

Katie Sowers becomes the first woman to coach in a Super Bowl

newsela.com/read/super-bowl-woman-coach/id/2001004891



Katie Sowers, an assistant offensive coach with the San Francisco 49ers, looks on during warm-ups before a football game against the Atlanta Falcons at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, December 15, 2019.

Photo: Lachlan Cunningham/Getty Images

By Adam Kilgore, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff

Published:02/02/2020

Word Count:1459

Recommended for:Upper Elementary School - Middle School

Text Level:6

In the first preseason game of his first NFL training camp, Kendrick Bourne dropped two passes and returned to the San Francisco 49ers sideline sullen, a mood his new teammates had rarely seen the buoyant rookie in. He sat on the bench and dropped his head.

Up walked one of his coaches, a low-ranking staffer and a fellow newcomer to the 49ers, who told him, "Live in the moment. Treat it how you've been playing all your life. You're supposed to be here."

The message lifted Bourne and stayed with him, and a couple of plays later, he made his first catch. He finished the game with a strong performance, and would make the 2017 team as an undrafted free agent. In the three years since, he has carved out a role in San Francisco's offense, and when Bourne looks back, he views the coach's message as a pivot.

"I always think about that," Bourne said. "That was just a big moment in my life. It was her first year, my first year. She was finding her way, I was finding my way. I just felt like her giving me that tip helped me make my way."

It was a common NFL occasion, a coach helping a young player through a test, and yet it was unlike almost any interaction on an NFL sideline. Look again at the pronoun: The coach's name was Katie Sowers. She was not just a striver, she was a trailblazer, a fierce former quarterback who saw a path when one did not really exist.

And on Sunday, February 2, Sowers became the first woman to coach in the Super Bowl. The 49ers played against the Kansas City Chiefs, with Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes delivering a pair of late touchdown passes as part of a 21-point outburst. Though the two teams were tied in the first half, and the Chiefs trailed by 10 points in the fourth quarter, Kansas City came back to beat the San Francisco 49ers 31-20 in a dramatic late turnaround in Super Bowl LIV on a picture-perfect South Florida evening. Though Sowers' team ultimately did not take home the trophy, it was nonetheless a big night for her.

One of three women who have full-time NFL coaching jobs (the Tampa Bay Buccaneers employ the other two), she is an assistant offensive coach on 49ers head coach Kyle Shanahan's staff. Her job consists mostly of grunt work. She helps organize practices, and she spends late nights drawing plays on cards for the scout team and early mornings prepping drills. She is living her dream.

"I'm waiting for someone to tell me this is all a joke, and they're going to be like, 'Psych — you're not really there, you're not really a football coach,'" Sowers said. "It's one of those things that, you really start to look around you and take advantage of every single day."

Around the office and among players, the distinction of her gender has vanished, and Sowers is just Coach Katie to them. A common theme is how her presence makes them enjoy coming to work more. Wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders called her "one of the coolest coaches I've been around," wide receivers coach Wes Welker extolled her work ethic, and other coaches find more work for her, because they know she can handle any task.

"The best compliment — I don't know if this is right to say — she's like one of the guys in there," 49ers General Manager John Lynch said. "It's awesome, it's inspired us. I've got three daughters, and I think it's really cool for girls to realize they can dream to do this."

Sowers, 33, has gained a small degree of fame. Monday night, at Super Bowl week's first media availability, reporters huddled around her for an hour. She answered openly and

comfortably, understanding and explaining her significance without self-promotion. She filmed a commercial this year for Microsoft that will air during the Super Bowl. "I'm not just here to be the token female," she says in the ad, "I'm here to help us win."

Her first step into the NFL came in 2016, during training camp with the Atlanta Falcons, and had been years in the making, spurred by a chance encounter.

Sowers loved football as a kid growing up in Kansas, even without opportunity to play, and as an adult she played quarterback in the Women's Football Alliance, an unglamorous league in which players pay to participate. She also worked as the general manager of the league's Kansas City Titans, and at the same time coached girls basketball. One of her players was the daughter of Chiefs General Manager Scott Pioli, and Sowers introduced herself.

"I was definitely nervous," Sowers said. "I knew who he was. I didn't want him to think I just wanted to get to know him to try to ask a favor. But then I really got to know him. I started to realize I was stereotyping him as much as I was worried about him stereotyping me. When I opened the communication, I found he was an amazing mentor and almost a second father."

The Chiefs fired Pioli in January 2013, but he and Sowers maintained a relationship. Her desire to work in football only strengthened, but coaching in the NFL did not strike her as an option. In 2014, when Sowers saw former WNBA player Becky Hammon coaching for the NBA's San Antonio Spurs, it hit her, no matter how improbable it seemed — she could coach in the NFL.

"Football has always been my favorite sport, but I never thought it was possible. As open-minded as I was, I never saw it," she said. "... It cleared a path for me. Seeing that triggered something in my mind. She's breaking barriers. She's doing something outside of what we see as the norm. And it helped me to think outside."

Hammon's example made Sowers redouble her devotion. She self-taught herself, devouring every football book she could find, especially Bill Walsh's tomes on coaching.

"I knew I had a long road ahead of me if I wanted to be an NFL coach," Sowers said. "I didn't have the opportunity to play on a college team. I didn't have the opportunity to break down film. I didn't have the opportunity to network like a lot of people did. But I was up for the challenge."

Pioli resurfaced as a front office assistant with the Atlanta Falcons, and he badgered his bosses to bring Sowers on. In 2016, she received a chance as an offensive intern during training camp, working with wide receivers coach Raheem Morris on organizing and conducting practice drills. Once the season started, Sowers worked in the coaches' office.

"I was nervous, but I was excited," Sowers said. "I knew I belonged, and that's what was most important. If I didn't feel like I belonged, I would have never stepped foot in that room. I knew I was going to face difficulties, but we all do. We all face them. It's part of your path."

Shanahan was the Falcons' offensive coordinator, and he viewed Sowers as an asset. Early in training camp at a coaches' meeting, one Falcons assistant swore and then blurted, "Oh, sorry, Katie," and she replied, "Why would you say sorry?"

"You start to realize, that's what made it work," Shanahan said. "We could all be ourselves. It didn't matter that a girl was in there, or a guy. She was just another intern trying to get a job. Katie made everyone so comfortable in that way, I never even thought about it."

When the 49ers hired Shanahan, Sowers asked if she could be a training camp intern again on his new staff. Shanahan hired her under the 49ers' Bill Walsh Minority Fellowship, and at the end of that summer, passing game coordinator Mike LaFleur approached Shanahan. "Katie's helped me so much," LaFleur said. "Is there any way we can just keep her here?"

In the seasons since, Sowers has become a fixture: "I just feel like she's on her way to the top," Bourne said.

It is still surreal for her to be here, especially considering the opponent. She has the Kansas City skyline tattooed around the word "home" on her left arm.

Sowers hopes girls and women saw her at the Super Bowl and felt what she felt when she watched Hammon on the Spurs' bench. One day, she hopes, a woman will coach at the Super Bowl without attracting extra attention. That day hasn't arrived, but Sowers plans to work for it to come.

"You have to have a first for everything to create change," Sowers said, "but I want to make sure I'm not the last."

Reproduced with permission. Copyright © 2020 Washington Post. All rights reserved.