

## **Playing for a Higher Purpose**

**By Ezra Broder**

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Soccer is the sport of choice for Hailai Arghandiwal, but one she is lucky to have. In her parents' native country of Afghanistan, women were not allowed to play soccer until a decade ago.

The Afghan women's national team formed ten years ago and started recruiting worldwide while Hailai was in high school in California.

"There was a pick-up tournament that the girls were playing in, and I was like, 'you know what, this would be a fun opportunity, why don't I just showcase my skills' and he liked the way I played and was like, 'you should probably join the Afghan National Team,'" Arghandiwal said.

Despite having never set foot in Afghanistan, she played in three international tournaments with the Afghan team. For someone who had the option to play soccer growing up in America, it was an eye-opening experience.

"I've been lucky here at Santa Clara in my 31 years to be around a lot of fearless women and Hailai is a fearless woman," said Santa Clara head coach Jerry Smith. "I think it does take that kind of courage to try and do what she's doing with raising awareness in a different culture, a male-dominated culture for women athletes."

"It is important to know where you come from, so I know that I want to help impact as many people as I can and I think for me, sport was the biggest way and the easiest way," Arghandiwal said.

Arghandiwal has stayed true to her word. Over the last four years, she has organized fundraisers, supporting the Afghan team from afar, all while leading Santa Clara to two NCAA Tournaments and twice being honored as a WCC All-Academic member.

"If you open up the dictionary for well-rounded student-athlete, and the type of student-athlete the WCC and Santa Clara want to draw, Hailai's picture is in there," Smith joked. "She's absolutely what you're looking for in a student-athlete in every single aspect."

Arghandiwal noted the guilt she feels for not having experienced the same things her Afghan teammates have.

“I’m taking that guilt and trying to change it to gratitude because I’m very lucky to be here but to give back to them is everything to me.”

As Smith previously noted, courage is a word he does not take lightly. But it is a word well-spent on Hailai.

“I think about the courage it takes for Hailai and it reminds me of the courage that Billie Jean King had to have in trying to do what she did to help women’s tennis and women athletes. I just feel really lucky that a person of her quality, a person of her maturity, a person of her worldliness and unselfish attitude ended up on our team.”

It should come as no surprise that the senior is the unquestioned leader of the Broncos and a pioneer for Afghan women.

“This is bigger than soccer, I know we want to win games, but we’re trying to do something bigger than all of this,” said Arghandiwal, “and that was to bring change to the women of Afghanistan, the children of Afghanistan, to change a whole mindset.”