelps—she has, when both appeared on *Oprah* last year) and the silly (whether she’s currently seeing anyone—the answer is yes). But beneath all the queries, unspoken, lay a deeper question: “How did you do it?” And the answers to that have been two decades in the making.

**I**t all started with gymnastics. Or rather, a natural inaptitude for gymnastics.

“We signed her up for gymnastics—like everybody does, I guess,” her father recalls. “The coach told us that she was very strong, but that she wasn’t very limber. So she suggested that we not do gymnastics anymore—which I thought was kinda odd, because that’s how she makes her money.” He chuckles. “I’ve always thanked her, although not in person, for doing that. Because that’s when our next thought was, well, soccer was a good sport, because you have to run to be able to play any sport.”

Something clicked. “She just loved it from day one,” says her father. “I don’t know why she got that love for soccer, but however she got it, she got a good dose of it, you know?”

To this day, it’s a wonderful mystery—even to Chalupny herself. “It was strange how it was just an instant love for the game,” she says. “I played other sports growing up, but I just always knew that soccer was what I wanted to do.”

At first, that meant bruises and bloody knees. Recalls her mother: “I would pick her up from grade school, and she’d be playing out there with all the boys, soccer and tetherball and four-square and all that. And honest to goodness, I’d have to take her to the bathroom to wash her hands, ‘cause I couldn’t put her in my car the way she was.”

Before the 2007 Women’s World Cup, Chalupny and her mother pulled out her old school papers and were amused—though not terribly surprised—by what they found.

“One of my papers was like, ‘Lori is doing well in school; most of her friends tend to be boys...’” Chalupny says. “I always tended to want to play tetherball more than gossip or whatever all the girls were doing.” Her father says by the end of elementary school, only one boy could beat her at tetherball—and he just happened to be taller than her.

Lacking a formal tetherball league, however, a competitive young Chalupny immediately set her sights on professional soccer. Her earliest writings unequivocally state her chosen career path: “Some of my papers from, like, kindergarten—from the first writing that I ever did—said that I wanted to be a professional soccer player. And I mean, there wasn’t a professional soccer team, you know?” She exhales in a whoosh. “As far as I can remember, since I’ve had an idea, I’ve always wanted to be a soccer player.”

**A**s immortalized in baseball flick *Bull Durham*, the play-it-one-day-at-a-time, practice-hard-and-listen-to-my-coaches line of causal attribution given to the sporting press easily becomes formulaic. Barb Chalupny is clearly aware of that as she talks about her daughter’s success. “She had this dream, and when she’s interviewed, it’s kind of like the old cliché, ‘A dream come true,’ but it really *was* her dream,” she says. “That was just what she wanted and was gonna do.”

It’s one thing to have a dream, though, and quite another to realize it. A lot can happen in between, only some of which is relevant to an athlete’s success. One of the problems with trying to write something meaningful about Olympic athletes is that by their very nature, they’re statistical

flukes—or to put it more positively, delightful anomalies. And beyond the statistics, attempting to capture in words something that's so inherently *physical* is alone bound to produce clichés. Sometimes words simply don't suffice.

What can be said with some certainty, though, is that Chalupny's tireless hard work contributed a great deal to her success, putting her ahead of her peers early on.

"I spent a lot of time in the yard with her," says her father. "We would go out and just do a lot of things that the coaches don't have time to do at practice, individual skills. I would go out there and kick with her for an hour, an hour and a half, and then I would get tired. I would come in the house, and we'd look out the kitchen window and she'd just be goin' back and forth. She just loved to dribble in the yard."

Her mother concurs. "She had Barbie dolls, but it wasn't anything that she'd get out and play with for long periods of time." She sounds bemused. "It wasn't unusual for her to come home from soccer practice and then go out in the yard and play soccer." Chalupny sheepishly admits to even setting up cones for herself in the backyard.

