

sports

Sofia, south of the border

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THAT'S the thing about Sofia Hidalgo — she can't help but make an impression.

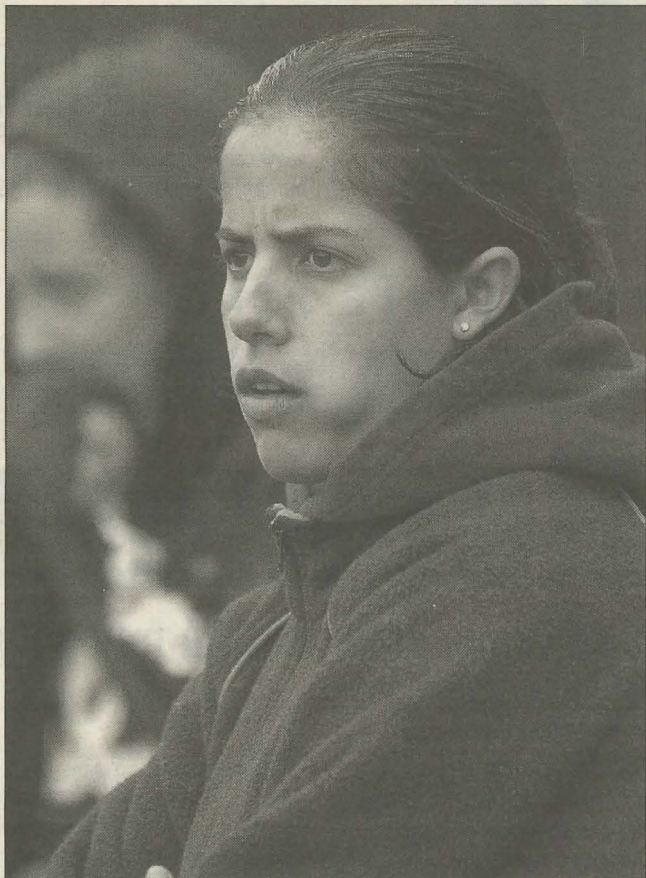
That was certainly the case with Mexican national women's team head coach Leonardo Cuellar, who first spotted the former Sutherland Sabre and 2001 BCCAA rookie of the year as she led a Guadalajara women's club team called Atlas to the national title two years back.

Hidalgo had been visiting her grandparents in Mexico after graduation when she helped the team claim the crown. She had wanted to try out for the national team before returning to the North Shore — and the Capilano College Blues women's team — but couldn't make the right connections.

Nearly two years later, Hidalgo got a second chance when the recent FIFA U-19 women's tournament rolled into town — with Cuellar's Mexican team in tow.

She made the most of it.

"I met him at his hotel and I introduced myself and he said he remembered me from Mexico and said 'I'd love you to play for my team.' He said he would have loved me to



NEWS photo Cindy Goodman

CAP College soccer team forward Sofia Hidalgo has had to watch her team from the sidelines this season as she nurses a hamstring injury. She's expected back as soon as this weekend, which is also good news for Mexican national women's team coach Leonardo Cuellar. He's looking to play the former Sutherland student in World Cup qualifier games this fall.

play for his FIFA U-19 team except I was too old. I couldn't believe he remembered me."

Then Cuellar dropped the bomb. He told the former North Shore Select he was so impressed with her play in Guadalajara that he wanted her to join the team for a series of World Cup preliminary qualifier games this October and November. The games serve as a springboard for the Women's World Cup to be held in China next summer.

"He was giving me all these dates to come down to Mexico

and I was going 'Oh my God, I can't believe this,'" said an elated Hidalgo.

She also had an opportunity to take part in a training camp down South from Sept. 9-29, but couldn't make the jump because of commitments at school.

"I'm in this (graphic design) program at school and I can't miss a day," says Hidalgo. "For two years I've been trying to get into this program and I'm finally in and

Sofia stays focused

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I can't take my chances."

Add to that the fact that she's currently sidelined from playing due to a left hamstring injury she suffered at last season's BCCAA provincial championships. She re-aggravated the injury this spring and had to call an abrupt end to a possible starting role with the Vancouver Breakers pro women's team as a result.

"It's so frustrating," says Hidalgo of the injury. "I stopped playing for about three months and three weeks ago I tried to get back to playing and I played a half game and I was fine and then four days later I played again and I could only go for five minutes. It was the worst feeling in the world. It wasn't very painful but I could feel it and I didn't want to risk it because there's so much at stake right now.

She's currently going to physiotherapy and massage therapy to get herself back in gear and ready for a possible

trip south later this fall.

Doug Abercrombie, who coaches Hidalgo at Cap College, said that he hopes to have the second-year player back as soon as this weekend, when the Blues travel to Cariboo and Okanagan.

"It'll make a big difference to have her back just because everybody's confidence will go up. She was a big part of the team last year. It was nice because the opposing teams couldn't just key in on Sarah (Regan) because Sofia was also a threat and they couldn't just key in on Sofia because Sarah was a threat. There were two people they had to watch.

"She holds the ball up so well and she's got a real flair for the game that other players don't. She's got great imagination — she'll back-heel a ball where others wouldn't even consider doing it and she gets the ball to people and sets other people up. It's just a different style of soccer, different than everybody else here plays. She's also very dedicated, she works very hard and she's very coachable. You

ask her to do something and she'll go out there and do it."

For now, Hidalgo's got her head in the clouds, but her feet are planted firmly on the ground. She's got the maturity to recognize that while achieving a pro career in soccer may be a dream come true, she still needs a solid backup plan in place.

"I was so happy and amazed when I talked to (Cuellar) I actually thought about delaying school a year and concentrating on soccer, but because of my injury I thought it was possible to get injured again and miss another year of school.

"I'd love to play professionally — it would be like winning the lottery, but that's the reason I'm in school. I know that (soccer) is not my future. Like my dad has always said, 'Soccer is awesome and it's something that fulfills you inside but you have to look at it realistically.' I'm not going to get paid for playing soccer. It would be my dream come true, though."

—files from Milt Williams