

PWHPA inching closer to forming women's pro hockey league

BY JOHN WAWROW
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Talks with select NHL teams and major corporate sponsors have intensified in the Professional Women's Hockey Players' Association's bid to form a league within the next year, two people with direct knowledge of discussions told The Associated Press.

While progress is being made, one of the people said an announcement is not imminent, while also cautioning against placing a timeline on when a proposed league made up of the world's top players could be ready for opening faceoff.

"No timeline, but we're getting closer," said the person, who like the other AP source spoke only on the condition of anonymity because the discussions are private.

In a text, PWHPA executive Jayna Hefford declined to comment Wednesday.

Details of how the proposed league would operate are unknown, though the most ideal scenario would involve NHL franchises on both sides of the border co-sponsoring women's teams competing in a regular-season schedule followed by playoffs.

What's also unclear is when and how long a PWHPA league's season would run. The top players have U.S. and Canadian national team commitments, including competing at the women's world championships in August, as well as a yet-to-be scheduled series of rivalry games expected to be played in November.

The NHL, as an entity, has backed off funding a pro women's league after the coronavirus pandemic blew a major hole in its budget. That hasn't stopped the league from supporting women's hockey, which most recently included the U.S. women's team taking part in the Winter Classic on Jan. 1 and paying for a charter flight for the team to travel from its Minnesota base



In this 2018 file photo, Hockey Hall of Fame inductee Jayna Hefford shakes hands with people associated with the hall before a hockey game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the New Jersey Devils in Toronto. FRANK GUNN/THE CANADIAN PRESS VIA AP

to Los Angeles en route to the Beijing Olympics last month.

It also hasn't stopped NHL franchises from forming their own partnerships. The PWHPA lists 10 NHL teams as partners, including Washington, the New York Rangers, Pittsburgh, Toronto, Chicago and Philadelphia.

The establishment of a partially NHL-backed league attracting top international players would be considered a game-changer for women's hockey.

It would be separate from the six-team Premier Hockey Federation, which was founded in 2015, and remains North America's only women's professional hockey league. In January, the PHF announced it is expanding to eight teams, and more than doubling its salary cap per team to \$750,000 next season.

PWHPA members have mostly balked at joining the PHF while in pursuit of establishing their own league in which players receive livable wages, health care and have dedicated access to training and practice facilities.

The PWHPA was formed three years ago following the demise of the Canadian Women's Hockey League. In that time, the association has attracted enough corporate and media broadcasting partnerships to base players in five hub cities — two in the U.S. and three in Canada — to practice and compete against each other expense-free in a series of barn-storming weekend events across the continent.

The most recent "Dream Gap Tour" stop was in Ottawa last weekend, with another scheduled for Washington, D.C., this

weekend.

The PWHPA is also hosting a "Rivalry Rematch" game between the United States and Canada set for Pittsburgh on March 12. It will be the cross-border rivals' first meeting since Canada won Olympic gold with a 3-2 victory over the Americans last month.

The buzz over the PWHPA inching closer to forming a league grew immediately in the aftermath of Canada's victory.

Canadian forward Brienne Jenner cited corporate support in both the PWHPA and PHF by saying, "I think we're not that far off."

"I think there is a market out there, and a lot of people want to see this level of women's hockey on a regular basis," she added.

Canada coach Troy Ryan urged corporate sponsors to get

on board.

"The girls deserve an opportunity to be professional athletes," Ryan said. "I think if anyone is smart out there, corporate sponsors or donors or business people, they would back it as a business plan because I think there's a viable market out there for it."

U.S. captain Kendall Coyne Schofield grew emotional in stressing how important it is for women's hockey to take advantage of the boost in attention the sport gets following the Olympics.

"Women's hockey cannot be silent after these two weeks," Coyne Schofield said. "We need to continue to push for visibility. We need to continue to fight for women's hockey because it's not good enough. It can't end after the Olympic Games."

Seahawks say they're not open for business on dealing Wilson



Seattle Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll speaks during a press conference at the NFL football scouting combine in Indianapolis, on Wednesday. AP PHOTO/MICHAEL CONROY

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Pete Carroll says the Seattle Seahawks aren't open for business when teams may inquire about the availability of quarterback Russell Wilson this offseason.

