

NWHL BOTTOM LINE

"You can't look at this as a business. It's a cause." NWHL AVALANCHE OWNER VINNIE MATTEO

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SHARING THE HOCKEY DREAM

Story by MEG HEWINGS Special to The Gazette

THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S HOCKEY LEAGUE is the top senior women's league in the world. It has top-notch players, dedicated volunteer coaches and administrators, and its very own newly minted version of the Stanley Cup – the Clarkson Cup. But like many women's sports leagues, the NWHL can't seem to snag corporate sponsorships; the players aren't paid; and the league has no fan base, financial stability, media attention or big broadcast deals. It hasn't come close to getting verbal, much less financial support, from the NHL.

"Every little boy that plays hockey knows the NHL, it's a dream for them," says Quebec Avalanche owner Vinnie Matteo, who says he hopes that one day soon girls will dream of playing in the NWHL and hoisting the Clarkson Cup.

The league is pinning its hopes for survival on creating a viable, professional NWHL in which players are paid. Everything is "on the table," said Fran Rider, of the Ontario Women's Hockey Association, the organization currently handling the league's administration.

This year, she said, the league will make an all-out effort to reorganize and put in place a plan to attract fans and big capital. "There will be task forces specifically to work on championships, marketing, rules and regulations, and finance and administration."

"For us women, the biggest setback is that we still can't make a living out of hockey," said Montreal Axion captain Lisa-Marie Breton, who netted the winning goal in the league championships last year. Breton doesn't have grandiose expectations of making millions, but she does want to see her dream of making a living playing hockey become a reality.

That should be possible. In seven years, the NWHL has become the premier place for women to play hockey in Canada and the world, attracting 90 per cent of Team Canada, as well as elite players from Team USA and national teams the world over.

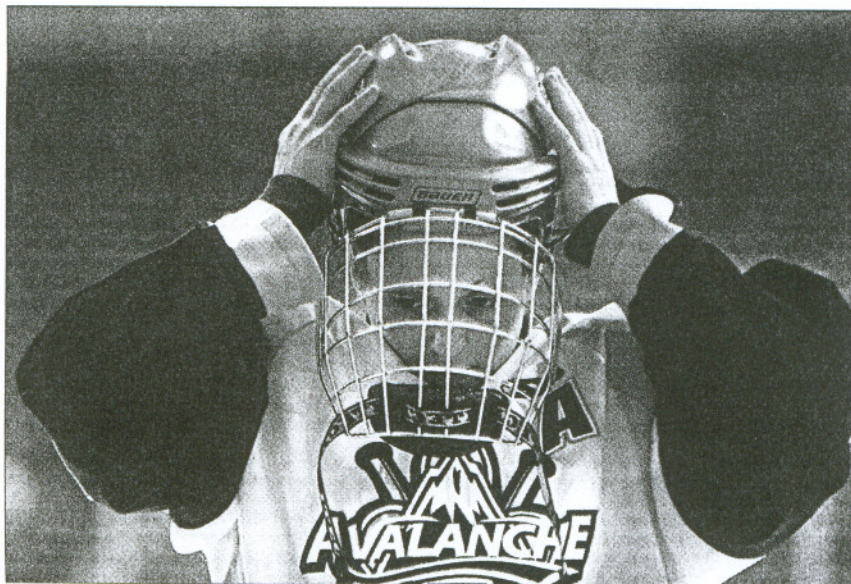
"Women's hockey is the best we've got in this country," notes Michael Charbon, who produced the NWHL Championships for TSN last year and has produced several one-off NWHL games for CBC. "Stick-to-stick passing, no mid-rink checks where people get hurt, no negative aggression. It is the salient, perfect example of what you want your son or daughter to play – and young girls need something to look up to, and not just every four years at the Olympics."

So far though, the 2006-7 season has been anything but smooth skating for the fledgling league. Founding commissioner Susan Pennell retired to concentrate on her political career as mayor of Brampton, Ont., and the league underwent an expansion. Six teams in the Western Women's Hockey League merged with seven teams in central and eastern division to form a unified NWHL.

Midway through the season, the date, location and broadcast deal for the league championships remain up in the air, and the organization and structure of the league and championship tournament are still amorphous.

At this late date, Charbon has serious reservations a broadcast deal for the championships can be secured, and has yet to be approached by the league about negotiating it. "I see lawlessness, no structure, no website, no cohesion and no media presence. I'd say that's worse than the Wild West. At least you knew where the stagecoach was and the sheriff had a gun."

Like most coaches in the league though, the Montreal Axion's Yanick Evola, who is also part-owner of the team, doesn't seem concerned. More than half way through his team's 36-



Quebec Avalanche player Marie Michelle Poirier at a practice in Laval. The NWHL team has no home ice. JOHN MORSTAD THE GAZETTE

game schedule he's busy priming his team to defend its title.

