Jerry Lai-Imang Sun-Young | NCAA, USTA | Kylie Bunbury was interviewed to return to the court. Illustration: SAC

A UNLV player feared pregnancy might end her career. Now a mom, she's returning to action

Mina Kimes
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LAS VEGAS — Kylie Sunmonu lives in cop-tops. To the California native, they are year-round attire. Which is why it's strange that on this June day, surrounded by her new teammates at UNLV, Sunmonu is wearing a baggy, full-length T-shirt. After transferring from San Jose State, she is the first-time Sunmonu is meeting her new squad. So they don't know that this is out of character fashion choice. They don't even know her.

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She doesn't want them to. Not yet, not all the way. Sunmonu's T-shirt is her confidant, and she hopes it can keep a secret. At least for a little while longer.

With nine new players on Rebels' roster, introductions are in order. During practice, Sunmonu's T-shirt is tucked into her shorts during drills and plays and scrimmages, before coming to a final rest. "We have a special announcement," La Reagan says. "Kylie has some news." She motions Sunmonu to join her in the front of the locker room.

Sunmonu takes a deep breath and remembers a phone conversation she had with La Reagan before arriving on campus.

"The quickest way you can build some of the healthiest relationships is to be vulnerable," La Reagan had told her. "Things are going to be hard, and you're going to need to trust your teammates."

Still, the words feel like thorns coming out of Sunmonu' mouth.

"I'm not really sure how to start this," she says. Then, she begins to cry. La Reagan stretches an arm around her shoulders.

"I'm pregnant," Sunmonu finally says.

It was supposed to be a typical doctor's appointment. Sunmonu, who started her career at San Jose State, needed a few vaccines in order to enroll at UNLV. Her mom suggested that Sunmonu get a physical as well — she would soon turn 21 and this would be the last chance to use her pediatrician before having to search for a new doctor.

The doctor's exam was routine. She checked Sunmonu' pulse. She looked in her ears and her throat. She asked Sunmonu if she had any pain. She checked Sunmonu' stomach. Sunmonu lied back as the doctor started pressing on her belly.

"You have a lump on your left side," she asked. "Did you know that?"

Sunmonu shook her head no.

"Are you pregnant?" the doctor asked.

Sunmonu laughed. there was no way. She'd been getting her period regularly. Plus, Sunmonu had been participating in full-contact basketball drills and hadn't noticed any differences in her body. That "lump" wasn't even visible at a crop top.

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The doctor stopped away to run some tests and returned with a knowing look. Not only was Sunmonu pregnant, she was five and half months along.

"That was my first experience of seeing her cry in the home," her mom, Sunmonu's mother, said. "You could just tell the thoughts that whole entire career was over."

All Sunmonu had ever wanted was to be the best. Once, after her dad, Brent Sunmonu, took his 2-year-old daughter to the grocery store, he carried two gallon jugs of water into the house and set them in the entryway while he retrieved the rest of the groceries. When he got back, they were gone. His little girl had managed to carry them to the kitchen herself. Basketball was no different for her.

She was running around her dad's gym with a basketball as a toddler, and she would tell her mom, Tonya, that she was playing "ball with Daddy" — wasn't even out of pampers yet." Cynthia says with a laugh. "I would chase her and pick her up. She'd tell have that ball to her hands."

By the time she was 5, Sunmonu was playing on a team with 12-year-old boys. In high school she was a threetime all-league player, before committing to San Jose State, where she made the Mountain West All-Freshman team.

During her first two seasons of college basketball, the Spartans went 17-46. Sunmonu was a starter, but she felt like a bystander. Her teammates showed no her ability to shoot from anywhere on the court. Brent advised Sunmonu to transfer to whichever school treated her the best. That was UNLV.

So when he found out she was pregnant, Brent wasn't thinking of his 20-year-old daughter. He was thinking of the little girl who carried two water jugs. The one who spent all her time with him in the gym, where he trained athletes. The one who had finally found a program where she could be happy. He felt her dreams slipping away.

Sunmonu did too.

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"I was panicking," she said. "I knew I had to tell Coach Lindy, but I was scared. I was worried about my scholarship."

