

‘We made it’: The Whitecaps’ rise to the model of success for the NWHL



By Heather Rule (/author/heather-rule/) Mar 5, 2019



Brooke White-Lancette paused for a moment as she sat on a bench outside the locker rooms at Ridder Arena before a Minnesota Whitecaps practice in February.

She made it through most of an interview with *The Athletic*, but she needed a little extra time to compose herself after the last question: “Is there a certain moment, anything you’ll look back on and really just remember from this year?”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“I just think ... the first game, realizing that ... we’re here,” White-Lancette said, pausing as the emotions bubbled up. “We made it and everyone got to witness that first, inaugural game.

“It was really, really special. For all of us.”

That really-special first game turned into quite the impressive debut season in the five-team National Women’s Hockey League for the Whitecaps. They bookended the season with winning streaks of six and five games to overcome a 1-4 stretch in the middle, finish 12-4 and claim the NWHL regular-season title.

The Whitecaps clinched the No. 1 seed and home-ice advantage in the Isobel Cup Playoffs with a sweep on the final weekend, getting a 2-1 victory at the Boston Pride on Saturday and a 4-1 win over the Connecticut Whale on Sunday. The Whitecaps will host the winner of Thursday’s play-in game between the Metropolitan Riveters and Connecticut at TRIA Rink in St. Paul at 1:30 p.m. on Sunday.

The Whitecaps, led by co-head coaches Ronda Engelhardt and Jack Brodt, have a deep roster of players, including 19 from Minnesota. Elk River’s Jonna Curtis was the team’s leading scorer this season with 8 goals and 19 points in 16 games. She’s followed by Olympian — and new NBCSN NHL analyst — Kendall Coyne Schofield with 7 goals and 7 assists in 13 games played this season. Defenseman Amanda Boulier, a Connecticut native who played for the Whale last season, had 5 goals and 13 points.

In goal, they’re led by top netminder Amanda Leveille (11-4) with her 2.09 GAA and .923 save percentage along with two shutouts. Eight Whitecaps made the NWHL All-Star Game, with defenseman Lee Stecklein serving as a team captain.



Minnesota Whitecaps

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Regular Season Champions!!! #1 seed for the Minnesota Whitecaps #StateOfHockey  pic.twitter.com/kBtGEDMh0m

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The beginning of the Whitecaps traces back to 2004 when, the story goes, Winny Brodt Brown's dad, Jack, and Dwayne Schmidgall started it to allow their daughters to continue playing hockey post-college. And it's really that simple, Brodt Brown said.

"We were playing at the highest level we could," said Brodt Brown, who's a Whitecaps captain and defenseman. "Graduated from college, and there was nowhere for us to go."

Brodt Brown and White-Lancette are the only two original Whitecaps still on the team. White-Lancette grew up in California and played boys' hockey. They've been skating together since they were teenagers. Actually, their paths crossed even before they knew each other.

Brodt Brown recalled going to an audition at Parade Ice Arena in Minneapolis for a skating double in the first "Mighty Ducks" movie. She didn't know of any other girl hockey players in the state at the time.

"Then I heard this other girl had gotten the part," Brodt Brown said. "Then we meet six months later at the first-ever U.S. national camp.

"So Brooke got the skating double part in the 'Mighty Ducks.' So we give her a hard time about the flying-V and stuff."

The duo became friends as they skated and played hockey at camps, plus White-Lancette came to Minnesota in the summers to train. She moved to Minnesota after college and is a personal trainer and coach of the girls' hockey team at Cretin-Derham Hall.

Now professional hockey players, Brodt Brown is glad to have the respect from the league. Her dad's goal was to showcase the strong talent pool in Minnesota. She said she tells White-Lancette all the time how competitive they still are on the ice, "because otherwise we wouldn't

still be playing at our age.” Brodt Brown just turned 41, and White-Lancette will turn 40 at the end of August.

They’ve had plenty of fans cheering them and their teammates on, too. The fan support was a huge positive for the Whitecaps in their first year.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” Engelhardt said. “This is a new thing. We didn’t know how it would do.”

Very well, actually.



The Whitecaps sold out all eight regular-season games at TRIA, a rink that holds 1,200. It’s the first time an NWHL team has sold out every single scheduled game. Players were very appreciative of all the support.