By the time she started select soccer with the Gateway Strikers at age 10, Chalupny was playing the sport at least a few hours every weekday and would sometimes spend entire weekends on the field. When she played indoor soccer at Vetta Concord, her mother recalls, "We would get there for an 8 o'clock game, and there were times that we wouldn't leave till 4 in the afternoon, because somebody was always short players, and it'd be like, 'Lori, do you want to play another game?' 'Sure!' Every game got a little older, and these kids were towering over her."

Whereas many parents would pull their kids away after games, set arbitrary limits on how long they could play, the Chalupnys gave their daughter a blessed opportunity. Little Lori never had legs longer than anyone else's or more money than anyone else (her father worked as a carpenter-turned-house-painter, her mother as a real-estate agent, and they divorced when she was barely out of preschool), but she got to run around with a soccer ball to her heart's content—and that may have made all the difference.

**I**n his 2008 book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, writer Malcolm Gladwell explores why some people become extremely successful, while so many others with similar talents or ambitions never do. His finding: The opportunity to play long hours at a high level truly does make a difference. "You can be the most naturally gifted athlete in the world," said Gladwell in a December ESPN interview. "But all that talent can't overcome the advantages of someone who has had the chance to work harder."

Gladwell's research uncovered a rough metric for success: the "10,000 rule." As he explained to ESPN, it's "this finding by psychologists that any kind of complex activity mastery cannot be attained without at least 10,000 hours of practice. That's true of being a grandmaster in chess, and being a great radiologist, and also of hitting a curveball. And the critical thing about 10,000 hours is that it takes roughly 10 years to put in that much preparation."

Did it take Chalupny that long? When asked about hours of practice, her mother laments that no one ever kept track. But we may be able to estimate. If she began playing league soccer around age 7 or 8, gradually ramping up to 2½ hours per school day, 180 days a year, that's 450 hours a year. If she played an average of 12 hours per weekend, 52 weekends a year, that's another 624 hours. Then there were the roughly 80 weekdays a year that she wasn't in school. If she practiced even five hours a day those days, which is a pretty conservative estimate, that's 400 more hours. All told, that's 1,474 hours a year—at least—on the field. So by the time she was 14 or 15, Chalupny probably had her 10,000 hours and then some.

It's strange, of course, to try to compress someone's life like this, into hours and minutes spent playing a favorite sport. What about the other hours of the day? While most of us may not remember much of what we did or said or were supposed to have learned as the yawning days of our childhood went by, that time was still important. Focusing only on Chalupny's practice habits may diminish the bigger picture.

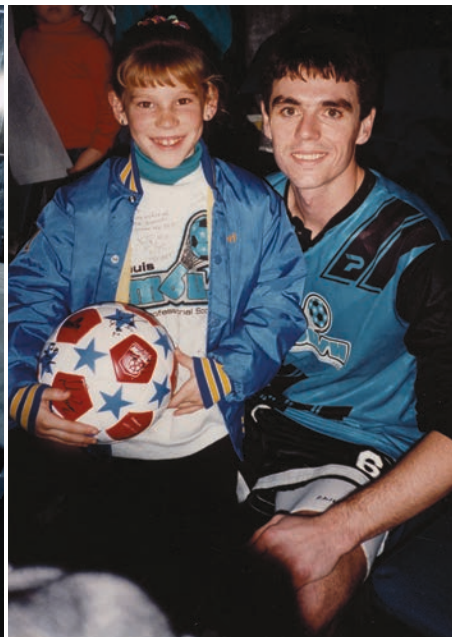
As Gladwell notes, 10,000 hours are necessary, but not *sufficient* for success. Rivaling the numbers in importance is family dynamics: the relationship patterns and work habits established by one's ancestors and carried into the present.

Here again Chalupny was fortunate. Whereas many families have to fight generations of sedentary habits to bring physical activity into their lives, the Chalupnys were an old sporting family, maintaining a membership in the Concordia Gymnastic Society, a German *turnverein*, or athletic club, in South City, going back several generations. Chalupny's father actually met both her mother and her stepmother, Sally, playing volleyball. "[Lori] grew up on a volleyball court, not a soccer field," he points out. "She was at tournaments, hangin' out all day long, watching us play and running around the gym."

