

# 'It gave me chills': Vignettes from the Whitecaps' first weekend in the NWHL



By Heather Rule (/author/heather-rule/) Oct 9, 2018



Before the clock started Saturday to signal the Minnesota Whitecaps' official entrance into the National Women's Hockey League, there was the ceremonial puck drop. Jack Brodt and Dwayne Schmidgall, co-founders of the original Whitecaps, did the honors to usher in professional women's hockey to the state of Minnesota.

In her black uniform with white lettering, Whitecaps captain and original member Winny Brodt Brown skated over to that red carpet for the ceremonial faceoff with her father. Some might say it was a moment 14 years in the making.

"I'm not an emotional person, but that was pretty emotional for me, seeing Dwayne and my dad out there," said Brodt Brown, who still seemed to be holding back some emotion hours later during the postgame news conference.

Though just playing a game in a professional capacity garnered enough excitement in itself, the Whitecaps didn't disappoint the sold-out, standing-room-only crowd of 1,200 who packed the nooks and crannies of TRIA Rink in St. Paul. Their first game as part of the NWHL was a 4-0 shutout victory over the defending-champion Metropolitan Riveters.

Brodt Brown, 40, who's played hockey since she was four years old with the boys, finally took the ice with her teammates as professional players.

"It gave me chills, and I still have chills right now," Brodt Brown said after the game. "It's almost like that shaky feeling where you're like, 'Wow, is this happening?' Obviously when you start playing, it all goes away, and it's all good."

The Whitecaps showed off their speed from the drop of the puck. Katie McGovern scored the first goal for the Whitecaps with a one-timer out front on a pass from Jonna Curtis. It came on the power play with 6:31 to go in the first period. The fans went crazy when the puck went in, and the sound system blared stadium-rock staple "Rock and Roll Part 2" so everyone could chant "Hey!" in rhythm.



**Minnesota Whitecaps**

@WhitecapsHockey

Minnesota Goal!!! Scored by @katie\_mcgov13!!!

🍏 @Jonnacurtis6

1-0 Minnesota 2:24 left P **1**

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Indeed, fans were excited, and the noise didn't stop after a goal.

"During the TV timeouts, I couldn't even talk because it was just so loud," said co-head coach Ronda Curtin Engelhardt.

Defenseman Lee Stecklein, a Roseville native and former Gopher, called the atmosphere electric from the moment they stepped onto the ice.

"I didn't expect any less from the State of Hockey," Stecklein said.

And so began a new era for the Whitecaps and women's hockey in Minnesota.

Hours earlier, some eager fans waited outside the rink entrance before the doors opened at about 3 p.m. for the 4 p.m. start. The bleachers filled in quickly, and the arena was nearly packed by the time the two teams hit the ice for warm-ups. Whitecaps starting center and former Gopher Hannah Brandt called it "everything we dreamed of, for sure."

Among the Minnesota hockey fans was a group of 27 girls youth hockey players from various age groups and their parents from the Austin Youth Hockey Association who made the journey up I-35 from southeastern Minnesota. Their girls' hockey practices get started later this week, according to Cory Squier, president of the association. The Whitecaps joining the NWHL is a cool thing to have in Minnesota, and they wanted to bring their girls to St. Paul to support the new team, Squier said.

"I just think that's the goal here, just to see the opportunity that hard work will pay off and there's an opportunity for girls, not just boys," Squier said.

Brenna Haedt, one of the Austin 12U players, sported a red Austin Packers hockey jersey and said she was "super excited" to see the Whitecaps play, because there were only a couple professional women's hockey teams before.

"I've seen a bunch of Wild games, but I've never seen a professional women's game," Haedt said.

It's inspiring, Brodt Brown said, to see all the girls in the stands knowing they could be out there one day.

“And that’s probably the biggest thing from this whole thing is that these girls have people to look up to and say, ‘Hey, that girl does it. I can do it,’” Brodt Brown said.

A couple of young women from Minneapolis were also pumped to see women’s hockey at a professional level. Liz Niemer and Grace Flinsch found spots standing along the boards behind one of the goals, looking toward the opposite end of the tinted smart-glass windows, to watch the debut game.

Niemer had attended plenty of women’s hockey games in the past, including the Gophers and the then-independent Whitecaps. She was excited to see the Whitecaps take the next step and play against other players of the same caliber, she said.

“It’s Minnesota, the State of Hockey. We should have a professional women’s hockey team,” Niemer said, matter-of-factly.

Like many others, Niemer is happy to see this move to professional hockey for the Whitecaps, so that playing in college or the Olympics isn’t the end of the road for women’s hockey players.

Niemer loved seeing the high level of play, especially since “the starting lineups had four gold medalists on the ice,” she said. Those included Kendall Coyne Schofield, Brandt and Stecklein for the Whitecaps and Amanda Kessel for the Riveters. All four were part of Team USA that defeated Canada for the gold medal in February.



The scene at TRIA Rink for the Whitecaps' NWHL debut. (Photo: Kirsten Burton / NWHL)

“They should have this avenue — come on! — to really play and get paid,” said Niemer, not missing a chance to cheer on the Whitecaps mid-interview. “They’re extremely talented.”

