

MOTHERHOOD AND MIDFIELD: KATHERINE TATO'S RETURN TO THE PITCH

By Mary DeMartini

As women's sports continue to become more popular, more and more women are achieving things that were once considered impossible. Highly skilled athletes are coming back to athletics after having children, and even improving in their sports. Katherine Tato, a midfielder on the Pleasanton RAGE, is one great example. She has a toddler and is also a key player on her team. Tato has been playing soccer her whole life, and didn't slow down even when she had her son.

"His name is Luigi, and he's going to be 4 in July," said Tato.



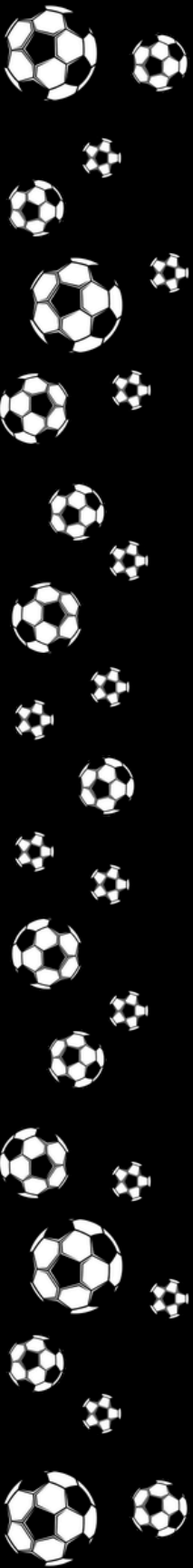
Katherine Tato and her son Luigi

Tato began playing soccer at a young age. Since then, she has played on numerous high-level teams, and has stayed committed to her athletic development through multiple struggles.

"I grew up in the Bay Area," Tato said. "I jumped around a lot between a lot of teams. Sophomore year I played on my high school's JV team, and then my junior year I decided to stick with my club team. I wouldn't have been able to make both practices, and it was a developmental decision. I felt like I was behind from where I wanted to be. In my senior year, I played on the developmental academy."

Tato always knew she wanted to keep playing soccer, but was less sure of her academic goals. She eventually became a personal trainer, but came into college undecided.





“For college, I was recruited by UMass Lowell,” said Tato. “I played two seasons, but wasn't sure what I wanted to study, and not getting the playing time I wanted to. I decided to leave and pursue playing soccer professionally, and then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.”

Due to lockdown, Tato wasn't able to actually play games in 2020. Instead, she went home and continued to work on her skills until another opportunity came.

“In 2021, I went abroad again,” Tato said. “There was a mixup with the paperwork and I had to come home. So I was there and then I came home with a fun little souvenir in my belly that is now almost 4 years old.”

After two failed trips abroad, both after making highly competitive teams, Tato was anxious to get back on the field. She began trying out for teams just a few weeks after having Luigi, and was able to still play at a very high level.


“Coming back from that, I played USL-W in 2023, but after that, I tore my ACL,” Tato said. “After recovering from that, I played USL-W again for a team in Atlanta, and then I went abroad again. This time, I figured out my paperwork and was able to actually compete. I played in Brazil, and our team got promoted to third division.”

Tato was a very important part of her team's rise to third division and is proud of the role she played as a starter. She began playing with the team when Luigi was barely 3 years old, and had a very quick progression back to soccer postpartum. However, Tato feels lucky that she was able to do this safely after returning to the field so quickly.

“I had no guidance,” Tato said. “I'm a personal trainer, and last year I got a certification in pre and postnatal fitness. So now I understand what goes into it all, but at the time I didn't have any resources available to me, and I didn't know what to do. I definitely came back way too quick. I tried to come back three weeks after giving birth, which was way too soon, and then I was playing games two months postpartum.”

Tato's care team was involved in assessing the health of her child, but offered little advice for her return to athletics. While they gave general guidelines, most of their advice was dependent on how Tato felt rather than a structured and objectively safe plan. Because of this, Tato felt pushed to get back on the field as soon as her body began to heal.





“I was itching to get back on the field,” Tato said. “I was also pretty anxious, I still wanted to play professionally and I hadn't quite done that yet. I thought ‘I’m 22 now, time is ticking and I have to get this done or it'll never happen.’”

Tato put a lot of pressure on herself physically and mentally. She struggled physically and also with postpartum depression. Although much of her quick trajectory back to soccer was inadvisable, she is happy with where she is now athletically and competitively.