"That's commonplace for us to have conversations with teams about all of the players, particularly marquee players, and that's not changed," Carroll said on Wednesday. "It's been the same every year we've been here so it's the same as it's been. We have no intention of making any move there."

Carroll was later even more definitive with his comments about Wilson's status in Seattle. While meeting with local beat writers away from the podium, Carroll said general manager John Schneider has given a standard message when

teams may call: "We're not shopping the quarterback."

This year has been mostly quiet to date on the Wilson front after last offseason where there was plenty of noise and ongoing speculation about his future with the Seahawks. Wilson stayed and had one of the more challenging seasons of his career that included missing games because of a finger injury for the first time in his 10 seasons.

Wilson played in 14 games and threw for 3,113 yards with 25 touchdowns and six interceptions. The Seahawks finished 7-10, their first time with a losing record since Wilson's arrival and missed the playoffs for just the second time. There could be heightened conversa-

tion about his future in Seattle next offseason as Wilson has two years remaining on his current contract with the Seahawks.

Carroll said he and Wilson have stayed in consistent communication through the offseason. There are a couple of significant questions for Seattle's offense with free agency approaching, including whether left tackle Duane Brown or running back Rashaad Penny are brought back.

"There's been a lot of talk and all that. That's just this time of year. But I feel like we're on a good page that we know what's going on and we're communicating really well still," Carroll said.

Carroll also provided injury updates on wide receiver DK Metcalf, running back Chris Carson and safety Quandre

Diggs. Diggs suffered a serious ankle injury in the final minutes of the season finale at Arizona, but should be recovered in time for training camps. Diggs is a free agent.

Carroll didn't play after Week 4 last season and underwent neck surgery. Carroll said Carson's off-season workouts are going well.

Metcalf underwent foot surgery after the season for a prior issue. Metcalf had been limited in practice for most of the season because of the foot troubles.

"He did everything he could and he did admirably, remarkably well," Carroll said of Metcalf. "But you can only get so much done. He's still a young player. He's still developing player and he'll get better."

Tiger Woods beats out Mickelson for \$8 million impact bonus

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Tiger Woods still moves the needle in golf even when he barely plays.

The PGA Tour informed players on Wednesday that Woods was the winner of the new \$40 million "Player Impact Program" that rewards those who generate the most positive interest in golf measured by five metrics.

Woods won the \$8 million prize over Phil Mickelson, who claimed on Twitter in December that he was

Wood

the winner.

The tour had said the program would be measured through the end of the year. Woods captivated golf in December when he returned from a shattered right leg in a February car accident to play the PNC Championship with his son, Charlie. They finished second.

Mickelson took to Twitter in December to "thank all the crazies (and real supporters) for helping him win the PIP."

He ended his message with words that didn't age well: "P.S. I'll try and find another hot controversial topic soon?"

Woods responded with one word above Mickelson's tweet — "Whoops."

Mickelson's public image has been badly damaged in recent weeks for revealing in an interview with Alan Shipnuck, who is writing an unauthorized biography on him, that he was willing to support a Saudi-funded rival golf league as leverage — while acknowledging the human rights atrocities in Saudi Arabia — to get changes he wants on the PGA Tour.

In another interview, he

accused the tour of "obnoxious greed."

Mickelson is taking time away from the game and has not played since the Saudi International a month ago.

Mickelson finished second in the Player Impact Program and earned \$6 million. He was followed by Rory McIlroy, Jordan Spieth, Bryson DeChambeau and Justin Thomas, who each earned \$3.5 million.

The rest of the top 10, who each made \$3 million from the bonus program, were Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka, Jon Rahm and Bubba Watson.

The PIP program was among those influenced by the threat of a rival league that Greg Norman is trying to put together with Saudi Arabian money. Prize money and bonus programs like the FedEx Cup already were increasing based on new media contracts that began this year.

PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan had said in an interview with The Associated Press in January that threats from a rival league allowed the tour to consider "sacred cows, or some areas that people said you can never do that."

The PIP program, along with the "Play 15" that pays every player \$50,000 for entering the minimum 15 tournaments a year, are not based on performance.

The five metrics used for the PIP are internet searches (Google Search); unlinked news articles that include the player's name (Meltwater Mentions); TV sponsor exposure (Nielsen ratings); awareness (Q-score) and social media engagement (MVP Index).