

**MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Minnesota's women's pre-professional soccer season starts Thursday. Here's what to look out for. 01KS0PZS34ARRRQAYVP7FQB9GW**

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**NINA MOINI:** It's a good time to be a women's sports fan in Minnesota. It always is. In basketball, Lynx season is underway. In rugby, Twin Cities Gemini won their first game Sunday. And on Thursday, there's a match between the state's two women's pre-professional soccer teams.

It's the home opener for Minnesota Aurora and the first game of the season for the Rochester FC Loons. Rochester coach, Eric Feil, and team captain, Rachel Jackson, join me now to talk about it. Welcome to the show, both of you. Thanks so much for being here.

**ERIC FEIL:** Hi there. Thank you for having us on.

**NINA MOINI:** Well, it's great to talk with you. So the Loons are part of the USLW League. The team started playing not too long ago-- I understand, 2023-- so in your second season of the League. Coach Feil, can you tell us about the League for those who may not be familiar?

**ERIC FEIL:** Yeah. So the USLW, like you mentioned, is a pre-professional league. So it is designed to give collegiate players a place to showcase their talents over the summer in the hopes of cracking into the USL's Gainbridge Super League or into the NWSL or any other of the main professional leagues around the area, as well as give the younger core of players that are coming up a chance to get exposed to that level of the game without having to commit to a college, let's say, and going through all of that rigmarole.

**NINA MOINI:** Sure. It's pretty cool to have two teams and that the popularity just continues to seem to soar with the sport. Rachel, I wonder what first drew you to soccer? Was this kind of always your sport?

**RACHEL JACKSON:** I've been playing since I was four. And I just started, because my older sister was playing. And I just wanted to do everything she did. So yeah, when I started, it's just been my sport ever since.

**NINA MOINI:** Can you talk about what led you to this league, specifically, in Rochester?

**RACHEL JACKSON:** Yeah, well, I played on a team in the same league, just in a different division, back at home. I'm from St. Louis, Missouri. So that team folded. There's no longer a team there anymore.

And Eric had reached out. And it's just a different opportunity to live in a different city for the summer. And I really liked the League when I was in it in St. Louis-- so coming here, just keeping that level of intensity with this league going.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. What are you liking about Rochester? Is there anything that stands out to you compared to St. Louis? I went to college at the University of Missouri. So I would visit from time to time, had a lot of friends from the St. Louis area. But what are you liking about Rochester?

**RACHEL JACKSON:** I like how it's small but also big. So everyone kind of knows everyone. And everyone's just so friendly here. It feels just like a very homey city to be in.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. So in the fourth season now for the Loons, Coach Feil, how have you recruited players since then? Are you looking to places that maybe things have folded, like in Rachel's case? Or how do you spot people out?

**ERIC FEIL:** Yeah. So it's a combination of a few things. I generally don't look for teams that are folding. Because you never want a team to fold.

**NINA MOINI:** Sure.

**ERIC FEIL:** That's not ideal for anybody-- but a lot of watching college games throughout the offseason. And we also tend to lean kind of towards recruiting players in the biomedical sciences with Mayo Clinic in our backyard. That's a pretty big draw for them.

And there's also a personality aspect we look for. I'll have phone calls or Zoom calls with these players before we get too far down the recruiting process just to figure out how they'll fit in with our dynamic and what their goals and aspirations truly are. Because we only really want the girls that are trying to push into that next level.

**NINA MOINI:** Mm-hmm. And Rachel, so I understand you're a midfielder. So you're involved in the offense and the defense, a lot of running.

**RACHEL**

**JACKSON:**

**NINA MOINI:** You're also team-- yeah, I remember. Because I only wanted to play defense. I never wanted to play midfield. But you're also team captain. So you're seeing things from a few different angles. Tell us what you think are some of your team's greatest strengths this year.

**RACHEL**

**JACKSON:**

Yeah, we have a lot of new players this year. So a lot of us came last week and more coming this week. And I think that Eric did a really good job of recruiting high-level, competitive players this year.

