

HDFS Undergrad Kelsey Kaufusi Drafted to the National Women's Soccer League

Jennifer Payne

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HDFS undergrad Kelsey Kaufusi will play for the Portland Thorns as a defender in the 2024 season.

Kelsey Kaufusi, a Human Development and Family Studies undergraduate in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at USU, became the first-ever Utah State Aggie to be selected in the National Women's Soccer League draft in January 2024. Kaufusi will play for the Portland Thorns as a defender in the 2024 season, which begins March 2024.

"Kelsey is a force to be reckoned with on the soccer field," says Manny Martins, head coach of the USU women's soccer team. "Her fierce competitive mentality and phenomenal athletic qualities make her one of the best 'shut down' defenders in the country."

Kaufusi's impressive four-year USU athletic record includes Mountain West Defensive Player of the Year for 2023 and First-Team All-Mountain West for 2023. The Aggies also won their first ever Mountain West championship in 2023 with Kaufusi as lead defender. For 2023, her senior year, Kaufusi ranked first on the team, playing 2,090 minutes. She also started every game she played with the Aggies over her four-year tenure—76 games.

"Not only does Kelsey excel defensively, but her ability to impact the game offensively with her passing and shooting range sets her apart," says Martins. "My projection is that

she will quickly adapt to the demands of the National Women's Soccer League and be a great asset for her team."

In Kaufusi's family, athletics has always been a family affair. Her mother played with the Weber State soccer team for a year before she was injured and had to drop out. Like her three younger siblings, who have each participated in a variety of sports including basketball, soccer, and volleyball, Kaufusi was heavily involved in sports while she was growing up.

"I was very fortunate to be a multi-sport athlete," she explains. "I played basketball in junior high and high school every year except my senior year. And I played soccer throughout high school. I also ran track in junior high and high school." Likewise, her husband, Nathan Kaufusi, whom she married in July 2021, competed on the USU track team.

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In addition to her impressive USU athletic record, Kaufusi is a dedicated student who will graduate in May with a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies. Kaufusi earned Academic All-District and All-Mountain honors each year of her undergrad. The award recognizes student-athletes who maintain at least a 3.5 GPA.

As a human development and family studies major, Kaufusi emphasized child development in her coursework. "I love kids," she explains. "I went into my major thinking I would teach preschool. I'm the oldest child in my family and I have a ton of cousins, so being with children was always something I loved to do. I love to babysit, I love to be around kids. Just working with children—listening to the things they say and spending time with them—is the best part."

To graduate with a bachelor's degree in human development and family studies, students are required to complete 150 hours of a practicum during their senior year. Kaufusi completed just over half of her hours before being drafted to the Thorns in January.

"Kelsey provided great service to the preschool students she worked with, and I know they loved her," says Kevin Barlow, practicum coordinator for the Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "She demonstrates what it looks like to be a great student-athlete."

"I worked with one-year-olds at a childcare in Cache Valley and I absolutely loved it," says Kaufusi. "Any time I got to spend with kids was the best. I'll finish my practicum in Portland while I'm playing. I'm looking at ways to volunteer hours with the community or find a school where I can read with kids."

"As much as Kelsey loves soccer, I think she loves her students just as much," says Martins. "During our Mountain West Tournament Championship run, I was really impressed by her commitment to her students. She would come to the lobby in the mornings before our team meetings and training and Zoom with her class. She spent individual time fully engaged with each child."

Considering all that she's learned from her years of competition, Kaufusi acknowledges the value of perseverance. "It's one of the main things I've learned from sports," she says. "College is obviously hard, so being able to persevere through school plus your sport is a lot of work. But I've always loved the challenge of playing and staying busy."