

# Navigating NWSL 2.0: The Push Toward MLS Patronage

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In April of 2017, Lifetime announced it would become an equity partner in the slowly growing National Women's Soccer League. The move was seen as a major step forward for the first US Women's professional league to survive more than three seasons. Suddenly, there was more money and polish on display in the booth, behind the camera, and through social media. The NWSL, it appeared, had arrived.

However, raised expectations of production and profitability marginalized the smaller, independent teams that had been the core of the NWSL. The league had been turning toward more teams co-owned by men's teams since the 2014 league expansion. Following the first season of the Lifetime deal, the Boston Breakers and FC Kansas City folded, indicating the persistent precarity of women's soccer outside of men's sports structures.

In NWSL 2.0, it seems that the price of success is the increased necessity of patronage from men's professional soccer. Legitimation through connection to men's sports—and men's media more generally—is not new or unique. Newman and Levine explicate how masculinization of serial dramas to distinguish prestige television from soap opera in *Legitimizing Television*. But the degree to which praise of the NWSL in recent years has focused on teams that share ownership with a men's team is stark and amplified since the Lifetime deal. All the expansion teams since the league began have been structured within MLS or USL (the top two professional men's leagues in the U.S., sanctioned as Division I and Division II, respectively, by the U.S. Soccer Federation) ownership groups. The Houston Dash joined the league in 2014 and is owned by the same group that owns MLS's Houston Dynamo. The Orlando Pride was formed in 2016 and is owned by the same group that owned and launched MLS's Orlando City SC in 2015. The formerly independent team, the Western New York Flash was sold and relocated to become the North Carolina Courage in 2017, and owned by Stephen Malik, who also owns the USL team North Carolina FC. And in 2018, MLS's Real Salt Lake Owner, Dell Loy Hansen, established the Utah Royals FC by buying most of the players from the recently-folded FC Kansas City NWSL team.

NWSL players, coaches, and owners recently spoke about the state of the league in a *Wall Street Journal* article by Rachel Bachman. Alongside the increased money flowing into the league from the Lifetime deal, there are attendant rising expectations of league branding and success. Within that article, league star Megan Rapinoe gestured toward the growing division within NWSL 2.0, saying that there are “still a few franchises that probably, frankly, have to get lopped off, and a few other ones have to come in. I think that's kind of the point we're at.” Among the responses from Portland owner Merritt Paulson (with Portland as the only original NWSL team that shared MLS ownership)

and Pride defender Ali Krieger, praise was framed as parity with the co-owned men's side, usually regarding facilities.

Counter to the plaudits for the Thorns and Pride owners and management, there were disturbing reports of conditions for Sky Blue FC, an independent team. The independent teams that remain in the league—Sky Blue, Seattle Reign, Washington Spirit, and Chicago Red Stars—with the exception of Chicago, play in smaller stadiums (6,000 or fewer capacity) and with minimal support staff and often difficult conditions. These stadiums do not televise well, with football yard lines visible, small crowds, and difficult camera angles, limiting the home games shown on Lifetime or ESPN networks, a recent addition to NWSL broadcasting rights holders.

Uniquely, the Chicago Red Stars owner, Arnim Whisler, rents Toyota Park with 20,000-seat capacity for home games and advocates for the continued importance of independent NWSL teams. In a 2018 interview with SB Nation, Whisler said, “The league will be stronger with diverse owners . . . if we're all MLS owners, I don't think that makes the strongest league.” And yet, this certainly seems to be the way things are going. Among the teams likely to get “lopped off” are: Sky Blue FC or the Washington Spirit, both of which have faced recent discourses of squandered potential and outright dangerous conditions. The managing director of the league, Amanda Duffy, has indicated that future expansion teams will likely come through MLS partnerships. As the league has changed since it gained regular television exposure and the funds and expectations associated with that, it seems the only way for the NWSL to gain parity of conditions for its players—let alone financing which is astronomically minimal compared to the men—is through the largesse of the owners of men's professional teams. Whisler is an outlier in NWSL 2.0, and likely will remain so...at least until the Red Stars are sold to an MLS franchise that sees merit in a women's team.

## **Bibliography**

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