



CALEDONIA – There's no substitute for confidence.

Earlier in their careers, Caledonia High School seniors Evie Crane and Ally Boykin never *really* believed they might have a future in soccer after high school. Crane and Boykin may have hoped for opportunities to extend their careers, but both players admitted a lack of confidence held them back.

That no longer is the case.

Buoyed by support from their coaches and plenty of success on the field, Crane and Boykin have developed into college soccer players. Those labels became official Wednesday when Crane and Boykin celebrated their decisions to play soccer at East Mississippi Community College during a signing ceremony in the old CHS gym.

“When I first came, I was so scared (my coaches) said I looked like a deer in headlights on the field,” said Crane, who moved back to Caledonia as a sophomore. She played basketball that year and returned to soccer as a junior. “Now I have gained so much confidence.”

Crane said she was so scared to mess up that it was hard to realize her potential. She said she had to realize mistakes are part of the game and that she has to look past those situations and make the next play.

“I am completely turned around (from my junior year),” Crane said. “It makes you so different as a player if you are playing confident and hungry rather than scared.”

Crane has played left back and striker and is now an attacking midfielder, which she called her “favorite by far” because she feels more comfortable. She said she enjoys the feeling that it is up to the midfielders to control the game and that she relishes the challenge of living up to that expectation.

Crane, who has been playing soccer for 14 years, also said the adrenaline she feels playing soccer drives her to keep playing.

“I hope it goes good,” said Crane, who is considering a career as a radiologist. “I think I will get settled in fast.”

Boykin, who plays outside back, initially thought this was going to be her final year of soccer. She said her thinking changed about halfway through the season and was pleasantly surprised when EMCC coach Chris Rash was interested. From there, she contacted Rash, toured the campus and had a “pretty easy decision” to play in Scooba.

Boykin said she changed her mind because she realized she could pursue a degree in nursing *and* play soccer. She said she plans to take

her academic pre-requisites at EMCC and then move on to a four-year school.

Boykin also admitted she didn't want to give up soccer just yet in part to how much she has grown in the last few years.

"In the beginning, I was not good at all," said Boykin, who received an offer to play at EMCC last October and signed in December. "My freshman year I didn't even touch the grass and I had no confidence. It wasn't until my junior year where I actually started believing in myself, but even then I didn't even think I would be able to go to college for soccer because I never thought I was good enough.

"Finally, my senior year when I got that offer, my confidence boosted."

Caledonia High School soccer coach Louis Alexander said Boykin and Crane have been a big part of what the girls program has accomplished in the last few years. This season, Caledonia is 11-3 (5-0 in district) as it prepares to face Corinth at 5 tonight in a non-district match.

Alexander said EMCC is gaining quality soccer players and solid young women who are going to do the right things on the field and in the classroom and in the locker room.

"The intensity and the energy in which they practice at, the other girls feed off it," Alexander said. "It is a testament to their hard work, and it is a good thing our underclassmen get to look at how these girls approach the game every day. Now they get to see the fruits of their labor."

Alexander credited both players for their maturation after lacking in confidence earlier in their careers. He said experience is the best teacher and that it took time for each player to see *and* believe they could perform and compete at the varsity level and play in college.

This season, Alexander said Crane and Boykin have been key components to a style of play that stresses possess first and attack second.

“Those two girls especially embody that,” Alexander said.

Taking the next step likely will mean adjusting to a faster pace and a more physical brand of soccer, but Alexander said Crane and Boykin’s development gives him confidence they will be able to navigate a new learning curve.

“The players who play at the next level are the big fish,” Alexander said. “With that said, I don’t feel like they will be small fish when they get there. They’ll trust in and lean on what they have done to this point. I believe when they do that it will follow suit. ... They have the blueprint, and they follow the blueprint to a T, so I think they are going to be fine. I am excited for what their future holds.”