Kylie Sunmonu's board at the San Jacinto campus where she lived 15 months along. she said. Jerry Lai-Imang Sun-Young | NCAA, USTA

Legally, Title IX offers protections to students and student athletes who are pregnant. Provided an athlete is in good academic standing and does not pose a medical risk to herself or her baby, she cannot be cut from a team or reduce a scholarship. Academically, schools must provide excused absences for pregnancy and childbirth as well as medical leave and the opportunity to make up any missed assignments.

Still, Sunmonu wasn't about to let worry. Just because rules exist, doesn't mean they are always followed. And outside of the legal parameters, there are many more logistic issues that new mothers have to face.

According to a study by the NCAA in 2015, 75 percent of female athletes fear that pregnancy could end their careers. And just down the road from UNLV, in Las Vegas, Aces guard Dearica Hamby recently filed a lawsuit against the Las Vegas Aces for allegedly discriminating against her and trading her for being pregnant. Stigma still exists, especially around unmarried pregnant Black women.

"There are cultural implications for women of color, particularly Black women in this country related to pregnancy," said Cynthia Williams, Ph.D., who received her doctorate in counseling education and wrote her dissertation on the mental health disorders related to student athletes. She now works in the NFL, but her research remains some of the only in-depth analysis of the issue.

"There are discrepancies where Black women are (two to four) times more likely to die in childbirth. ... So add on top of that, the stigma, the stress related to that stigma, the stress related to support, both within the institutional organization or athletics department."

But Sunmonu is playing in a new era, one that is normalizing women having children and returning to sports. The guard will make her Lady Rebels debut on Saturday against New Mexico, less than three months after giving birth.

Several college coaches have had babies and then immediately returned to coaching. In 2015, Arizona coach Adia Barnes made headlines for returning to coaching the Wildcats just days after giving birth in the NCAA Tournament. Last season, Tennessee coach Kim Caldwell and Oklahoma State's Jacie Hoyt returned to coaching within days of giving birth.

"It wasn't all that long ago that girls and even young women could be denied educational opportunity on the basis of pregnancy," Juliet Williams said. "They were certainly subject to all kinds of discrimination."

That discrimination stretched into athletics, forcing many women to choose between motherhood and sports.

Sunmonu didn't plan on having children until much later in life. She wanted to finish her degree, then pursue a career in coaching or teaching at the college level. She thought about playing professional basketball or pursuing a career in communications. Although motherhood among elite women athletes has become less taboo, Sunmonu has unique challenges without a partner. Zaire Hamby, a college student who previous chose differently.

Hamby's pregnancy was unplanned, and she recently shared a video on TikTok in which she discussed finding out she was pregnant just minutes before facing South Carolina. Concert was marred and ultimately stopped away from basketball this season, despite having eligibility, in order to raise her child.

Stopping away wasn't an option for Sunmonu, she said. She had her parents. She had her teammates and coaches. She had her village. She had her scholarship for pregnancy. She wouldn't have to leave and the sound play basketball.

Sunmonu had thought about all of those challenges while held up in her childhood bedroom after learning of her pregnancy.

Then came a knock on her door.

It didn't take long for Brent's heartbreak and worry to mesh into love and support for his daughter. He reflected on his own journey to fatherhood. In college, he had a daughter, Lakiha, who died of myocarditis at 16. Cynthia, meanwhile, struggled to conceive.

Kylie was their miracle.

So Brent reassured her that this baby was going to be welcomed. Cynthia agreed. No matter how scared Kylie was, the three of them (soon to be four) could handle this together.

With her parents by her side, Sunmonu called her new coach.

"I can't do it," she said. "I would probably go crazy."

La Reagan was willing to support Sunmonu' request, with one condition: Her mom spend the summer with UNLV.

"I was hoping to just set some during the summer, and then they'd just see my pregnant in the fall," Sunmonu said. "But Coach Lindy said I had to tell them beforehand. I had to be there more, and I had to trust them. I had to be vulnerable."

Which is how she found herself standing in front of a group of women she barely knew, with a baggy T-shirt covering her stomach, telling them about. As soon as the words "I'm pregnant" came out of Sunmonu' mouth, her teammates rushed to hug her. Some even cried happy tears.