“It makes a difference,” Stecklein said. “The other teams like it, too. They’re not used to this.

“It’s showcasing women’s hockey, and we’re really proud we get to do that here.”

The sellouts were the most impactful part of the season for Brodt Brown.

“Just because it’s pretty neat that that many people care,” Brodt Brown said. “When I started playing, people didn’t want girls playing.

“Every time I just look up in the stands, it’s an incredible feeling to see all the support that we’ve had. It’s just great for the NWHL to have that.”

The sold-out crowds and support for the Whitecaps organization wasn’t a surprise at all to NWHL founder and commissioner, Dani Rylan. They knew fans in the State of Hockey had a love of the game, which is why they looked to expand in Minnesota, she said. But one thing certainly surprised them.

“I think we were all very shocked that we sold out every single regular-season game in advance, which was definitely a happy development,” Rylan said.

Before each home weekend series at TRIA, Whitecaps games sold out even further in advance as the season went on, according to Rylan, ranging from the day before the season opener to almost a month before the regular-season home finale. Tickets for Sunday’s playoff game were still available as of this writing.

It’s created a demand for professional women’s hockey in Minnesota. Brodt Brown said she heard from people all the time reaching out to try and get Whitecaps tickets.

“A unique thing is, we’ve also never had to open a box office at TRIA Rink,” Rylan said. “That is a first for our league.”

In addition to the booming ticket sales setting a new precedent for the league, the Whitecaps are also the first team in the NWHL to make a profit. Rylan spoke enthusiastically of the revenue streams, including ticket sales, “merchandise flying off the shelf” and local sponsorship sales. Selling one \$12,000 sponsorship equals selling 600 tickets, or half of TRIA Rink, Rylan said.

While happy with the financial success, there’s still room to grow. Looking ahead to next season, they’ll look to add media partners. This season, various games were broadcast on Twitter and YouTube.

“We’d love to align with a regional sports net in the area,” Rylan said.

Transitioning from an independent team to a professional team netted some differences for the Whitecaps and the NWHL as it expanded outside the northeastern part of the country. White-Lancette notices the more consistent practices, something that comes with being professionals and having that commitment.



Minnesota Whitecaps

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Co-captains Brooke White and Winny Brodt-Brown [#Whitecaps](#)
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The depth of the roster makes the practices competitive, too, with so many talented players competing for lineup spots. White-Lancette called the practices “gritty.”

“But that’s what makes all of us better,” White-Lancette said.

The other big change in the NWHL was the travel. In the past, the league’s four teams — Boston, Buffalo Beauts, Metropolitan Riveters, and Connecticut — had only played one game per weekend.

“It’s pretty fascinating because that is a common assumption that the travel expenses would go up,” Rylan said. “But we got creative with our scheduling.”

This year with Minnesota in the mix, the NWHL switched to two games per weekend. So, teams came to Minnesota for a pair of games to, in a sense, kill two birds with one stone. Travel was done strategically, according to Chris Botta, an NWHL communications consultant. The Whitecaps had four weekend road trips playing two games against the same opponent and played a pair of weekend road series with a game each against Boston and Connecticut, their home rinks less than a three-hour drive apart. The result money-wise was a Minnesota budget that was comparable to the budgets of the four northeast NWHL teams, Rylan said.

NWHL players this season, all with one-year contracts, received salaries ranging from \$3,000 to \$10,000. The NWHL hasn’t yet announced the free agency dates for the upcoming offseason. As far as future expansion, Rylan sees the depth of women’s hockey in the country, particularly in the Midwest.

Brodthorn also sees how fast women’s hockey has grown. She could envision NWHL expansion in the Midwest, throwing out cities like Chicago, Detroit or Winnipeg in conversations, to potentially develop some closer rivalries.

“Anything’s possible,” Brodthorn said. “We just need support.”

White-Lancette and Brodthorn have been teammates and friends for more than 25 years. They each have two sons, and Brodthorn said she and White-Lancette are going to be together a lot longer as their boys play hockey.

They can also say their moms are professional hockey players, too.

“Sometimes we kind of pinch each other,” White-Lancette said. “Gosh, Winny, can you believe it? We’re still going strong, and still love it.”