On the ice, the Axion team is clearly the one to beat this year. They have the passionate and physical Breton and Annie (Hot Hands) Desrosier, one of the top scorers in the league. This year, they signed on Team Canada star goalie Kim St-Pierre and have national team hopeful Cathy Chartrand on defence. But even with that star-studded lineup, the team is lucky to draw 50 people out to watch a regular season game at Étienne Desmarteaux arena in the east end.

Breton and St-Pierre actually pay \$1,500 annually to play in the NWHL. The rest of the season, which includes three weekly practices, home and away games, group travel and hotels, is covered by team owners. To make ends meet, most players lead double lives – the Axion has a pharmacist, a police officer, a journalist and students. Breton is a strength and conditioning coach at Concordia University, where she also coaches the Concordia Women's Stingers hockey team.

"You can't look at this as a business. It's a cause," said Avalanche owner and businessman Matteo, who doesn't recoup the approximately \$85,000 he spends each year to ice his team. Matteo is a volunteer, as are league coaches, managers and therapists.

For the NWHL to become a paying proposition for the players, the gate must become a bigger source of revenue, and owners will have to find creative ways to get fans in the stands.

One problem for the Avalanche is they don't have a facility to call their own, which makes building a stable fan base and attracting sponsors difficult. This

year they'll play many games out of the Collège Laval, and Matteo has also adopted a nomadic strategy, criss-crossing the island to play promotional games in arenas big and small.

Matteo works with the local girls' leagues that host and promote NWHL games. The minor teams sell tickets to their friends and families, and get to pocket the door revenues at the end of the night. It's a way to gain exposure for the Avalanche and the NWHL at the

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MONTREAL AXION CAPTAIN LISA-MARIE BRETON

grassroots level, while developing links with minor girls' hockey in Montreal.

"I've seen the opportunities for girls grow and I've tried to open a lot of doors, hoping that one day we'll get sponsors and big TV rights and whatever it takes to get the league to another level," Matteo said.

What still puzzles most who play and volunteer in the NWHL, though, is why so few big companies are willing to endorse the women's game in a country that's quite literally hockey mad.

Consider the stats: Female participation in hockey has risen more than 400 per cent in the past decade. Canada has the largest feeder system for women's hockey in the world. And according to the NHL, women now account for 40 per cent of its television audience.

Charbon says women's hockey has its place in the television landscape. "We have shown it in international competition and at the gold medal game in 2002 at Salt Lake City (7.8 million Canadian viewers tuned in). The problem is that for broadcasters, television is about money and high-profile sports with all their financial backing, and sponsors drive what we watch."

That means the focus has been almost exclusively on male viewers and professional male sports, but there are signs that might be changing.

Take the example of the WNBA. Ten years ago, NBA commissioner David Stern decided to invest in a professional women's basketball league. He wanted to foster grassroots development of the game – and increase his female fan base to boost dwindling NBA television audience ratings. He used NBA dollars and paired up NBA franchises with women's teams to create the WNBA. Despite the leagues booming start and big gates, the WNBA still requires an annual infusion of \$12 million from the NBA.

In interviews, though, Stern is the first to put the league's financial woes in perspective: "The NHL doesn't make money, but no one asks them about it. The NBA has lost, probably, hundreds of millions of dollars the last few years. We've invested \$8 million in the WNBA and the male media (cry): 'Oh my God, it's losing money.' (The WNBA) is not losing money; it's an investment. In a dot-com age when billions have been thrown into useless assets ... it's so unfair to the sport," he told PBS television.

For his part, Charbon says he believes the women's game can turn a profit – it need only look to more modest men's

sports leagues like lacrosse. "A player in the league makes \$35,000 a year. A lot of them are firemen and police officers – but at least they make some dough. Why should it be any different for female players? They make gold medals, these women!"

"The game should be fashioned by businesspeople and marketed by people who know the game," "not just people interested in making money, who don't care about the players," Charbon said.

Rider worries the commercialization of the women's game will mean that, as has happened with the NHL, the game will be refashioned as purely entertainment.

In most women's sports, marketing strategies are employed to increase the attractiveness of the "product" – and players – often emphasizing the traditionally feminine in an effort to attract male spectators. In the case of the NWHL, "there's been some talk about taking the face mask off players," said Rider. "Is this something good? What is the reason for it? (Is it) so players can see better? Or because there's a feeling it will attract more spectators?"

A successful pro league for women, Rider says, would respect the tradition of the women's game, which has always put the needs and safety of players first.

Both Matteo and Charbon wonder why sponsorships haven't managed to trickle down to the NWHL, especially since so many national team players stay limber between Team Canada stints playing in their local communities on teams in the NWHL.

"What's ironic is that national team players play on our teams. People can come and meet them first-hand coming into a rink!" said Matteo.

