

“Growing up Together – Catherine Hess and MVNU Women’s Soccer”

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Four years ago, the Mount Vernon Nazarene University women’s soccer program was just wrapping up its first season as a varsity sport as the Lady Cougars finished the year with a respectable 11-8-0 overall record.

At the same time, Catherine Hess was closing out a stellar high school career at Hillsboro High School with a program-best 71 career goals that included a school-record 22 goals during her junior year when she was selected to the All-Ohio Second Team.



Now, four years later, Hess and the MVNU women’s soccer team have both developed into forces to be reckoned with on both the conference and national level. Hess has helped lead the Lady Cougars to a 67-25-2 (.723 winning percentage) record during her career as well as two American

Mideast Conference South Division titles and the 2003 National Christian College Athletic Association national title. MVNU finished 19-5-0 overall in 2004 and wrapped up its second straight AMC South Division title by going 7-0-0 in conference play. The Lady Cougars, who at one point in the season won a school-record 14 straight matches, also finished the season ranked 23rd in the final NAIA national poll – the program’s highest ranking ever.

Individually, Hess has been a huge reason for the success of the MVNU women’s soccer program. She holds the school records for most career goals (67), most career assists (52), and most career points (186). She also holds the single-season assist record with 17 in 2004 as well as the school record for most consecutive matches with at least one point (19).

This season, Hess led the Lady Cougars with 24 goals and 17 assists. She has been the AMC, NAIA Region IX, and NCCAA National Player of the Week twice this year, and she was also the first player in program history to be selected as the NAIA National Player of the Week when she was honored for her performances during the week of October 3-9. She was selected as the AMC South Division Player of the Year award this season, and she was an NCCAA First Team All-American and an NAIA Honorable Mention All-American as a junior in 2003 after compiling 19 goals and 16 assists.

“All the awards are nice, but none of them would mean anything without my team having success,” said Hess, who is always quick to redirect the attention to her teammates. “The one award that does mean the most to me, though, was last season’s Most Valuable Player award that I received from the team. Knowing that my teammates thought that much of me is an incredibly humbling feeling.”

“I think that it is safe to say that Cat has been the most exciting player to watch in our program’s history,” said MVNU head coach Jonathan Meade. “We have watched her win a lot of balls on the field because of her great work ethic, but the most exciting part is waiting for her to rocket a shot into the back of the net. She has had some of the biggest goals in our program’s history including the game-winning goal in the NCCAA national championship match and most recently the game-winner in overtime at Tiffin to keep us in first place in the AMC South. However, she is also always quick to point out that she could not have done any of this without the efforts of her teammates. She is a very unselfish player, who loves to get her teammates involved in the scoring as her assist total shows.”

“Watching Cat play and coaching her has been a lot of fun over the past four years,” Meade added. “However, I have received even more joy from watching her grow in her faith and Christian walk. She has had an incredible transformation in her life since coming to MVNU four years ago.”

“Cat is the kind of player who I can always count on,” said freshman forward Kristy Brandolini, who teamed up with Hess to be a potent one-two scoring punch up front as she tallied 20 goals and 14 assists. “She is very strong and determined, and she wins the ball a lot and looks to make smart plays. She has an amazing shot, and few players are capable of driving to the goal and making a great finish like she does.”

“She is also a great friend,” Brandolini added. “Not only do we have a lot of fun together, but we can talk about serious things which has helped us build a strong friendship. It has been great to have her watching out for me, and I don’t know what I’m going to do without her next year. She brings a lot of energy and talent to this team.”

Hess’ journey to MVNU almost did not happen. Like many highly skilled athletes, she concentrated on trying to land an NCAA Division I scholarship, and she wanted to try to go out of state to school. However, during a recruiting visit at the University of Louisville, she realized that she needed more in her life than just the challenge of playing soccer at a high level.

