

OTHER COLLEGES

# Central grads Hawkins and Tucker help boost Sweet 16-bound Drury women's soccer team

*Panthers' leading scorers each studying for careers to help children express themselves*



by Mary Ellen Chiles  
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Holland Hawkins, left, and Kourtney Tucker played soccer together at Central High for two years before teaming up again across the street at Drury University. (Photo by Mary Ellen Chiles).

Holland Hawkins and Kourtney Tucker rank among the all-time best in Central High School girls' soccer history.

Across the street at Drury University, they've continued to find the net.

Holland and Tucker have combined for 17 goals to help vault the Panthers, who have reached the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Division II women's soccer tournament.

Fifth-seeded Drury (16-4-2), making its first appearance since 2007, will face No. 3 seed Grand Valley State (14-1-7) on Sunday in a Midwest Regional Championship in Allendale, Michigan.

The Panthers upset fourth-seeded Northern Michigan 4-1 and No. 1 seed and host Ashland 1-0 in Ohio last weekend to advance. They'll make the 650-mile trip to face a Michigan-based Grand Valley State team making its 19th regional championship appearance.

Tucker, a senior midfielder who earned All-Midwest Region honors, said lengthy bus trips give players time to study for class on the road.

"You get used to it," Tucker said. "You have to in order to stay on top of your classes."

## Central connection



Kourtney Tucker chose the Panthers because of Drury's proximity to family. (Photo by Drury University)

Tucker and Hawkins were two years apart at Central — a school that plays its home games at Drury — each etching their names in the Springfield school's record book.

Hawkins left Central with 76 career goals, a mark that ranks 26th all-time in Missouri girls' soccer history. That number would likely be higher if not for a canceled 2020 pandemic season. Her older sister, Aspen Hawkins, still has the Central scoring record with 118, which ranks No. 23 in the state.

Tucker, a 2020 Central graduate, ranks third behind the Hawkins sisters on the school's all-time scoring list.

Success on the pitch isn't the only thing the Drury duo has in common. They share an interest in helping children learn to express themselves.

Tucker, an only child, has wanted to be a teacher since high school.

"I've always really liked coaching and helping kids," she said.

She's majoring in elementary education and minoring in special education. She relishes the chance to help kids with different abilities.

"Whether you teach SPED or not, you're going to have kids who are in SPED and need extra services in your classroom," she said.

Tucker spent last spring student teaching at Republic Elementary and noticed some fourth graders struggled with reading skills. Tucker figured it was because her students missed a lot of kindergarten due to COVID. She helped students fill in gaps in vocabulary and reading comprehension.

"I loved it," she said.



Holland Hawkins played at UMKC for two years before returning home to Springfield. (Photo by Drury University)

Hawkins studies psychology and special education, and is considering further studies in speech pathology. She is already helping children acquire language skills while working in her mom's day care during school breaks. Some of the kids have autism and struggle with verbal expression.

"When they can't talk, they get frustrated, and they don't know how to express what they need," said Hawkins, who has a team-high 11 goals this season. "It makes me happy to see them be able to express their

emotions.”

Hawkins, who transferred to Drury this season from Division I Kansas City, has plenty of experience communicating with all kinds of learners: She’s the third of nine kids, ranging in age from 18 to 28.

## **A different kind of coach**



Drury head coach Justin Olson recently won his 100th game as a collegiate head coach. (Photo by Mary Ellen Chiles)

Drury head coach Justin Olson stresses open communication, especially when players are upset about playing time or other team matters.

“We want them to be honest,” Olson said. “It’s not the principal’s office: This is the coaches’ office.”

It seems to work. In 2020 Olson took over a team that had gone winless in 2018 and won just three games in 2019. In the past five years, Drury has gone 55-20-19.

“I think the biggest thing is we don’t want to coach from fear,” Olson said. “We don’t want them to walk on eggshells.”

When Olson played at Southern Indiana, his coach was more of the “drill sergeant” type.

“He commanded respect, he was loud, he was scary, and you bought into that,” Olson said.

“But if we did that approach here, a lot of (players) are going to shut down.”

Some athletes do thrive off that motivation. Olson doesn’t consider this as a generational change.

“I’m 39 years old. I don’t coach the same way I did when I was 29,” he said. “I feel like I’ve adapted.”

To be sure, he and his staff still have high expectations, the players said.

“They never let our standards drop,” Tucker said.

“They believed in us a lot,” Hawkins said, “They kept us pushing when we got into a couple slumps in the season.”

## Support system



Josh Lewis-Evans worked as a grad assistant for both soccer teams, earning a master’s in communication this year. (Photo by Mary Ellen Chiles)

His colleague agrees. Josh Lewis-Evans, a London native, played soccer at Drury, then helped coach both the men's team and the women's team as a graduate assistant. He's now one of Olson's assistants, alongside MacKenzie Serrano. Nico Helin volunteers as a goalkeeper coach.

"I don't think it's necessarily just being positive," Lewis-Evans said. "It's them buying into a mindset that we'll have their back and support them."

And the players support each other.

"We have a really loud sideline, but it's amazing," Hawkins said. "They hype us up and we feed off them."

They don't all have to be best friends.

"We always tell them, like, 'Hey, you're not going to have 30 bridesmaids from your soccer team,'" Olson said. "We get that, but all you have is each other."

The Panthers play Grand Valley State at noon on Sunday in Allendale, Michigan. You can **stream the game on YouTube**.



## **Mary Ellen Chiles**

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**More by Mary Ellen Chiles**

