

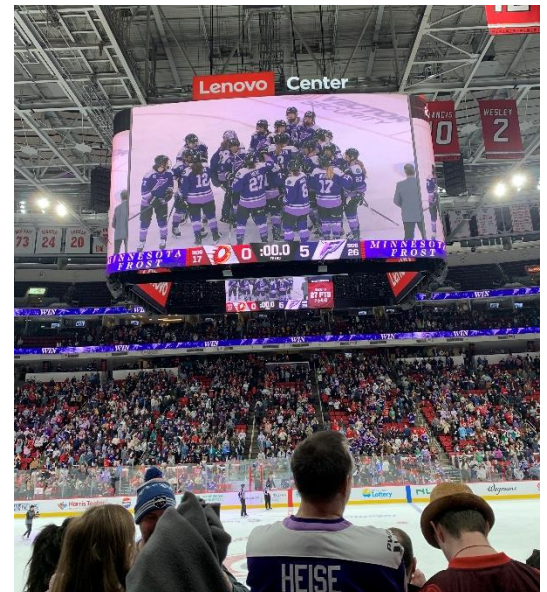
Play Like A Girl:

What the Rise of the Professional Women's Hockey League Means for Women's Hockey and Why it Matters



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On March 7th of this year, I, along with my friends Chayse and Cooper, made the long drive from Johnson City, Tennessee to Raleigh, North Carolina. It was a tiring and difficult trip, with a minor car accident to make matters worse, but we felt it was all worth it to reach our destination. We were on our way the Lenovo Center to watch our first in-person PWHL game. The Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) had been an interest of mine since the league had formed a year before, and I had the merch and names of my favorite players to prove it. The game was a part of a tour where teams traveled all over the United States and Canada, allowing those who didn't live near a team to watch a game.



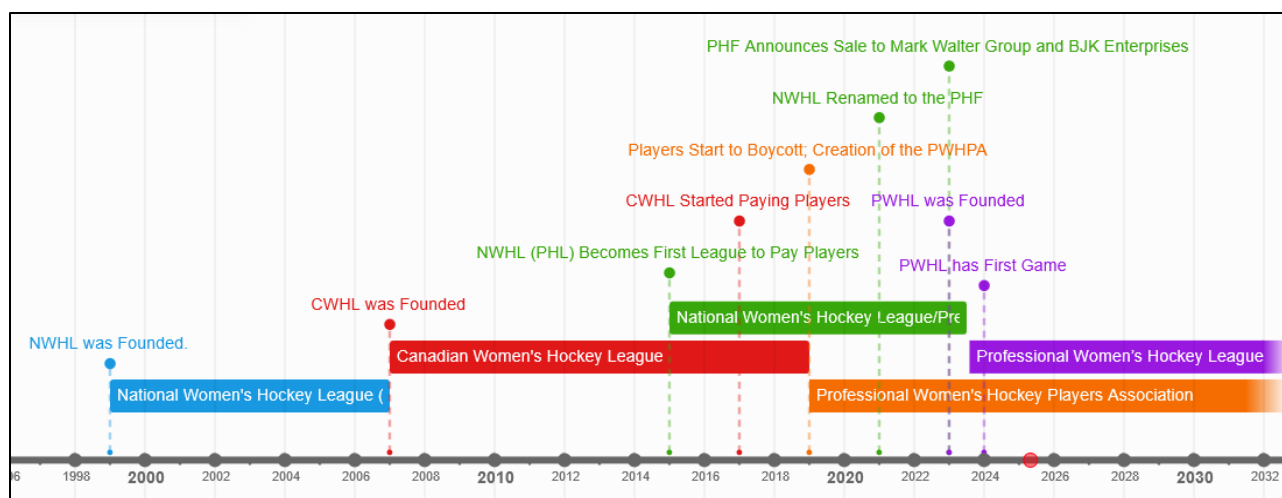
A photo taken by the author at the PWHL Raleigh game, March 7th, 2025.

It was Minnesota Frost vs Ottawa Charge, and the Frost won 5-0 (Something I was very excited about as a Frost fan). What I was most interested in, though, was the sheer amount of people there. The merch attendant told my group that they were almost sold out of everything because they had underestimated the number of customers they would have. During the game they made an announcement stating that over 10,000 fans were in attendance, over half of the arena's capacity.

I had never been one to watch sports for fun. I liked going to a high school football game or my older sister's basketball games well enough, but it had never been something I actively chose to seek out on my own. So, I wasn't really sure why I was so interested in the PWHL when I first heard about it through a random news article. I had always liked hockey in an abstract way—in that I never actually watched the games and didn't know the rules—but I had never been as interested in men's professional hockey as I was for this women's league that, at that point, didn't even exist yet. It turns out I wasn't the only one who was interested, the PWHL has become more popular and mainstream in its fifteen-month existence than any other women's hockey league. It made me wonder, what about the PWHL is so enticing?

Background

Before this league, the North American world of women's hockey was small and unsustainable. There were very few options for women hockey players to play besides college teams and the Olympics, and the options that did exist only paid players through occasional sponsorships and stipends. In 2015, the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF, formerly known as the National Women's Hockey League) became the first women's league to pay its players' salaries, but many players were still unsatisfied with the conditions and organization of the league.



