



PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S HOCKEY LEAGUE GROUND-BREAKERS

A sold-out crowd for the Battle on Bay Street, Scotiabank Arena, Toronto

How the nascent league is building fandom with the help of key sponsors.

BY DOUG WALLACE

WITH SIX TEAMS so far—Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Boston, New York and Minnesota—the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) has enjoyed ample media coverage since its inaugural season opener on January 1, 2024. The teams have also played to sold-out venues, including Toronto's 19,000+ seat Scotiabank Arena on February 16. The Battle on Bay Street match between Toronto and Montreal set a record as the largest attendance ever for a women's hockey game. And while building a fan base relatively from scratch has to be daunting, the crowd-pleasing league is quickly finding its feet, the decibels in the stands mostly likely set to increase.

But who's doing all the cheering? "I think the appetite for women's hockey has been around for quite a long time. Out of the gate, we've had a huge influx of families," says Amy Scheer, PWHL's senior vice-president of business operations, "but it's a bit early to make any sweeping characterizations of who our fans are. The goal is to be affordable and accessible for everyone, and to schedule our games at

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PWHL 3-on-3 Showcase at NHL All-Star Thursday



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family-friendly times at family-friendly prices. Once we are a bit further into the season and we have more data, we can sit down and discuss who our fan segments are. We're not quite at that point yet, but we're getting there."

Amid all the hoopla, a solid lineup of sponsors has been shoring up support as well—big players like Air Canada, Pizza Pizza, Tim Hortons, Rogers, RE/MAX and more.

"We're at well over 20 partners," Scheer says, adding that no two partnership packages look the same. "Every conversation we're having is different, about where we align and what the goals are. Then, we build the packages around that."

It's less about set buy-in tiers and more about activations around what each particular sponsor is interested in. "I think there's this great rally from the sponsors to support the game," Scheer says. "We had all the sponsors at NHL All-Star Weekend [February 1-4 in Toronto], and everybody is delighted with what they've seen in the first month in terms of fan engagement and attendance."

Canadian Tire became the league's first funding partner in 2023, reaching a multi-year sponsorship agreement through its Women's Sport Initiative, which pledges to spend at least half of its professional sports sponsorship budget on women's sports by 2026.

Scheer points out that potential partners who initially had a "wait and see" stance on sponsorship have already begun asking how they can now get involved. It's a nice position to be in for a new sports organization that doesn't have the luxury of past years to build on and didn't have a regular pre-season.

"We are very much in operational mode ensuring that the hockey is great, that the fan experience is great, that we're engaging with our fans, and that there are multiple ways for them to see our games if they can't make it to the arena," Scheer explains. In Canada, this includes TSN, CBC and Sportsnet, plus the league's official YouTube channel.

"There's a lot of work to do, but we understand what is possible." **A**

AIR CANADA: WE ALL FLY

Air Canada has made a multi-year commitment as major inaugural partner and the league's official airline.

"We have a lot of great elements in our plan," says Martine Boulerice, director of brand marketing for Air Canada, speaking about the new ad campaign We All Fly, which is specific to the PWHL across broadcast, digital and social media. "The campaign goes beyond the usual logos and integration and visual assets. It's important to us to go further and really leverage our own channels at AC. We're already seeing a lot of visibility in the media, both for the league and for things that we've done."

Air Canada also has a program called Fan Flight that they've employed for years with NHL teams and with the Toronto Raptors. "We bring deserving fans to see their favourite team in another market," Boulerice explains. "This is definitely something we're bringing to the PWHL. It's about celebrating the passion of Canadians for the sport, connecting them with that passion outside their home city and inspiring the next generation of young girls."

Plans to sustain Air Canada's visibility include broadcasting throughout the season with specific sponsored content integration with the CBC, including its "PWHL This Week" intermission segment.

PHOTOS (L-R): PWHL; ARIANNE BERGERON; PWHL; HEATHER POLLOCK

RE/MAX CANADA: THE ADVANTAGE OF THE GAME

RE/MAX Canada is the official real estate agent of the PWHL, “and it’s off to such a great start,” says Anthony Volpini, RE/MAX executive director of marketing.

“Traditionally, we’ve sponsored only male sports, which is kind of silly given that 44% of our agents are female. Last year, we decided to put some of our sports sponsorship dollars toward female professionals. We invested with the WNBA, and this year with the PWHL, to do what we can to help them grow the game.”

Volpini says that RE/MAX is more of an entry-level sponsor at this point. “We have a rink board for one period, for every home game in Toronto with Ottawa, and we have 30-second TV spots running during the games.” Current marketing elements also include being part of the league’s social media channels once a week with a feature called The Advantage of the Game. “It’s built around the word ‘advantage,’ which is part of our tagline when we speak to our consumer.”

RE/MAX also gets a packet of tickets to the games, which they give to their more than 25,000 real estate agents across Canada, who then promote it to their clients to help expand the brand.

“The goal is to be affordable and accessible for everyone, and to schedule our games at family-friendly times at family friendly prices.”

—Amy Scheer, senior VP,
business operations, PWHL

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