And I think that helps us a lot. Because we always just want to compete with the highest teams, like Aurora, like Sioux City and all those teams. So I think the competitiveness of my current teammates are going to bring us to that next level.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. Rachel, I'm curious if you think Minnesota has a lot of support around soccer. We feel that here. I think a lot of Minnesotans have seen the sport continue to progress and grow and more interest, particularly on the women's side of things. What are your impressions of the sport of soccer in Minnesota? Do you think it's valued, treasured?

**RACHEL**

**JACKSON:**

Yeah. Like I said, I'm from St. Louis. And people from St. Louis consider it a soccer city. But coming here, I figured that you guys only have a men's team, just like we do in St. Louis. But even the crowd that Aurora brings to their games, and then as well as our games, I just feel like everyone here supports the teams and especially women's sports.

I think Minnesota is one of the best states that comes out for women's games. And yeah, I think soccer is-- I think people here value it. And that helps always wanting to come back, at least.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. Coach Feil, I understand there's 15 new expansion teams in the League, including some new to the Midwest and your division. So what teams are you watching? What are you excited about?

**ERIC FEIL:**

Oh, that's a loaded question. You want the Midwest teams to do well. Everybody in the soccer world knows that both of the coasts have a ton of Division I schools and a ton of Division I athletes that come out. But I think it's really good that teams like Edgewater, Castle and Rockford Raptors from the Chicagoland area are joining in, because it opens up a lot more pathways that historically have been regionally restricted.

It's obviously a little bit easier on the girls side to go Division I, because there are more programs in the area. But there's a platform now that college coaches can see the Midwest for what it is, as an actual hotbed that's slept on when it comes to soccer talent. And that's what's the best about these expansion teams-- is there's more players getting more time in the spotlight that they wouldn't necessarily otherwise get.

**NINA MOINI:** Awesome. Rachel, I wonder what some of your goals are for the season related to the sport and then just your own personal growth? I'm sure you have some of those, too.

**RACHEL JACKSON:** Yeah, I think the team goal is just obviously to win games. That's everyone's goal in this league-- but also just to compete with some of the higher teams. Aurora has been number one in our division for a really long time. And I think that we have the capability to go and compete with them this year.

Same with Sioux Falls-- I thought they were a very, very good team last year. And so just competing this year, being at the same level as them and actually making it a game-- I think, last year and the previous years before that, it was a lot of defense. But I think we have the personnel this year to create some offensive chances and score some goals this year.

**NINA MOINI:** Cool.

**RACHEL JACKSON:** And for me, personally, like Eric said, this is a developmental league to go professional. And I'm done with my college career. And so that's what I'm looking to do next. So I'm hoping this league will help me get some looks into the professional world and, yeah, push my soccer experience forward.

**NINA MOINI:** For sure. Coach, I'll give you the last question here. It does seem like you play Aurora often for your season opener. Like Rachel mentioned, they've gone undefeated several seasons. How are you gearing up for that match-up?

**ERIC FEIL:** Pretty much the same way I always do. It's kind of luck of the draw that we always wind up at least on one team's opener-- playing the other one. But for me it's a benchmark game, like Rachel's saying. We want to be cracking into that upper echelon, fighting for playoff spots.

And with their history and their pedigree, it's also a great mental challenge for us to be embracing underdogs. And watching a lot of film year to year doesn't necessarily help, because there's so much turnover for teams.

**NINA MOINI:** Sure.

**ERIC FEIL:** So doing what we can in-house to prepare ourselves for how we want to play-- and then using this game as a way to tweak and adjust things to get ready for the rest of the season. Because we know we'll get another shot at them at some point.

**NINA MOINI:** Sure.

**ERIC FEIL:** So this is a big test for us, as opposed to a win or die situation.

**NINA MOINI:** Awesome. Thank you, both, for joining *Minnesota Now*. Wishing you all the best with the season ahead. Thanks so much.

**RACHEL JACKSON:** Thank you.

**ERIC FEIL:** Thank you.

**NINA MOINI:** That's Rachel Jackson, Captain of Rochester FC women's team. And Eric Feil is their coach. Thanks for joining us.

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