

ROSS RETURNS HOME

By Heather Rule, SportsEngine, 09/21/20, 12:00PM MDT

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Hub exclusive: Littleton's Kelsey Ross honed her game while playing three years in Vermont. The forward is back in her home state, where her arrival is a boon for an improving Team CO 19U girls' squad.



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Team CO 19U girls' forward Kelsey Ross credits her brother for introducing her to hockey, but it was the sport's competitive atmosphere that hooked her. Photo by Katie Hinkle, SportsEngine

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When she was younger, Kelsey Ross always wanted to follow in her older brother's footsteps.

A year-and-a-half older than Ross, he played hockey. So naturally, Ross decided to play hockey, too. They played on the same team for six or seven years before her brother gravitated toward lacrosse once the family moved from Texas to Colorado.

Ross played a bunch of other sports, such as soccer, basketball, and ran track and cross-country, but she focused on hockey full time beginning about when she was in the seventh grade.

"I think mostly what kept me playing was just the competitive atmosphere," said Ross, who turned 17 in June. "It's just the one that's had my attention throughout all my life.

"I just stuck with hockey."



Team Colorado girls 19U forward Kelsey Ross. Photo by Katie Hinkle

This year, sticking with hockey means she joined the Team Colorado 19U girls' squad. It also means a return to her home state after a few years of playing hockey on the East Coast.

She brings with her a high level of on-ice skills and leadership honed while playing hockey for three years in the North American Hockey Academy in Vermont, and her inclusion on the Team CO roster helps bolster the team's offense with her speed, hockey IQ and shot accuracy.

Ross is a phenomenal athlete and has the potential to be the team's No. 1 forward this season, said Team Colorado 19U coach Brent Bohn.

"She's quick," he added. "She makes really good decisions, not just on the puck, but off the puck."

A high hockey IQ and an ability to read plays are two more of Ross' strengths.

"I'd say I know what's going to happen before it happens, even with the other team, so I can position myself correctly," Ross said.

Team Colorado 19U defender Sydney Luttrell noted that Ross has a really good, hard and accurate shot, too.

Being a speedy 5-foot-9 forward, Ross can reach pucks quickly, and it's difficult for opponents to knock her off the puck, Luttrell said.

"She definitely uses her size to her advantage," Luttrell added. "And she just has a really good hockey sense. She's able to see a play developing, and able to read and react to that play, rather than the play happening and then she reacts."

Ross described herself as a player who sets up her teammates for goals, saying she's likely to get more assists than goals.

Ross returns home after developing her skills while participating in highly competitive hockey each weekend across the past three seasons at NAHA. According to the academy's website, she tallied nine goals and 14 assists in 37 games with the Red team in the 2018-19 season, and had 10 goals and eight assists in 56 games with the White team the next year. She was also selected to participate in two USA Hockey development events: the Girls 16/17 camp in 2019 and the Girls 15 camp in 2018.

While a member of the NAHA Winter Hawks, Ross faced many of the opponents that Team Colorado will play this season, and she can help give insight to her teammates so they can adjust on the ice against those opponents.

"(Ross) just has a really good hockey sense. She's able to see a play developing, and able to read and react to that play, rather than the play happening and then she reacts.

—Sydney Luttrell
Team CO 19U defender

Ross decided this year — her senior year — was a good time to stay home in Littleton and play locally, while still being able to develop her game, she said.

"I saw with the new coaches and just a new team, basically, the development was getting much better and there was just more promise for Team Colorado as a whole and the whole program," Ross said.

It was the combination of Team Colorado getting a new coaching staff and seeing the team in action at multiple tournaments last season that attracted Ross to the program as well, she said. She could see how different and how much better the team looked last season.

Of course, getting to sleep in your own bed after hockey practice is a perk, too. Ross said it's nice to come home from practice and be around her family.

Her teammate and friend, Luttrell, also made the return to Colorado for her senior season. From Brighton, Luttrell spent her sophomore and junior years playing for the Madison Capitols in Wisconsin before deciding to join Team Colorado this year. Ross and Luttrell have known each other for about four years, but this is their first year playing together.

Playing out of state and away from home was one of the biggest challenges, Ross said. Being away from home for months at a time since her freshman year in high school really caught up to her the past year, she added.

Ross also battled some injuries while she was away. She tore her Achilles tendon twice — once in her freshman year and again in her junior season, keeping her out of hockey for a minimum of three months each time. She also separated her shoulder a few times during her sophomore season. It was difficult to be at NAHA nursing those injuries, she said.

"So I couldn't really come home and distract myself from not being able to play," Ross said. "It was definitely tough at first, but then I realized that I've got to stick it out in the long run to be able to come back strong to help the team out."

Ross leads by example and comes to the rink to get stronger, better and not mess around, Luttrell said. She's also there to offer kudos for teammates when they do something well, or remind them to focus if needed, Luttrell said.

She also can influence teammates without uttering a word.

"Her game does the talking, for sure, from a leadership standpoint," Bohn said.

Ross hopes to display her leadership by playing hard and with a positive attitude at every tournament, game and practice this season.

It's Ross' work ethic that also separates her from other players, and she doesn't give up, Luttrell said. Ross listens to her coaches and implements the feedback she hears from them, Luttrell added.

Ross is also very serious and dedicated to hockey, which Luttrell said shows in the fact that she went away for three years to play.

"If you want to play at this level, you have to be fully invested and willing to push yourself to the limit, and be willing to get yourself back up," Luttrell said. "Her work ethic and her drive, and her want to become a better player, that really makes her one of the top forwards [on the 19U team]."



Team CO 19U teammates and coaches know Ross (right) sets a good example with her solid work ethic and drive to improve as a player. Photo by Katie Hinkle, SportsEngine

Though it's still early in the season, Ross has enjoyed the supportive and respectful atmosphere around her new team.

"It's just been, by far, the most positive and best team dynamic on and off the ice that I've been a part of in a long time," Ross said.

Ross and Luttrell are both committed to play hockey for St. Norbert College in Wisconsin.

Ross' goal for this season is to develop more as a player — whether it's on or off the ice — and she specifically wants to work on moving the puck faster, creating more opportunities on the power play, and focus on getting pucks out of the defensive zone.

She registered one goal and three assists to help the Team CO 19U squad finish third at the National Girls Hockey League Labor Day Face-off held Sept. 4-7 in Hartford, Connecticut. The season-opening event included some of the East Coast's top AAA competition.

If Ross stays healthy this season, she's going to finish in the top-three for scoring on the team, Bohn said.

"She's a very teachable and coachable athlete with just a lot of ambition to have fun in the game," Bohn said.

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