The atmosphere at home was equally sporting. Chalupny and her father attended Blues games together; she collected hockey cards the way other girls her age collected My Little Ponies. When she wasn't dribbling a soccer ball, she was shooting baskets in the driveway. Chalupny grew up in an environment where working hard—and playing hard—were valued as a matter of course. Ken Chalupny's father, Robert, was a longtime member of the carpenters' union; Barb's mother was a German immigrant after World War II. She died when Barb was in her late teens, leaving her to raise her younger siblings.

Discipline was key. Says her father, "We were enough of athletes that none of us liked losin', so it was always a competitive atmosphere. There were some cutthroat board games goin' on at our house." And a high premium was placed on honest competition. Her mother recalls laying down the law early on: "I might've seen her cheat once, you know, at Chutes and Ladders—I mean, we're talking young—and it was kind of one of these things where I said, 'OK, game's over.' And I remember she had a friend over, and her little friend, and this is normal, the girl wanted to go a couple squares over, and I just said, 'Lori, I don't know if you told her the rules, but there is absolutely no cheating going on when we play games, or it gets put away.'"

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Left: Lori celebrates turning 8 years old with a birthday party at a St. Louis Storm indoor soccer match. Center: At a birthday party several years later, with a member of the St. Louis Ambush indoor team. Right: Proudly displaying her Olympic gold medal at Nerinx Hall last September.

**T**ake an old sports family, add a dash of discipline, get a focused, standout player. Could the recipe work a second time? Ken and Sally Chalupny learned the answer when Lori's little sister, Casey, started playing.

"I always thought, 'Well, we'll just raise another kid, and we'll raise her just like Lori, and it'll all come out the same,'" says her father. "But we found out that it doesn't work that way." He laughs. At age 15, Casey's already a stellar player in her own right, and Chalupny says her sister is a force to be reckoned with one-on-one, as well as in living-room juggling contests at home.

But while Casey grew up with certain advantages—she learned to dribble as soon as she could walk, and learned to swim from national team standout Heather O'Reilly—her personality is quite different from her sister's. Whereas she's very social, for instance, Chalupny's quietness off the field is legendary. This is a girl who was so bashful as a child, she wouldn't even call out for pizza.

"My parents would always make fun of me, 'cause making a phone call was like the worst thing I ever had to do," she remembers. "If they would make me order a pizza, or that kind of stuff, I was just so quiet that talking on the phone was miserable for me. I always begged my mom, 'Please, just *you* call!'"

Recalls her mother, "I'd forget something at the grocery store, and I'd say, 'Lori, just run in and get the thing of butter,' or whatever. And it was a long time coming before she would do that," she says. "It's not because she didn't want to or was lazy. But she might have to *talk* to somebody!" She laughs.

In interviews now, Chalupny's shyness manifests itself as a sort of aw-shucks sheepishness. Her father says soccer helped her gain confidence—but didn't necessarily make her more vocal. "She's still fairly shy as a person. I don't know that that changed a whole lot for her personally outside of soccer. But she's anything *but* shy on the soccer field," he says. "So I think that's kind of where she vented herself. She could go crazy on the soccer field, and no one would say anything."

He credits her JB Marine club soccer coach, John Kittner, with showing her a middle path. "He had that single-mindedness of, he was a soccer coach and that's what he did. And I think some of that rubbed off on her, that you can be however you want to be in person and still go out and push yourself on the soccer field," he says. "Sometimes he'd be thinkin' soccer, and he would just walk past you and wouldn't even say hi. But looking back on it now, I know it's 'cause he was concentrating on what he was doing."

Just like most families with young children, the Chalupnys had to feel their way forward. Finding Coach Kittner was a happy accident. Recalls her father, "Basically I looked in the paper, and what I always saw was JB Marine winning something. So we said, JB Marine is the club we want to get in, because they're the club that wins. They're the club that's dedicated. We didn't know anybody there, we just knew that they played top-level soccer."

