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Online

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As every fan of women’s hockey knows all too well, the journey to the formation of the Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL) has been long and arduous to say the least. Now, after an inaugural season that exceeded expectations, drew packed houses game after game, and developed a passionate and committed fan base, the PWHL is poised to cement its status as a permanent fixture of girls and women’s sport. In the process, it is inspiring scores of young girls to recognize that there is a place for them in “Canada’s game”, as players, coaches, broadcasters, administrators. The possibilities seem endless. And none too soon! – Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor.

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by Olivia Pope

Athletes among the ranks of Caitlin Clark, Simone Biles, Nelly Korda, and Marie-Philip Poulin have one thing in common – they paved the way for the burgeoning growth and investment in women sports. A new stadium has been built in Kansas City specifically for women’s soccer, prime time television coverage (and not just the Olympics every four years) has grown for women athletes in many sports, and most importantly, new professional leagues are being invested in each year. Most notable has been the Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL), which held its inaugural match on New Year’s Day 2024, attracting more viewership in Canada than the 2024 NHL Winter Classic. Many would agree that the formation of the PWHL was long overdue, and somewhat, surprising considering the troubled history of competing leagues and the struggle to maintain financial support.

This article dives into the history of women's hockey prior to the formation of the PWHL and the tumultuous path that has led to a thriving professional league across North America. More specifically, I discuss how the sustainability of the PWHL not only shines a light on exceptionally talented women hockey players but is proving to provide opportunities for women coaches and other supporting roles that not so long ago had been nearly impossible as careers for women. Currently, 58% of the PWHL coaches, including head and assistant coaches, across the original six teams are women, as well as 50% of the general managers.

I spoke with Melody Davidson, arguably the most influential coach and figure in Canadian women's hockey history, to discuss her perspective of the PWHL, its history, formation, and the opportunities for women coaches. Davidson also discusses barriers she faced as a coach and how the PWHL provides an opportunity to foster and inspire women role models within coaching. Davidson has won four gold medals at the Olympic Games, both as an assistant and head coach, has been the head scout for the Canadian Women's National Team, and has contributed five years as general manager of the women's program at Hockey Canada. She has earned several individual accolades, such as the 2010 Jack Donohue Coach of the Year Award from the Coaching Association of Canada, an induction into the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame for her coaching at the Olympic Games, a pair of inductions into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Alberta Hockey Hall of Fame and, most recently, an induction into the International Ice Hockey Federation Hall of Fame in 2024, to name a few.

I also spoke with Melodie Daoust, a three-time Olympic medallist and MVP of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea. Daoust brings a unique perspective, as she is one of the few players who has played in the Canadian Women's Hockey League (CWHL), the Professional Women's Hockey Players Association (PWHPA) as well as the PWHL for Team Montreal (now the Montreal Victoire*). Daoust's incredible career has led her to pursuing coaching full-time, starting as a part-time coach with the Les Carabins de l'Université de Montréal, to forming her own business running hockey camps across Canada, to now being a full-time coach for a boarding school at Collège Bourget in Rigaud, Que. Daoust discusses her experience playing in the different leagues and her hopes for the future of the PWHL.

**Also, as of September 9th, The Ottawa Charge, The Toronto Sceptres, The Boston Fleet, The Minnesota Frost, and The New York Sirens*

PWHL History

The history of professional women's hockey prior to the formation of the PWHL is marred with frustration from players, disappointment with financial backing, and fundamental differences regarding the structure of a league. The CWHL was one of the first major leagues that was centrally run, beginning in Canada back in 2007. Centrally run means that the CWHL owned each team and therefore any revenue going towards the league or to any individual team would be redistributed equally amongst each team. In theory, this structure would be more attuned to providing equal player talent across each team thereby eliminating any economic disadvantage one team may face. However, in practice, the CWHL faced difficulty generating sustained investment and sponsorships.

