

## Yael Averbuch West is paying it forward

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Yael Averbuch West suspended a professional soccer career to focus on her health. Averbuch West, a defender for Reign FC of the National Women's Soccer League, has spent the past few NWSL seasons battling ulcerative colitis, a debilitating illness she was diagnosed with in 2012. However, Averbuch West's break is anything but restful. Averbuch West runs her own business and, in March, became the first Executive Director of the National Women's Soccer League Players Association, an organization she helped form and unionize as an active player in 2017.

By all standards, Averbuch West has enjoyed a successful professional soccer career. In 2009, she was drafted fourth overall by Sky Blue FC, of Women's Professional Soccer, the professional league that existed between 2009 and 2011. When WPS folded, Averbuch West competed professionally in Russia and then Sweden, where she played until 2013. In 2014, Averbuch West joined the newly formed NWSL, where she remained until stepping away this season. Averbuch West has also made twenty six appearances with the U.S. Women's National Team. Through her career, Averbuch West has experienced all the challenges, including employment uncertainty and wage instability, faced by many professional women's soccer players. The challenges, however, have influenced Averbuch West's ambitions off the field.

While an active player, Averbuch West launched her own business partly to supplement her playing salary. Averbuch West's business idea originated while playing in Sweden. During her free time, Averbuch West would film her individual training sessions and share them on YouTube as "backyard skills challenges." To Averbuch West's surprise, her videos connected with people. "People would send in videos [of themselves] doing these challenges," Averbuch West says. "I realized that people do want to see what kind of things I do in my backyard as a pro player." Averbuch West invested considerable time and effort into learning how to convert her skills challenges into an actual business. "I basically took myself to my own version of business school," Averbuch West says. "I was listening to podcasts, reading books, and talking to people." After a long development process, Averbuch West's YouTube videos evolved into Techne Futbol, a training app that allows players of all ages and levels to master technical soccer skills on their own time with Techne designed training programs.

Averbuch West applied similar entrepreneurial skill to forming the players association. Averbuch West and several former WPS players were determined early in their NWSL careers to establish structure and communication among NWSL players. "We started to see huge value in having [the players association] and for us take ownership of it as players," says Averbuch West. Averbuch West and her team sought counsel from advisers, like the MLS Players Association, on the formal steps necessary to establish a players union. After taking these steps, the players association was formalized in 2017, with Averbuch West as its president. On November 15, 2018, well after the players association was operational, the NWSL formally recognized it as the exclusive bargaining representative for all NWSL players. "By the time we were recognized as a union [by the NWSL] we were already an operating organization," says Averbuch West.

The players association continues to focus on structure and communication among players. It also serves as a unified voice for the players on issues arising on and off the field and on league decisions that impact players' lives. Averbuch West is hopeful that the players association can help expand player opportunities off the field, by offering continuing education opportunities and advice on personal brand building, preparing for later-stage careers, and transitioning to post-soccer life. "If you have had a career that has been your passion but has not allowed you to save money, [once that career ends] you don't have the luxury to go back to school or reflect on your next passion," says Averbuch West. "You have to get right into the work force." Averbuch West's aspirations for the players association are clearly a reflection of the challenges and accomplishments she has experienced as a player. "It is incredibly influenced by my own personal experiences," says Averbuch West regarding the support she hopes the players' association can provide its members.

Averbuch West is ideal for the role she's taken on. She is articulate and generous in sharing her experiences and extremely outspoken regarding the challenges players' face during and after their careers. Averbuch West is also extremely passionate about the players association's function in addressing these challenges. With the NWSL experiencing a post-World Cup bump in attendance, inking a multi-year sponsorship deal with Budweiser, and a new media rights deal with ESPN, hopefully Averbuch West and the players association receive the resources necessary to support their members as they continue delivering a world-class product on the field.

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