“I think the experience made me a better soccer player, but I did not need to push myself so soon,” Tato said. “At 6 months, I started to feel more like myself, and a year later I was really performing again.”

Before Tato became a better player, however, she needed to learn how to manage her time, and how to play in a body that now felt very different.

“It was very mental,” Tato said. “Your body feels different afterwards, when you hit the ground you can feel every part of your body, and your core needs a lot more rehab than I realized at the time. I also didn't start feeling normal emotionally until a year and a half to two years later.”

Coming back to soccer wasn't just difficult because of her new mental and physical state, she also had an infant at home to take care of. Tato learned how to care for Luigi mostly by herself, but feels grateful especially for the support of her parents.

“For the first couple months I was living off of two hours of sleep a night,” Tato said. “I would put him down for bed and then sneak off to a nighttime training session. If my dad was home working and Luigi was down for a nap, I would run down to a field session and tell him to call me if anything happened. My mom and my dad were both huge helps.”

When Tato is playing at home, her mom is a huge supporter. She often watches Luigi and gives advice and words of support to Tato. Now that Luigi is getting older, Tato can also go to training sessions much more easily, often bringing him with her.

“Away games and games in general are the most challenging part,” Tato said. “Childcare is free in Brazil, which is a lifesaver, but in the US it's very expensive. His other grandma would watch him a lot on game days in Brazil.”



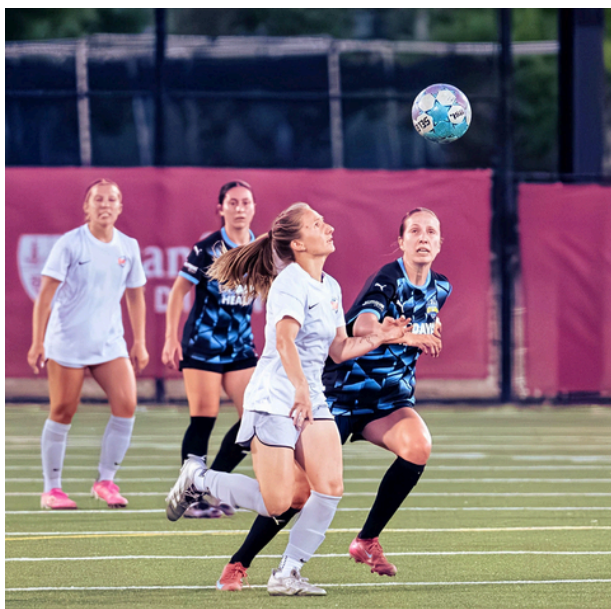
Tato has worked through a lot of barriers to play at such a high level with a small child, however she also believes that there are many advantages even within soccer to being a mom. To her, the good still vastly outweighs all of the obstacles.

“My time management has gotten so much better since having Luigi,” Tato said. “He also made me a better player, 100%. I used to be so into soccer that I couldn't see out. It's still a huge priority, but now no matter how I play, I come home to him smiling and laughing with me. Even if I play badly, I have to put it away for a bit, so it helps a bunch with perspective.”

Throughout her journey with soccer, Tato also earned a certification as a personal trainer. This job is fulfilling and helps her to balance her many priorities.

“Being a personal trainer is interesting first of all, and it's also really relevant to what I do,” Tato said. “It's nice because I can set my own hours and do my programming at home with Luigi.”

Clearly, Tato has only improved as a soccer player in the past four years. Her dreams haven't gotten any smaller either.



Tato plays against Cal Storm at Stanford Medicine Sports Complex



“My main goal is to eventually play professionally in the US or in Brazil which is why leagues like this are so important,” Tato said. “I just want to keep playing as long as I can. Outside of soccer I want to own my own gym and make it a space for the community.”

With so much going on in her life, it's important to Tato to stay grounded. She used to do this by meditating, although she now struggles to find the time. Instead she focuses on gratitude and spirituality.

“I am a spiritual person, which has helped me a lot,” Tato said. “My friends and family have also been such a great support system, especially when things feel like a roller coaster.”

Tato is continuing to chase her dreams with RAGE, and she does so while still being a great mom. Luigi loves bragging to his friends about her skills, and also loves coming to games and practices.

“My mom plays soccer and my mom’s soccer friends like me too”, said Luigi.

As the season and her career progress, Tato’s biggest supporter will never be far away.

Katherine Tato and Luigi at a team lift

