

NATALIE PORTMAN'S BARRIER-BREAKING SOCCER CLUB

Hottest Ticket

JUST OVER A YEAR AGO THE OSCAR-WINNING ACTRESS LAUNCHED AN L.A.-BASED WOMEN'S SOCCER TEAM. NOW ANGEL CITY FOOTBALL CLUB IS FILLING STADIUMS—AND BUILDING AN A-LIST FAN BASE *By* **GILLIAN TELLING**



in Hollywood!



The A-Team

“The excitement is palpable,” says Natalie Portman (left, in red, with Uzo Aduba, Jennifer Garner, Eva Longoria and Jessica Chastain in 2019). Inset: Angel City Football Club players huddle in April 2022.



There's no red carpet, movie marquee or haute couture ensembles. But when the women's Angel City Football Club players hit the field at BMO Stadium in Los Angeles, it's clear that stars have arrived. "The energy," says actress Natalie Portman, "is nothing short of electric."

It's a dream come true for Portman, who founded the Angel City Football Club—part of the National Women's Soccer League—with business partners Kara Nortman, Julie Uhrman and Alexis Ohanian in 2020. Since their first game in April 2022, matches have become celebratory the moment fans arrive—many wearing Angel City's official colors of asphalt (gray) and sol rosa (pink)—and become part of a party with group cheers, drumbeats and smoke blasts. "You can't not get swept up into it," says actress Uzo Aduba, 42, one of several celebrity investors. "Whether it's the drumming, the pink smoke or the fan group flags, it's just powerful."

Then there's fellow backer and fangirl Jennifer Garner, who shows up to games in a "Soccer Mom" shirt and hands out orange slices. "I love communal events that make L.A. feel like a small town, and our home games are that," says the actress, 51. "It's like being in on something together."

That sense of community is the goal for Portman, who spent the early days of the pandemic creating the team. "I never thought I'd be involved in a professional sports team," says the Oscar winner and activist, 42. "But when I saw my son [Aleph, 12] watching the 2019 Women's World Cup with as much enthusiasm and passion as he did the Men's World Cup, it made me think what an enormously positive culture shift it would be if the next generation looked up to female athletes the way they look up to male athletes."

She also vowed to get the players—superstars like Christen Press and Ali Riley—paid fairly, through salary and sponsorship and endorsement deals. "We're all united by what the future for women can look like," says Press, 34. They're determined to have players make what male counterparts do. "We wanted to do two things: pay players what they're worth, and prove that a women's club can be worth as much as Liverpool," says Nortman, 47, referring to the English team. Adds celeb investor and actress Sophia Bush, 41: "When you break down what female players are bringing in, in terms of audiences, it's past time."



GETTING INTO TEAM SPIRIT



STAR INVESTORS

Billie Jean King
"We're at a tipping point with women's sports," says the equal-pay pioneer. "Being part of the AC ownership team was an easy yes."

Sophia Bush
"To see women smashing records in ratings, attendance and profit while being categorically underinvested in is breathtaking," says the actress.



Gabrielle Union
"There's a lot of room for growth," says the actress (with husband Dwyane Wade and daughter Kaavia). "It's time to put our money where our mouth is."



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1. Team owners Kara Nortman, Natalie Portman and Julie Uhrman.
2. The Angel City Football Club team, which includes U.S. National Team players Christen Press and Alyssa Thompson.
3. Angel City has partnered with the L.A. LGBT Center since 2020. "Everyone belongs here," says Uhrman.
4. "The supporters section's passion is so infectious!" says Sophia Bush of the team's die-hard fans.



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Giving back is also key: 10 percent of every sponsorship dollar goes to the community, and to date they've partnered with DoorDash to combat food insecurity, delivering more than a million meals to locals in need. Turning a profit is important, and Uhrman, 49, says they've done that: "We have 17,000 season ticket holders, we pack the 22,000-seat stadium, and we have sponsors. We're proving to shareholders women's sports are good business."

Shareholders include Hollywood heavyweights Gabrielle Union, Jessica Chastain, America Ferrera, Christina Aguilera and Eva Longoria; star athletes Abby Wambach, Shawn Johnson East, Lindsey Vonn and Mia Hamm; and tennis legend Billie Jean King and her wife, Ilana Kloss. "The first time I went, I was blown away by the amount of little girls with their favorite players' jerseys," says Longoria, 48, "and seeing their faces as they watch these amazing athletes, thinking, 'I could do that. I could be that.'" Meanwhile, "I love seeing the 15-year-old boys in Angel City jerseys cheering on the best athletes in the world who happen to be women," says Nortman. And inclusivity is crucial. "When I played growing up, you could count on one hand the number of Black girls I'd see at tournaments," says Union, 50. "It's awesome to see the sport grow and become way more diverse."

This expanding impact is one of the "great joys of my life," Portman says as Angel City prepares to face the Portland Thorns at their Oct. 15 season closer. "It's been incredibly rewarding. And it's still amazing when you hear kids saying that their Christen Press jersey is just as important as their LeBron James jersey." ●

Jennifer Garner

"Women's sports are breath-catching and powerful," says the star (with player Ali Riley). "The more success we see, the more success we will see."

Eva Longoria

"I met Natalie through our advocacy for equal pay, so I was like, 'Yeah, I'll invest to accelerate change for women in sports!'" says the actress.

America Ferrera

"I'm thrilled to bring this to my home city. I'm also proud of ACFC's commitment to giving back," says the *Barbie* star.

Uzo Aduba

"Women's sports are thriving," says the Emmy winner. "When someone is given time and opportunity, anything is possible."