At that point, she started to really consider attending MVNU. Her older brother, Josh, had been a member of the MVNU men’s soccer team in 1997 and 1998, so she was familiar with the school. She was not really sure if a Christian school was something that really interested her since she did not profess to



be a Christian, but finally she signed with the Lady Cougars.

The rest of Hess' senior year and the summer leading up to her enrolling at MVNU was filled with turmoil as her father, Tim, passed away just prior to her graduation after a battle with cancer. During that time, Hess found herself making some bad choices as a way to escape from all the sorrow, pain, and confusion that she was feeling.

Once she arrived at MVNU, she turned her focus towards soccer and immediately began to contribute to the Lady Cougars' success as she recorded 13 goals and seven assists during her freshman season. On the way back from a game at Urbana University on September 11, 2001, she overheard several of her teammates sharing their testimony of their own personal walk with Christ.

"I knew that if I would have died right then that I would have gone to Hell," said Hess, thinking back to that day. "I knew that I wanted to have my own personal relationship with Christ. However, I decided not to do anything about it that day because I wanted to make sure that I wasn't just doing it because I was scared."

So, Hess continued to ask her teammates and coach questions as the season went along. Finally, right before she went home for Christmas break, she asked her roommate and a few of her teammates to pray with her as she committed her life to Christ.

From that point on, things began to change in Hess' life. She began studying the Bible and attending Bible studies and praise and worship with the MVNU men's and women's soccer teams. During her junior year, she shared her own personal testimony with entire MVNU campus community in a chapel service. She has volunteered at New Hope Industries and now has a field placement there, and she has also been a volunteer for two years with the Special Olympics and plans to do that again this year.

"I am so thankful that I came to MVNU," said Hess. "My teammates have been great encouragements to me during my struggles. I am also very thankful to have had such an incredible coach. Coach Meade has been like a father to me as he has always been more than willing to answer any

questions that I've had. Even when he knew that I wasn't going down the path that I needed to be on, he did not judge me but just encouraged me to keep considering the changes that I needed to make in my life."

There have still been some challenges for Hess since her conversion, but she has remained strong. Her teammate and close friend, Jessi Gates, spent last year in Iraq when her Army National Guard unit was called into active duty. Gates was never far from Hess' thoughts and prayers and she is thankful for her safe return and her contributions on the team this season.

"Jessi has been a real inspiration for me," said Hess. "Despite missing last year, she played better than ever this year and was a key reason that our team had the success that we had. Whenever I got frustrated or started to let down out on the field, I just looked at Jessi and remembered everything that she's been through. You can't help but play harder with that kind of example on your team. She is also an incredible Christian, who I have learned so much from."

"Cat has meant so much to me over the past three years," said Gates, who is a junior defender. "I can always count on her to listen to me or help me through tough times. She has been a great friend and support system in my life. God has really blessed me with her friendship. She is definitely one of a kind and a life-long friend."

While Hess' immediate goals are to finish up her classes this spring and enjoy the remainder of her senior year after another successful soccer season that saw the Lady Cougars advance to the NCCAA championship match again before finishing as the national runner-up, she also has some plans for life after MVNU. She is trying to get into the Peace Corps with an interest in going to South America. She also plans on pursuing a master's degree in either special education or social work.

Thanks to the contributions on the soccer field by Hess over the past four years, the Lady Cougars have risen to a level of national prominence in short amount of time. More importantly, though, Hess has seen her life transformed through the game of soccer in a way that will keep her impacting others for Christ for the rest of her life.



Catherine Hess' Career Statistics (2001-2004)

Year	Games	Starts	Goals	Assists	Points	MVNU Overall Record	Conference Record
2001	23	22	13	7	33	14-9-0	10-6-0
2002	21	21	11	12	34	14-8-1	5-1-1
2003	23	22	19	16	54	20-3-1	6-1-0
2004	24	24	24	17	65	19-5-0	7-0-0
Total:	91	89	67	52	186	67-25-2	28-8-1