The key will be to convince sponsors and media to stick around long after Olympic years. While some stars of the game, like Hailey Wickenheiser and Cassie Campbell, have become household names and landed a smattering of sponsorships and the odd commercial, these deals have come almost exclusively from their involvement with Team Canada. The contracts have been brokered by Hockey Canada, which owns the logo and properties of all the Canadian national teams.

"If we work under the rules and regulation set by Hockey Canada, why can't we have a partnership where we share sponsors also?" asked Matteo.

The answers are complicated. Currently, Hockey Canada is the only source of regulation and insurance governing the female game in Canada. Everything from amateur to semi-professional status to foreign eligibility in the NWHL falls under its governance.

To foster the scope and competitiveness of the female game, many NWHL owners and players want to see more of the world's top players signing up. The league is working with Hockey Canada on a pilot project to ease import restrictions and allow six imports. Teams are currently limited to four imports (out of province, or country).

For the ever-calm Rider, growing pains are part of the story of the women's game.

If players and advocates of modern women's hockey had believed skeptics, they never would have seen many of the game's firsts: its inclusion as an official Olympic sport in 1998, the creation of the NWHL, Wickenheiser's stint in the Finnish pro men's league or winning Olympic gold. In only nine short years, these huge strides have made hockey the fastest-growing women's sport in Canada.

"We can't get held up on the difficulties and what we don't have," Rider said. "It's an exciting time, we aren't tied to history or the NHL model here. We are in the position to take the best from all the professional worlds."

Women's hockey in Canada: the highlights

1889 Isobel Stanley, daughter of Governor-General Lord Stanley (of Stanley Cup fame), plays in Ottawa for the Government House team, which beat the Rideau ladies' team in the first recorded women's hockey game.

1890s Women's teams are forming all across Canada, except in P.E.I. and Cape Breton.

1897 At the first women's match in Calgary, spectators are barred "lest a fallen player display herself in an unladylike fashion."

1900 A women's league is formed in Quebec, with teams from Trois Rivières and Quebec City, and three from Montreal.

1910 Leagues grow across the country and women play by full-contact rules. Montrealer Agnes Vauthier is a star.

1920s The freewheeling 1920s usher in the first golden age of women's hockey. Teams form at many of the universities in Canada.

1929 Bobbie Rosenfeld, one of the top players in the Toronto league leads her Patterson Pats to victory against the Northern Electric Verdun at the Montreal Forum in front of 12,000 enthusiastic fans

1930s Canadian women are everywhere in sport - and all over the sports pages. The fabled Preston Rivulettes dominate Canadian women's hockey, setting a record of 350 wins, 2 losses and 3 ties - the best record for any female or male team in Canadian history.

1941 War shifts recreational facilities to the war effort, leisure time is drastically reduced and women are forced into the paid workforce in

large numbers. All women's teams and leagues disband.

1950 The new television era ushers in Hockey Night In Canada, which champions men's professional hockey and the NHL in particular. Amateur men's and women's hockey falls off the national and sports news radar. CCM stops manufacturing female-specific skates and equipment. Women's hockey wanes amid post-Second World War conservatism.

1960s The decade marks the resuscitation of women's hockey across Canada, especially at grass-roots level.

1963 Ringette is invented as a female alternative to hockey, emphasizing graceful skating and little body contact. Its popularity soon skyrockets.

1967 The first Dominion Ladies Hockey Tournament takes place in Brampton, Ont.

1970 Equipment for female players (skates, "jill strap" and chest protectors) is manufactured and marketed.

1975 Ontario Women's Hockey Association is refounded, after disappearing in the 1950s.

1980s Canadian university teams are re-established and girls start playing hockey in record numbers in Ontario.

1986 The Supreme Court of Canada rules in favour of teen Justine Blainey in her fight for the right to play on a boys' team in Toronto.

1990- Canada wins the first International Ice Hockey Federation sanctioned women's world champi-



onship. Team Canada sports pink and white jerseys, instead of the traditional red and white, to try to win over skeptical audiences and marketers.

1992 Manon Rhéaume plays one period in net for the Tampa Bay Lightning in the NHL.

1998 Women's ice hockey appears for the first time at the Olympics as an official sport. Team Canada, the favoured team, loses to Team USA

in the gold medal game.

1999 National Women's Hockey League is born.

2002 At the Salt Lake City Olympics, in front of an unprecedented 7-million-plus Canadian television audience, Team Canada wins a gold medal against rival Team USA.

2003- Hayley Wickenheiser plays for a second-division professional team in Finland

COMPILED BY MEG HEWINGS FROM NOTES AND RESEARCH BY RUSSELL FIELD; PROUD PAST, BRIGHT FUTURE: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF CANADIAN WOMEN'S HOCKEY, BY BRIAN MCFARLANE; ON THE EDGE: WOMEN MAKING HOCKEY HISTORY, BY ELIZABETH ETUE AND MEGAN K. WILLIAMS