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Basketball: Ashley Joens – from WNBA to playing for Bay of Plenty

By Kaitlyn Morrell

Multimedia Journalist · Bay of Plenty Times · 1 Mar, 2025 12:04 PM · 5 mins to read

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Originally from Iowa City, Ashley Joens is a Tauranga Whai import for the 2024 season and is one of the top performers in the entire Tauhi League. Photo / Brad Pitman

Ashley Joens has played for WNBA teams the Dallas Wings, Las Vegas Aces and Phoenix Mercury. But in the WNBA off-season she had two simple requests – a league with a shorter season and a gym she could get in all the time. A team in Tauranga came to the party. Kaitlyn Morrell reports.

Ashley Joens had never been to New Zealand until she signed with the Tauranga Whai as an import for the 2024 season – and dominated the league.

She was the top point scorer, top 3-point scorer, one of the top offensive rebounders, and made it to the free-throw line more times than any other player in the entire Tauhi League.

Joens is originally from Iowa City. She grew up in tiny Solon, population 3000, and had always been surrounded by basketball because her dad was a coach.

"I'm the second of five girls, my older sister played and both my parents played in college.

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"I was just always around it and that's how I started. I had a little stuffed basketball when I was a baby and everyone always jokes, 'You came out of the womb playing basketball,'" Joens said.

College coaches recruited her from club basketball for Iowa State University, where she spent five years before getting drafted to the WNBA in 2023.



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Coming from a land-locked city like Iowa her favourite thing about New Zealand, especially living in Mount Maunganui, is the beach. Photo / Brad Pitman

Joens finished her college career as the all-time leading scorer with 3060 points, leading rebounder with 1391 rebounds, became the 14th division 1 player to reach a career milestone of 3000 points, and earned Big 12 Player of the Year after winning the Big 12 conference in her final year.



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Joens was drafted to the Dallas Wings in 2023 and was the 19th overall pick in the WNBA draft to kickstart her professional career.

"I got drafted to Dallas and was there for half the year, then went to Vegas, then back to Dallas and then to Phoenix. I was kind of all over the place but I think that helped me grow as a player and a person.

"I had gained so much experience going from team to team that I didn't feel like a rookie," Joens said.

"I think as a competitor you want to play against the best and you're always looking for different ways to get on the floor and learn from the players as well.

"You want to improve your game as well as get the opportunity to compete against the best players in the world," she said.

Signing with the Whai meant Joens would be based in Tauranga; training, playing, and living full-time in Mount Maunganui for the duration of the season that came to an end in December. The Tauranga Whai made the final for the first time and were crowned champions of the Taihi League.

"This was my first time in New Zealand. I didn't know where it was, to be honest. I knew it was somewhere by Australia but I didn't know exactly where on the map.



Joens made it to the free-throw line more times than any other player in the Taihi league. Photo / Brad Pitman

"Once I had signed with the Whai, I looked New Zealand up and did a tonne of research because I like to know where I'm going and what's around the area.

"I was super excited because dolphins are my favourite animal, and because it's summer here I really want to go and see one," Joens said.

"I like to hike, so have been going on little hikes up to waterfalls, which is so fun."

Coming from a landlocked place like Iowa, her favourite thing about New Zealand, especially living in Mount Maunganui, is the beach.

"In Iowa, you're surrounded by cornfields, here you're surrounded by water, big difference. We have more pigs than people, and you have more sheep than people.

"There aren't really beaches in Iowa, there are a couple of lakes, but in New Zealand having a beach so close by is nice."

Coming to the end of her season with the Whai, Joens has adjusted to the New Zealand lifestyle and picked up some Kiwi slang.

"My favourite thing you guys say is 'bugger off. I think it's so cool. I'm going to start using it when I get home. I love it."

To go from the WNBA to a New Zealand league only in its third season was a massive change, but Joens said the Whai ticked all her boxes and seemed like it would be a good fit.



Ashley Joens (back row, second from the left) and the 2024 Whai women's basketball team. Photo / Brad Pitman

"The competition itself intrigued me the most. I looked at [some of the other players](#) in the league and knew that it was going to be a lot of competition.

"It's a short season so you're going to play the same people over and over again, but you kind of get used to what their tendencies are and what they play like."

Joens said playing a full season for the Whai had been a great experience.

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"We've had a lot of ups and downs as a team, but I think that only helped us grow together. We had a rough patch at the beginning and that helped us towards the end of the season.

"I think just being around this team, these girls, the coaches, and everyone else, it really has just been a great experience."

Kaitlyn Morrell is a multimedia journalist for the *Bay of Plenty Times* and *Rotorua Daily Post*. She has lived in the region for several years and studied journalism at Massey University.



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