Niemer and Flinsch are also both Minnesota Lynx fans, and to that end, Niemer is already looking further down the road and said she would love to see the Whitecaps at Xcel Energy Center, home of the Minnesota Wild, someday. The Wild have a partnership with the Whitecaps, as the New Jersey Devils do with the Riveters.

“The Lynx have a great presence at — come on! — at Target Center, and that’s a really solid fan base,” said Niemer, again pulled in by the game. “I would love to see the Whitecaps get to that at some point.”

For Flinsch, a relatively new sports fan, she loves every second of it, “especially relating a lot to women athletes in particular,” Flinsch said.

“I love watching anybody of any gender play sports, but especially having that representation,” said Flinsch, who also sported a gray Whitecaps t-shirt from years past.

The line at the table for Whitecaps t-shirts, hoodies, hats, key chains and souvenir pucks — complete with the re-branded logo — was 20 to 25 people deep, starting just after the doors opened and not letting up much throughout the game.

Kelly O'Donnell, owner of Goodwood Hockey, a local apparel company providing Whitecaps merchandise, did some research on the other four NWHL teams from their initial game sales to prepare for the Minnesota debut and decide what and how much to bring to the rink to sell to fans. The logo beanie hats were the only thing they sold out of during that first game, and they'll have more in by the end of the month, O'Donnell said.

Knowing the story behind the Whitecaps' start in 2004, with Jack Brodt and Schmidgall starting the team for their daughters, was enough for O'Donnell to have a bit of a moment, especially when she saw Brodt Brown take the ice, she said.

"I've actually found myself choking back tears a couple of times," O'Donnell said. "The atmosphere, the sold-out crowd, the enthusiasm, the investment that these fans have in this team, the history that's behind this, is absolutely incredible. I'm so glad to be a part of it."

Along with all the latest merchandise, fans also loaded up on concessions during the game. The typical fare was available, including hot dogs, pretzels, candy, popcorn and even craft beer options. The stand sold out of hot dogs and popcorn before closing up shop at the start of the third period, which will be the typical plan for now, according to concession worker Angela Robinson, who works for the Minnesota Wild.

They were pretty well prepared, according to Robinson, and things seemed to go even better once they opened up a second line to help the waiting hockey fans.

"We'll definitely plan for that in the future," Robinson said. "We just didn't really know what to expect, first Whitecaps game. We are happy to be busy. We'll just work on all the kinks as we go."

Everything seemed to go pretty smoothly with the Whitecaps debut. The players had no complaints when it came to the logistics of the opener. Stecklein pointed toward the support of the Whitecaps staff and the Wild partnership — whether it is publicly, internally or on social media — for things coming together so well on the first try.

“It felt different than even the exhibition games we had,” Stecklein said. “It felt like this is professional hockey, and this is what it’s supposed to be.”

Brodt Brown and winger Brooke White-Lancette were both members of the inaugural Whitecaps with Curtin Engelhardt. It was just a matter of “when” the Whitecaps would join the NWHL, said Tony Lancette. He was at the rink Saturday to watch his wife make her professional debut.

“For her to persist and get through all that, have the drive to keep going and see it all the way through to the professional ranks, is a pretty special day for her and for her whole family,” Tony Lancette said.



**Minnesota Whitecaps**  
@WhitecapsHockey

Winning our first @NWHL game in front of a sellout crowd  
#Priceless #RollCaps (📸 @T3Morris)

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He sees the hockey cycle continuing with Whitecaps players going on to coach girls who can then dream of playing professionally.

As a lot of those youth hockey players looked on, the Whitecaps continued to put on a show on the ice. Brandt made it 2-0 in the second period off a rebound, while Kate Schipper made it 3-0 just a few minutes into the third. Coyne Schofield iced the victory with a shorthanded empty-netter with 55.7 ticks remaining.

Amanda Leveille, a former Gopher who previously played for the Buffalo Beauts in the NWHL, made 19 saves in goal for the shutout. Besides the stellar play from her teammates in front of her, there was another element to the weekend that Leveille really enjoyed.

“One of my favorite things is when you walk onto the ice and there are so many young girls that want to high-five you,” Leveille said. “That’s something that we all cherish. It’s so cool that so many young girls want to strive and be in our spot one day.”

The Whitecaps swept the weekend with a 3-1 win over the Riveters on Sunday, getting goals from three different players. Defenseman Amanda Boulier got the Whitecaps on the board in the first with a snipe-shot from the point. After the Riveters tied it on the power play with 1:22 remaining in the first, Curtis and Brandt added goals in the second period.

Leveille once again got the nod in the cage and made 21 saves.

As part of their 16-game season, the Whitecaps will meet the Riveters again for their next series, Oct. 20-21, in their first road games. The NWHL is now officially a five-team league.

“It’s crazy to realize you’re a professional player, and that’s something that so many women have been working toward for so long to give us this chance,” Stecklein said.

“So I just felt really, really grateful as I skated up to that blue line.”

*(Top photo: Kirsten Burton / NWHL)*

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