

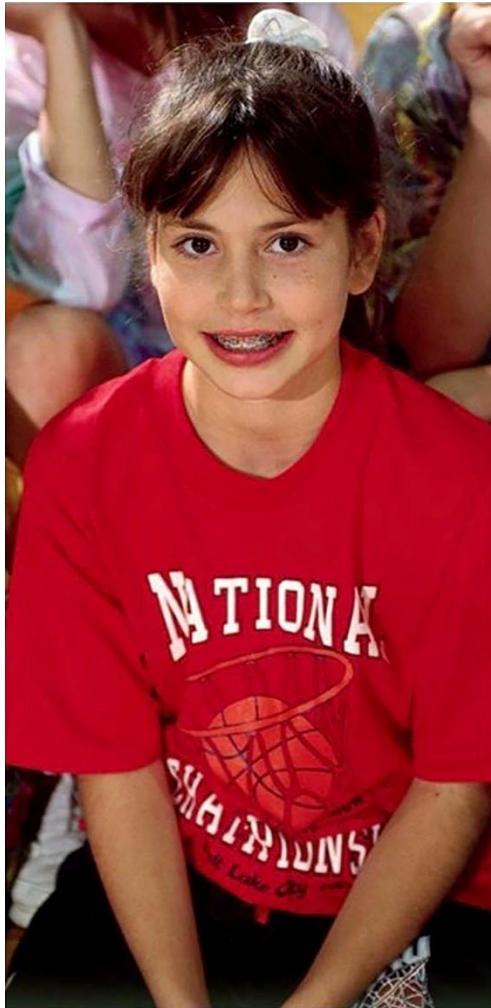


Sue Bird

Goals Growing Up

If you look at my 5th grade yearbook, it says "lawyer, doctor, professional soccer player." I had really high goals at that point! I did actually come into my basketball life at an interesting time, because the WNBA started in 1997 and women's basketball was getting hyped in '95. The Yukon Huskies went undefeated and it was really publicized. 1996 was the Atlanta Olympics and obviously there was a ton of excitement behind that. And then there was the birth of the WNBA. So during those three years I'm 14, 15, 16. I'm in high school, getting recruited a little bit. So even though I didn't grow up wanting to be a professional basketball player, around the time when I was choosing a college, there was professional basketball in the US. I didn't dream about it as a young kid, but I definitely had that goal when I was a teenager. I didn't really have a backup plan in place or anything like that, but from day one it was always really stressed in our household: "Finish your homework before you go play. Do well in school." I have an older sister who went to Brown and then Yale Law School. That was kind of the standard set in the house. My dad's a doctor, my mom's a nurse. So, academics was always big. If I didn't become an athlete, I took school seriously enough that I would have figured something out. But I didn't have that one backup plan.

Sue as a Child



Role Models

I'm going to talk about my family. I was lucky to have my older sister because she really did set that bar. Every teacher I ever had was like, "Oh, you're Jen's little sister." She left her mark in all of these teacher's minds. Ironically enough, you fast forward to us now, and she'll get asked "Oh, you're Sue Bird's older sister?" It's come full circle a little bit. So, my sister was who I looked up to. Both my parents as well, but my sister was within reach. She's only five years older, and every step of the way throughout her journey I was watching. I got to see her excel in the classroom, I got to see her excel in athletics. She was also a good athlete, played varsity on two different

sports, and then we both found our paths. I was lucky to have somebody to always look up to.

Influential Players

I don't have one player that I modeled my game after. It was more that I just watched a lot of basketball. If I had to pick two, I would say I was really a big Mike Bibby fan. I was in high school when he was at Arizona, and I loved watching his game. As it turns out, we're both point guards that can also score, we were both #10. And we're both bowlegged, so it's a natural fit. And then the second player is Jennifer Azzi. I first noticed her in the 1996 Olympics. I kind of thought, "Oh, she looks like me." When you see someone who looks like you, it makes you feel like, "Oh, I could do that too." There's a connection there.