One of the first things Kittner taught Chalupny was to use her left foot, a crucial skill for a naturally right-footed midfielder. "The first Youth National Team I made, they needed a left-wing midfielder, and they thought that I was left-footed from the couple times they'd seen me, so they threw me out there," she recalls. "It wasn't until like a year or two later that they realized I was actually right-footed!"

"That was my first big break; that was the first time I really got in with the national teams," she says. Coach Anson Dorrance also mistook her for a lefty when he recruited her to North Carolina, says Kittner. His training had paid off.

When questioned, Kittner responds a bit gruffly at first, downplaying his influence, but softens as he shares his early memories of Chalupny. "From a real young age, from the minute I saw her, I knew that she was somethin' special," he says. "It wasn't she was so much faster or so much stronger or anything like that, it was just this dedication to being terrific, you know? What makes her a great player from a good player is, she was always working on her own, she was always trying things, and anything that you asked her to do, she would just say, 'OK, fine.'"

Was her shyness ever an issue? "She wasn't one of the ones who was spending the night at everybody's house, and she wasn't the social animal on the team," he recalls. "Her dad was pretty strict with her—but even though he pushed her a little bit, I think that she was really subject to it, because she enjoyed workin', you know?"

In 25 years of coaching St. Louis soccer, says Kittner, he saw a few players get called up to national team tryouts. But Chalupny is the only one who ever made it all the way.

**W**hat Kittner had, says Ken Chalupny, was a vision for the future. Kittner had already coached his own daughter, nine years older than Chalupny, through the college recruitment process and along the way developed a firm idea of the steps needed to reach the highest levels of soccer.

With the help of Kittner and U.S. Girls' Youth National Team coach Tracey Leone, Chalupny quickly advanced. By age 17, she had played for the U.S. at four levels, start-

ing with the U.S. U-16 National Team in 2000. In 2001, she played with the U-21s in her first Nordic Cup, a role she reprised during college on the title-winning 2003, 2004, and 2005 U.S. Nordic Cup teams. And in 2002, she saw major time in the midfield for the U.S. U-19 World Championship team, bringing her to a total of 21 U-19 caps (international appearances) and 14 U-21 caps in her youth career. Nearly every weekend, including major holidays and what would've been her prom weekend, was spent traveling for the Olympic Development Program, JB Marine, or Nerinx Hall.

Back at home, she was named an All-Conference and All-State player thrice running, helping the Nerinx Markers to an undefeated regular season her junior year and accruing All-American honors that year and the next. Nerinx coach Jim Saali says Nerinx practices were far from playtime for her. "She led by example; she led by hard work. You could see the passion, the intensity in her eyes," he says. "My feeling with Lori is, I don't know if practices were ever long enough or intense enough for her. I got the feeling like she needed more, she wanted more, and was never satisfied."

Ryan Hanley, who played with Chalupny in the Olympic Development Program and was often pitted against her on defense for Busch Soccer Club, remembers her being "much more focused" than the other players. "She was always very nice, very sweet, but at the same time, she was a really intense competitor," Hanley says. "She was putting more of an effort into training and being the best at it that she could be than any of us, and that was always apparent."

Even then, Chalupny's technical skills wore out her competitors—and her fierceness only grew in college. Bill McDermott, a soccer commentator who coached the rival Busch team, watched the midfielder transition from a stand-out youth player to the No. 2 college recruit in 2002.

"She's had to test her abilities at a very high level almost every time she plays, because when she graduated, she went to the University of North Carolina, which is the most successful program—not just in intercollegiate women's soccer, but in intercollegiate sports," he notes. In college, the honors continued to pile up, as Chalupny was named an NSCAA All-American her sophomore, junior, and senior years, a Soccer America MVP her senior year, and an All-ACC selection all four years. Her sophomore year, the Tar Heels went undefeated to win the NCAA title—and very nearly repeated the feat two years later.

