

Former Lehigh soccer star Gina Lewandowski is finally getting what she always wanted ... but for how long?

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Bayern Munich defender Gina Lewandowski, left, vies with Barcelona midfielder Lieke Martens during the UEFA Women's Champions League semifinals in Barcelona in April. Lewandowski playing for New Jersey-based Sky Blue FC of the NWSL.

Gina Lewandowski is finally doing what she has wanted to do since graduating from Lehigh University in 2007: play professional soccer close to home. But how long will she do so? That's a question for her, her body and

Father Time.

Lewandowski, the former Lehigh and Central Catholic star from Coopersburg, played almost exclusively for German clubs Frankfurt and Bayern Munich since going on a tryout with friend Ali Krieger in 2007. She played one year in a failed league in Buffalo in 2011 – she thought then that that was her homecoming – before returning to Germany.

However, when it came to decide on what to do this year, Lewandowski, who turned 34 in April, decided to return to the United States whether she played or not. She wanted to be near some family members, for personal reasons.

Through a friend of a friend, she got hooked up with Sky Blue FC, which plays in the NWSL, the current incarnation of top-level women's soccer in the United States. The NWSL has teams in Washington, D.C., Portland, Utah, North Carolina, Chicago, Houston, Orlando. Sky Blue FC plays its home games at Yurcak Field at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey.

Finally, Lewandowski's home games are a reasonable drive away from the Lehigh Valley.

But how long will she do this?

"I'm actually not sure," she said. "I wanted to come back to the United States and play a year closer to home. I'm going to take it as it comes and see how I feel mentally and physically. October is the last month of the season, so I have some time to decide. I don't know, actually, right now."

An outside defender, Lewandowski is the most accomplished female soccer player to come out of the Lehigh Valley. The Morning Call girls soccer player of the year in 2003 had a near call-up to the women's national team for practice in 2012. She got in a Friendly when the U.S. played Brazil in 2015

and also spent some time in training camp with the national team while it prepared for the Rio Olympics in 2016. She did not make the Olympic roster.

For this upcoming season, Lewandowski had to make a decision last winter.

"I was happy in Munich and enjoyed it, but playing in the [United] States is something that I always wanted to do," she said. "I'm not the youngest any more and I don't know how many years I have left. I wanted to be closer to family. Some family members were not doing so well. After 12 years, I wanted to come home and play closer to home so that family and friends can see me. At 34, how much time do I really have? One more, or two more, years? I wanted to end my career playing closer to home."

Opportunities to play professionally in the United States have been difficult to come by over the years. Despite the wild popularity of the USWNT, which is competing in the World Cup this month, professional leagues have not stuck.

In Germany and many European countries, however, that is not the case. Many clubs have affiliations with men's teams and a longer, richer history.

"It's been surreal," she said. "I'm definitely going to miss it. My dream was always going to play professional soccer since I was little. Germany was the only country, at that time, to give me the opportunity. In the US there was no professional league. I am extremely grateful to Frankfurt for taking me on the team. ... It's been an unbelievable experience, developing my game technically and tactically. It set me up for the future, too. I took some coaching courses."

Munich went from sixth place to first place in her first four years there. She was on two championship teams.

“Everything is world-class,” she said.

Lewandowski said that she grew so much as a person in that time, perhaps more – or at least differently – from most people growing up during ages 22 to 34.

“They’re key years in your life when you’re trying to figure yourself out as a person,” she said. “I was taken out of my comfort zone right out of college. I was forced to adapt to an environment that I didn’t understand. The language, the culture, their mentality. It took me a few years to be confident in who I am. ... I had to be comfortable with the uncomfortable – sitting with the girls at dinner, the language, being made fun of in a fun way. I learned to relax and take things as they come. It helped me learn a lot and grow as a person.”

Lewandowski said that she has no plans to retire, but she does understand that the clock on her soccer life – ticking upward – is moving toward the end.

“Physically I feel good,” she said. “I don’t know how what this environment will do to my body. I would like to play as long as possible, as long as my body stays together. I always had interest in coaching. Not sure about the level. Did camps. Never knew to what extent. Open and willing to explore the options.”

Having played in Europe for a large chunk of her life, Lewandowski has several contacts with players and coaches in the current World Cup. She said that she is impressed with France’s system of coaching and producing players for its national team.

“France won the champions league,” she said. “A lot of countries are at their top level now. It will be interesting to see who shows up. It’s going to come down to who handles the pressure and the expectations. ”

Lewandowski started playing for Sky Blue in May and hasn't made the 90-minute trip home as much as she wanted.

"I definitely want to get home more," she said.

Tim Shoemaker is a freelance writer.