A timeline leading up to the formation of the PWHL

The PWHL was formed after the PHF was sold and merged with the Professional Women's Hockey Players' Association (PWHPA), a group of players that were boycotting the previous leagues in hopes of creating one that was better and more unified. The PWHL's creation marks not only one of the first times players have received reasonable salaries and benefits, but also the first time a women's league has had the funding and organization necessary to help it succeed. This organization includes a player's union organized by the PWHPA, allowing players to be more involved in the league and prevent the dissatisfaction they experienced in the past.

The PWHL was officially established in August 2023, with the inaugural season starting on January 1, 2024 and ending in May with Minnesota Frost winning the first ever championship trophy. The league currently has six teams, with a confirmed expansion team for the 2025-2026 season in Vancouver and another that has yet to be announced but is suspected to be in Seattle.

Importance

The PWHL is more than just another professional league, it marks a significant shift in the perception of women's sports. In the past few years, there has been a major increase in the

demand for women's sports. Women's hockey is no different. The immediate success and popularity the PWHL have experienced in such a short time shows the worth of a professional women's league that receives the proper investment and promotion. Over the course of two seasons, the PWHL has sold out multiple arenas and has had over one million fans attend games. The league also set multiple attendance records, including the global record attendance for a women's hockey game with 21,105 people in attendance at a game in Montreal. This isn't even accounting for the fans who watch the televised games or via the free livestreams provided on the PWHL YouTube page. The league's inaugural game received 2.9 million viewers on Canadian broadcasters, and over 130 thousand livestream viewers. This amount of success has not only shown the desire for women's hockey, but the potential for growth and sustainability for a bigger and better league.

This growth and visibility is important not only for the current women hockey players, but for the upcoming ones as well. If the PWHL will be remembered for anything, it will be for the lasting impact it had on the young girls watching. At every game, you are sure to see a wave of girls wearing their favorite player's



Source: The Colgate Maroon News

jersey, holding signs with phrases like “Future PWHL player” and “Play like a girl” on them. I know from experience; I saw dozens of them at the game I attended. These young girls are

learning not only that they can aspire to be a professional hockey player, but that they can do it in a women's league that is both successful and beloved.

However, it isn't just girls that are inspired by this amazing league. The PWHL is also a source of inspiration for the LGBTQ+ community as well. Women's sports have historically been more inclusive than their male counterparts, and the PWHL is no exception. The PWHL has over twenty out queer players, and several of these players are in relationships with either a teammate or a member of another team in the league. This has led to the PWHL becoming a safe environment for queer fans of the sport in a way other professional sports have not. While male players in the NHL (National Hockey League) may be refusing to participate in their team's pride events, queer fans can feel comfort in knowing that there are more than enough players in the PWHL that support the LGBTQ+ community even when they don't have to.

Criticism

While the PWHL is becoming increasingly popular, the league, much like its predecessors, comes with its own set of criticisms and challenges. Many critics came before the league had even played its first game due to the disbanding of the PHF. After being bought out, the PHF was completely gutted to allow the PWHL to become the new unified league they were aiming for. As a result, fans were understandably hesitant to celebrate the formation of a new league at the expense of the old one, especially because the PWHL seemed to make a point of erasing the history of the PHF while celebrating the PWHPA.

One common criticism in this vein is that the PWHL spent the entirety of its inaugural season without team names, instead using only the name of the team's city. Some fans felt that choosing to play an entire season nameless instead of using the names of the PHF teams that the

PWHL had bought the rights of to be an insult. Many also point to this as proof of another common criticism that the debut of the PWHL was rushed and inadequately planned. The naming of the championship trophy was similarly conscientious. The PHF's trophy was referred to as the Isobel Cup, named after Isobel Stanley who helped popularize the sport of hockey and is one of the first known women to play the sport. The PWHL's trophy, meanwhile, is called the Walter Cup after the league's main financial backers, the Walter family. This renaming meant that the trophy no longer was a tribute to a major figure in the history of women's hockey, and some fans found this to be distasteful. Although these criticisms are not widespread opinions and fans have become less vocal about them, they are still notable in showing how the league's "clean-slate" approach might not have appealed to everyone.

Another significant criticism to address is the way the PWHL handles players with problematic views. While the PWHL is a very inclusive league who makes a clear effort to support their players and fans who are minorities, it is impossible for there to not be some differing opinions. At the beginning of the 2024-2025 season, the Minnesota Frost faced backlash after choosing to draft Britta Curl-Salemme, a player that is controversial due to her history of homophobic, transphobic, and racist social media activity. Fans were upset that a league with so dedicated to diversity would allow someone with those views to be a part of the league. Curl-Salemme has since posted an apology, but many fans found it to be insincere and still feel betrayed by the league for tolerating this type of behavior.

Future

While the PWHL is not a perfect league by any means, it has the potential to become something much greater than anything that has come before it. The PWHL is still in

development, however, I don't think that fans of this league are overestimating its stability. With the amount of dedication, support, and love the league has received in the short time it has existed, it is sure to grow. So go buy a jersey, tune into a live stream, and enjoy the show. You don't want to miss watching what this league is going to become.

About the Author

Heidi Nantz is an undergraduate student at East Tennessee State University majoring in English with a minor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She enjoys watching women's hockey, reading weird novels, and petting every cat she can find. She can be contacted at nantzhc@etsu.edu