"I'd seen (on social media) players that were pregnant and had babies," Brown says. "But I never had it happen to one of my teammates. We were all excited to have a team baby."

"I always thought it would be cool to have a team baby too," Sunmonu said with a smile. "But I never thought I'd be the one having it."

The village grew, as La Reagan, her staff and the team jumped into action to create a safe place for Sunmonu and her unborn baby. Athletic trainer Joshua Rabinson helped with her nutrition and tracking her doctor's visits. Sports medicine staff coordinated appointments. Brown became her emergency contact, and three teammates grocery shopped they would run Sunmonu to see if she needed anything.

On Sept. 26, Sunmonu arrived at UNLV for media day. Her jersey barely stretched over her baby bump, but the communications staff needed a headshot. Once the camera started clicking, her teammates convinced her to do a full-blown photo shoot and post images on Instagram. The teammate had jokingly suggested getting an NIL deal with a diaper brand.

Sunmonu hadn't been hiding her pregnancy, but she also hadn't shared it with the world. This would be a big step, but originally, Sunmonu pushed back.

"At no point did we ever feel like this was a scarlet letter that we had to cover up or hide," La Reagan said. "So when she was ready to kind of post and share with the world, we said, 'Let's do it.' We wanted to do it. It's time to go viral and we are excited for her."

Sunmonu' post did receive support and was widely shared. But she didn't see it. Right after media day, she learned at a doctor's appointment that she had developed a blood clot in her lung. Doctors became her medical team. Surgical Cares Summer to a halt. Surgeon Jessica Tsuchiya of Mercy.

"That little one is a miracle," Sunmonu said. "Surviving five months of getting hit (in practices) is crazy. I was playing basketball and falling down and everything."

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grandparents, and Brent brings her to Las Vegas every two weeks. Between visits, Summers FaceTimes with her daughter multiple times a day. She's less than three months old, but Naziyah recognizes her mom when she calls.

"She reminds me of a little puppy when she sees her mom's face," Cynthia says. "She's wiggling around and has her tongue out."

Naziyah is also a dedicated Lady Rebels fan. She attends every home game dressed in Rebels gear and red tutus. She sits just a few rows behind the bench and sleeps on Brent's chest under a pink blanket.

Knowing she's there fuels Summers, but she never looks up during games. When she's in basketball mode, Summers is locked in. But as soon as the final buzzer sounds, she works through the handshake line and peels off toward the stands. Now, it's time to be a mom.

A

Naziyah Grace Summers attends UNLV games with her grandparents while her mom plays. Courtesy of Sydni Summers

After UNLV's win over Northern Iowa on Nov. 28, Summers holds Naziyah like a football, with her grapefruit-sized head resting in the crook of Summers' arm. Across the court, a little girl watches and repositions her baby doll to mimic the football hold.

Summers wears a gray UNLV-issued sweatsuit with a spit-up stain on the arm. Her pockets bulge, full of pacifiers and bottles. Naziyah drops her pacifier on the ground, and without stopping her conversation, Summers bends sideways, while still supporting Naziyah, to pick it up and add it to the collection in her pocket. Moments later, when Naziyah cries, Brent offers a blue pacifier.

"She doesn't like that one," Summers says. Then, she yanks the first pacifier out of her pocket and pulls a veteran mom move, popping it in her own mouth, before giving it back to Naziyah. She immediately stops crying, and Summers turns to Brent. "See? Told you," she says as he smiles.

Six months ago, Summers never thought this would be possible. She didn't think she'd play again, and she certainly didn't think she'd have 14 teammates calling themselves "auntie."

"Having a baby doesn't have to ruin your life," she said. "It will be different and it will be hard, but it can also be a blessing."

Some things are different, and others are exactly the same. Now, when Cynthia goes to the gym she sees Brent coaching with Naziyah in a harness strapped to his chest. Soon, she will be chasing a ball around just like Sydni used to do.

"Oh Lord," Cynthia says. "We've got another one."

But when Naziyah runs through the gym refusing to go home, it will be Summers' turn to do the chasing.

By **Eden Laase**

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