Some argue that this was not a structure problem, but was due to several reasons, specifically the divide with the National Women's Hockey League (later rebranded as the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF)), a lack of broadcasting opportunities, increased travel costs with added expansion teams, and the introduction of player salaries. All these factors may have contributed to its eventual downfall, but the fact remains that the CWHL's centralized model prevented teams from franchising, which makes paying its players a professional salary extremely difficult without a very large and sustainable investment. Whatever the reason(s) may have been, on May 1, 2019, the CWHL announced its dissolution due to the business model being "economically unsustainable".¹

The PHF was founded in 2015 in the United States, but later added teams in both Toronto and Montreal prior to its demise in 2023. In contrast to the CWHL, the PHF was a for-profit league that was backed by private investors.² It was the first professional women's hockey league to pay player salaries, with a minimum salary of USD\$10,000 per player and a salary cap of USD\$270,000 per team. The PHF seemed promising given that it was providing "decent" player salaries; Daoust recalls the temptation at that time to join the PHF:

"I was close, I needed to pay the bills for my family, for my son, house, etc., and at that time I was making maybe \$2,000 for the year, and some players were signing with the PHF for six figures, so it became very tempting, but I always came back to the fact that money is one thing and we are trying to push for something bigger with the PWHPA and I think it was great that we stuck together knowing that behind the scenes a lot

¹ [CWHL ceasing operations due to 'economically unsustainable' business model | CBC Sports](#)

² [Will a new women's hockey league succeed where others have failed? - The Athletic \(nytimes.com\)](#)

was happening to make [the PWHL] a reality so I knew it was just a matter of time”.

Although player salaries were attractive, the PHF continually faced criticism over the lack of transparency about who the investors were and where the money was coming from.³ Players also became spooked when player salaries were cut in half in 2016 and the salary cap lowered to USD\$150,000. The PHF did see some success in the later years, with expansion teams, a salary cap boost, and full health-care benefits to its players; however, doubt remained as to whether the financial backing was sustainable. This eventually led to the PHF selling its assets in 2023 to form the PWHL.

PWHL Formation

Unlike the CWHL that was centralized or the PHF that had private investors, the PWHL currently has one main investor, the Mark Walter Group, which owns all six teams. Davidson acknowledged the significance of this investment, specifically highlighting the ability to have a sustainable domestic league and what that means for players and coaches:

“Right now [the PWHL] is set up [to be sustainable], and everything that came before it was a stepping stone ... but it doesn’t happen without the financial backing of the Walters Group and others involved in it, so it allows [the PWHL] to make mistakes, to grow, and have full-time staff; there is no need to have to do something part-time. They can now focus solely on that team, which has never happened in Canada for a [women] domestic league.”

Both Davidson and Daoust believe there was always a market for the PWHL; the issue was whether there would be quality investment in forming the league.

Davidson:

“I don’t think there ever was a question if there was a fan base, or if we had the talent or not, it’s just if you could afford it, could you surround the organization with quality people and quality players.”

Daoust:

“I think the fans in the stands say it all, we have the fans, we have the market, we know we can make money as an organization, we just needed the investment.”

³ Sources: [PWHPA decides to move forward with plans for future of women’s hockey without PHF - The Athletic \(nytimes.com\)](#)

The PWHL's inaugural season proved there was a market and no shortage of a fan base. A new attendance record of 19,285 was set at the Scotiabank Arena in downtown Toronto on February 16th, 2024, which was then shattered on April 20th, 2024, in Montreal at the Bell Centre with 21,105 fans. The success of the league continued to show in other areas, garnering partnerships with Air Canada, Canadian Tire, Barbie, Bauer, and Molson, to name a few, as well as broadcasting agreements with TSN, Sportsnet, and RDS that secured national television coverage of regular season and playoff games.⁴ In addition, the PWHL also signed a collective bargaining agreement with the PWHPA that currently provides for an average minimum player salary of CAD\$55,000, excluding any performance or incentive compensation.⁵ The average salary jumps by 3% in every subsequent year until 2031.⁶

After such a successful first year, the question remains as to whether the league can maintain such attention and recognition, as well as ensure eventual growth.

PWHL Future

The next steps for the PWHL are critical for the sustainability of the league. Davidson believes that expansion teams are likely in the future, but a feeder system will be integral to maintain a high calibre of play:

“It will take three to five years or more to get a feeder system. Right now with only six teams, there are still a lot of players without a place to play but are potentially good enough to play in the league at future points. Then expansion for sure, but [the PWHL] needs to be fiscally responsible... the cost of travel can be extensive. All of this will happen; it will just take time.”