Sue in her Seattle Storm Uniform



Mentorship

Throughout my whole life I've had great coaching. My AAU coach and my high school coach, I had a ton of influence from her right out the gate, on how to play the game the right way, how to be a leader. I remember she was one of the first people to say "Do you want to be a player who had great potential, or do you want to be that player that reached it?" At a young age, those were powerful words! Then you move on to college. When it's all said and done, it will be my college coaches that had the most influence on my game and me as a person. My college coach was really challenging. He was demanding and blunt. He pulled out a lot in me. I had two personalities at that point - I had my off-the-court personality, which is a little more reserved and laid-back, and he was telling me, "You can't be that on the court." He kind of got me to be this whole other person on the court. And then my coaches in the professional ranks have been amazing. I've been really lucky to have good coaching throughout my life.

Sue Showing Off her Basketball Skills



Jewish background

I wasn't really raised anything. My dad is Jewish, his whole side of the family is Jewish. My mom is Protestant-Christian. I did Christmas stuff just as much as I did Hanukkah stuff. I didn't go to church, I didn't go to temple, I wasn't baptized, I didn't have a bat mitzvah or anything like that, but I still had doses of both religions. It was kind of cool; I got the best of both worlds. I got to celebrate Easter with one side of the family, and then we'd have Passover dinner on the other side. I don't necessarily identify one way or the other—I have both inside of me.

Sue and Canine Friend at the Rio Olympics, Summer 2016



Family history

My dad is like 100% Russian, and I have some really cool documents. My aunt, my dad's sister, did a great job of saving everything. I have things like the boat ticket, the documents from Ellis Island where my father's grandfather came over on a boat, and our name is actually Boorda. They went through Ellis Island, like, "What's your name? Boorda? Bird. Go through," and that's how "Bird" came about. That's why my name is

what it is. I played in Russia during my off seasons for a very long time, and I had all these documents written in Russian, so I got them translated. So that's where my father's side came from.

Israeli Citizenship

It's very much basketball-motivated. There are different rules, where each team in Europe can only have two Americans. As an American, if you have any kind of ancestors or connection to another country, it can be advantageous for your career if you can get a passport. For myself, with my father being Jewish and still having relatives in Israel, it was an easy connection. When I tell this to people outside of basketball circles, it seems a little odd. But in our world, it's very normal. So that's how it all came about. It was cool, because what I found was, in this effort to create an opportunity in my basketball career, I was able to learn a lot about a culture that I probably wouldn't have tapped into otherwise. Part of it was being just immersed and basically living there for a little bit, and it was one of the best experiences. People have this kind of different image of what Israel is, and what it's about. And yes, there are military people all over, but there's so much more. Going to Jerusalem was an amazing experience. I've been two or three times. I went to the Dead Sea. I never got to go to Eilot, which I'm bummed about, because I've heard it's beautiful down there. I spent most of my time in Tel Aviv. Gorgeous. There's so much culture, and I've made some friends who are lifelong friends. I got to get in touch with my whole dad's side of the family, the family tree, I learned all about it. It was just an awesome experience.

Changes in Women's Athletics

There's been a ton of change. First and foremost, from a WNBA perspective, our game has just gotten better and better. I mean the literal game on the floor, the product itself. We only have 12 teams and you can have 11 or 12 players on each team. With each draft class, it's like survival of the fittest, and what that produces is really competitive basketball. It pushes you to get better. From that perspective, when you

have a good product, it can only grow. We're still trying to get our footing and figure things out from a business standpoint, but we have the product. The changes that you have seen are different kinds of investment—not just from a money standpoint, but time and energy and things of that nature, different companies investing. But while I can talk about all the strides we've made, I still think there is a long way to go. I bring up that word—investment—because I think it would be great to be equal to the investment that you see for male athletes. People ask why women's sports don't do as well or aren't as successful, and then you hear a stat that says "Oh, the highlights they show, whether it's ESPN or other channels, about 2% of the time is dedicated to women's sports." And then you wonder why people don't like it or see it or know it. I don't want to put down the progress we have made. I've been in the league for 17 years and it's amazing where we are now, but it would be nice to have people put their money where their mouth is. Everyone's talking about women, but we need the actual investment to be there. That's what I would like to see change.

Sue Playing for Team USA in the Olympics



Staying in the Game

It's tough to say how long I want to keep playing. I've seen my friends go through this process of knowing when it's time and listening to what your body is telling you. The way I see it is that you just never know, and I want to stay in the moment and focus on what I'm doing right now. I joke that I'm on the one-year plan—ask me in a year, and I'll tell you how I feel. Right now, I'm in a place where I'm going to do whatever it is I can to control my body. I can control what I eat, my workout regimen, my attitude about things. I can't control how it feels, but I can control basically all the things that will allow it to feel as good as it can. That's kind of where my head is. I'm going to control what I can, and if I feel good, and I'm still enjoying the game, and I'm still excited to go to practice and be around my team and enjoy a season, why not keep going? And if one of those things change or shifts, that's okay too. I've had a good run.