Meanwhile, Chalupny's international career was taking off. In 2005, she started all four games in Portugal's Algarve Cup at left back as the U.S. won the tournament and was later named the U.S. Soccer Young Female Athlete of the Year. Though a serious concussion kept her out of action for four months in 2006, she made the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup team as a midfielder, scoring the second-fastest goal in Women's World Cup history against Nigeria on the way to a bronze finish. In 2008, Chalupny saw time again at left back, starting there in 19 of 22 international matches the U.S. women played in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics.

When an accidental kick to the head from goalkeeper Hope Solo in the opening minutes of the first game in Bei-

jing sidelined Chalupny for the team's loss to Norway and subsequent 1-0 victory over Japan, Solo says she was actually the one most shaken by the whole episode. Chalupny remained cool—and luckily, after that brief hiatus, she was cleared to return in Game 3 against New Zealand. The defender nabbed the assist on the winning goal in that match, then maintained a strong presence against Canada in the quarterfinal. Finally, after scoring one of four goals for the U.S. in the semifinal against Japan, Chalupny helped keep Brazil scoreless in the final as the U.S. went 1-0 to capture the gold.

By the time Chalupny turned 25 this January, she had earned 87 caps in international play—and one shining gold medal. It's been the dream of a lifetime, she says.

**"E**verybody on the national team says this: She's the best player on our team," says Tina Ellertson, who, along with her 11-month-old daughter, Mya, is rooming at Chalupny's Brentwood condo during Saint Louis Athletica's inaugural season in the Women's Professional Soccer league. "She's so good on the ball, and she's so good with her service, she's so good with her striking. She is seriously good with everything we do."

Solo, who's also joined Chalupny in St. Louis, cites her as the "quiet strength" behind the national team's success: "Whatever her role may be, she does it and she does it well. She's just a great athlete, and she's a workhorse, you know?"

"She's represented the epitome of a soccer player, the end-all," says McDermott. "She's probably the finest female player that's come out of our area. And that encompasses a wealth of superb female players. [St. Louis] has been a real beacon for soccer development in the United States, and she ranks right at the top."

When Athletica, one of seven teams in the new league, begins play this month at Korte Stadium in Edwardsville, Ill., Chalupny, Solo, and Ellertson will be at the forefront of a movement to give young girls an attainable goal: a salaried professional league that will be a middle ground between collegiate play and the national team. That's important not just for St. Louis, but for the future of the sport.

When Chalupny was in college, she saw the previous league, the Women's United Soccer Association, lose momentum and fold. "It was a shame, because it was a dream to be able to play professionally," she says. "There's been talk about a new league starting up for years now, though, so I've kind of always had it in the back of my mind and been thinking about it and hoping that it would work out."

Coach Jorge Barcellos, who pushed the Brazilian women to silver against the U.S. in 2008, says he's thrown his lot in with the new league, resigning his position as head coach of Brazil's national team specifically to coach for St. Louis. "They wanted to keep me on as head coach for another four years, but it was my choice to come here," he says. "I have a very high admiration for American soccer, especially because of the professionalism that the players have. So I'm going to move here now and do the best that I can to help soccer in America grow."

As the WPS kicks off its inaugural season, Chalupny eagerly anticipates the renewed opportunity for professional competition as a midfielder. The break this fall was nice, she says, but now she's ready to move forward—and hopefully clinch a WPS title en route to the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup.

"Especially after the Olympics, you have the tendency to get into a lull, so it's kind of refreshing to start with a new challenge now—and the goal to be the champions of the WPS," she says. "That's an exciting goal!" ■

**MARGARET BAUER** is associate editor of St. Louis Magazine. Like Chalupny, she grew up playing soccer in St. Louis. Alas, neither a natural left foot nor a birthday 11 days before Chalupny's—nor hours spent playing tetherball, soccer, and four-square with the boys at recess—afforded her a championship berth in women's soccer.

#### See Lori Live

Saint Louis Athletica kicks off its season April 4 against the Chicago Red Stars. Game time is 7 p.m. at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Korte Stadium. Can't make it? Catch the team April 25 at Saint Louis University's Hermann Stadium as it faces off against Los Angeles Sol. For more details, visit [saintlouisathletica.com](http://saintlouisathletica.com).