Whether expansion is in the near or far future of the PWHL, another question remains as to when and how teams will become individually owned. At what point does the Mark Walter Group sell teams or expand and allow other franchise owners? This is a critical piece that Davidson believes the PWHL has done a great job “... *doing their homework to have a good business model and strong foundational pieces in place.*” Daoust also spoke about the trust the players had in the leadership to make these big decisions: “... *it was just a*

⁴ [The PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S HOCKEY LEAGUE, TSN, and RDS Announce Broadcast Rights Agreement - Bell Media](#)

⁵ [64ed721629f3b2cfe84c7a54_PWHL-CBA-thpwhlcom.pdf \(webflow.com\)](#) (section 8.2(a))

⁶ [64ed721629f3b2cfe84c7a54_PWHL-CBA-thpwhlcom.pdf \(webflow.com\)](#) (section 8.2(b))

matter of time, we all trusted Jayna Hefford with our careers since we knew she was going to make something great.”

It is evident this time around that the investment in the league is there, the players trust the individuals who have the decision-making powers, and the future of the PWHL has the building blocks to be a sustainable and profitable league. Only time will tell as to where the league will go from here, but the expectations of players, coaches, and staff is that decisions will be made that better the league for the long-term.

Future for Women Coaches

As the PWHL continues to develop and grow future players, it will also provide an opportunity for future women coaches and support staff. So much so that Davidson has already experienced a demand in women coaches:

“I usually get calls from coaches every spring asking me to refer current female players who may plan to go into coaching for certain available coaching positions, and I could easily fill these with three or four names, but for the first time ever, this year, I had to say there are only males available. [The PWHL] took out 18 coaches from NCAA, USport, or top-end provincial hockey and the majority of them came from women’s hockey.”

Davidson recalls the times where she knew that finding a coaching position that paid at least minimum wage would be difficult:

“After every Olympics I thought, ‘Oh no, what am I going to do as a job?’ Nobody came knocking. It’s very much unlike the men’s program, When you coach the Olympics or world championship, people are offering you jobs. There was the CWHL at that time, but it didn’t pay: you couldn’t make a living doing it.”

Davidson has been coaching hockey since 1992 when coaching opportunities were far and few in between for women. Although she might have one of the best winning track records of any coach in hockey history, she recalls having to work two or three jobs at a time just to be able to coach. Since the PWHL, Davidson seems hopeful that women can make a career out of coaching instead of having to face the same challenges she overcame:

“My why has always been, coming from a small town and having to go through an era where there were no coaching opportunities for me, I always want to make sure there is a legacy, and opportunities left

behind afterwards, so people don't have to face the same challenges I had to face".

Daoust also seems optimistic about future opportunities in coaching. When asked if she sees herself wanting to coach in the PWHL or possibly the NHL, she said that it would be a very fun challenge to take on and is open to coaching at any level, but that in any professional league "... we want to hire the best, whether that be male or female, the players are just asking to be treated professionally." Davidson shared the same sentiment when asked to provide advice for young women looking to make a career in professional sports:

"I think the biggest mistake you can make is to think just because you're a woman somebody is just going to hand it to you ... we do have so many opportunities out there and different pathways, but the biggest piece of advice is to put in the time and gain experience."

Evidently, the opportunities are there for women wanting to be involved, whether that be coaching or other roles that may be of interest, such as broadcasting, player agent, administrator or working with hockey brands such as CCM or Bauer. Although the path towards the PWHL has not been an easy one for both players and coaches, the league is proving to be to be an example of bridging the gender gap that Davidson has fought so hard to overcome her whole career. The best advice from Davidson and Daoust is to put in the time and gain experience because, finally, the opportunities are there for women to not only have a career but to excel in these roles.

About the Author

Olivia Pope is a lawyer at Stikeman Elliott LLP practicing in corporate commercial matters. She completed her undergraduate degree at McGill University, where she played on the women's varsity hockey team. She also played in the CWHL for Team Inferno before heading to law school at the University of Alberta. Olivia is passionate about developing women's hockey and is currently an assistant coach for the Foothills Storm in the Alberta Junior Female Hockey League.