Sue Playing for the Seattle Storm



Life in Seattle

I love Seattle. For a while, I was only living here during the summer, so I would joke that I loved the weather. But it's true. I saw it at its best. I don't think there's anywhere in the world that can compete with Seattle when it's like 75, 80, and clear. It's unbeatable. But what I really love about Seattle is the restaurant scene. I love going out to eat and experiencing that. Whether it's new restaurants or your old favorites in the neighborhood, you're always going to have an amazing time. And just the vibe of the city. You can drive five minutes to Lake Washington and rent paddleboards, or maybe you drive an hour and go for a hike, or you go down to the Locks and just watch the boats go through. There's all this stuff around you. Seattle has the big city stuff, whether it's the music scene, the shows, the shopping, the restaurants, but it's small and convenient. You can get where you need to go. That's probably my favorite thing. It's like: big city vibe, small town feel.

Community Contributions

As a player still playing, I want to have my hands in something in the community. Whatever it is. Seattle Storm actually does a tremendous job in the community and they really make it easy. If you see something that you feel passionate about, you can contact them, and they help make it happen. I think time is probably the best thing you can give. I do want to get more involved—I think something as simple as a camp. That really interests me, and it's something that I've never been able to do because when kids usually go to camp, it's summer, which is when I'm doing my own camp! So we'll see. Luckily, there's already been that kind of framework, and the groundwork has been laid, the relationships have been made, so I think when I do have more time, it will be easy to just jump right in. Until then, I think working through the Storm is a good way of doing it. One of the best things about having a professional team in the city is the connection with the community. Being role models, having kids see women be strong. If you have a dream and you want to be something, we're kind of living examples of that.

Coming Out

Before coming out, my girlfriend Megan and I would talk about that topic all the time. In my mind there was no need to come out. I felt like, "My family knows, my friends know, anyone who knows me knows, so what's the difference? I'm not doing anything to hide it, so why do I have to come out?" And she showed me the other side of that. Because it's not the norm in casual conversation. A straight couple doesn't have to announce that they're together. So, because gay couples aren't there yet, it actually does matter, and you do have to say it. You do have to show yourself in that way, to be a role model in that way. And that was what got me thinking. I don't necessarily target different groups in terms of my ability to be a role model, but I acknowledge that coming out has given a lot of people confidence to be who they are, to see that somebody in my position has the guts, if you will, to say it. There was a nice byproduct of sharing my story that I hadn't necessarily thought about. So, I think it's just about people living their truth.

Sue and her girlfriend, Soccer player Megan Rapinoe



Plans for the Future

Part of me says, "Maybe I should just keep playing, so I never have to actually grow up and get a real job!" But I think coaching does interest me. If you had asked me this

even five years ago, I was like, "No, I'm good." But the older I get, the more I start to see the game as a coach. I'm obviously a player out there, but I'm starting to see it in practice. I'm starting to see it the way a coach sees it, and it interests me. I think what always was not attractive was the life of a coach. Their summers are full of recruiting. You're recruiting 15-, 16-year-olds, trying to convince them to come to your school. Then you get them, they're 17 to 21. There's something nice about that, because you're able to mold young women. But that's a tough life; you're traveling a lot. I kind of want to be in one place. And the thing about coaching for the WNBA, which is probably where I'd want to coach if I did, is that there's not a lot of job security, and there's not a ton of money. There's way more money in college. These are just the pros and the cons; it's just kind of a balance thing. So that's kind of how I see it. Right now, my heart is in women's basketball, wanting to advance that game and get this league going. It is in the right direction, but I want to push it forward even more. So that's where my whole coaching mentality is at. If I don't do that, who knows? I've done some broadcasting, which I really enjoyed. Again, a lot of travel, but maybe I'm just meant to travel for the rest of my life.

UPDATE: In September of 2022, Sue Bird officially retired. The Forward, a Jewish news source, published an article about her career and impact on the game. Read it [here](#).