

National Women's Soccer League continues to rely on unpaid amateur players

March 18, 2016

By Jamie Goldberg

The **Portland Thorns** were **locked in a 1-1 tie with Sky Blue FC** last July when **Alyssa Kleiner** sprinted down the left wing and lobbed a pinpoint cross into the box for **Sinead Farrelly**, who headed home the game-winning goal as 12,223 paying fans at Providence Park cheered in unison.

Through months of hard work and dedication, Kleiner had earned a spot in the starting lineup on that summer day.

But of the 11 starters, she was the only one not being paid to play.

"It's hard to sit back and realize, 'I'm not getting paid and the other girls that are playing alongside me are,'" Kleiner said. "It's a hard pill to swallow, but I just told myself that if I put in the hard work, it would lead to a contract in the end."

Like dozens of other up-and-coming players in the National Women's Soccer League, Kleiner joined the Thorns in 2015 as an amateur player.

While NWSL teams may invite a handful of non-rostered players to participate in trainings throughout the season, clubs are only allowed to carry up to 10 players on their **Amateur Player Lists**. These players can be called up as game-day replacements when national team players are away, but league rules stipulate that amateur players "may not receive or retain any remuneration for playing except expenses directly related to a game or games which have actually been incurred by the player."

Before being allowed to appear in NWSL games, these amateur players must sign amateur agreements to register with U.S. Soccer and acknowledge that they will not be compensated for their participation.

Despite receiving no compensation, dozens of amateur players - most of whom are recent college graduates - have trained with teams across the NWSL over the last three seasons in hopes of honing their skills and ultimately signing professional contracts.

Amateur players exemplify a financial reality for the NWSL, which is still striving to become profitable. The league keeps costs low by allowing teams to carry only 20 rostered players and leaning on unpaid amateurs to fill out practices and sometimes serve as replacements on the 18-player game day rosters. In 2015, amateur players were especially important to the league as it lost 47 of its top stars to the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. They may once again be critical in 2016 as the league loses players to the Olympic Games.

"I think it worked out reasonably well during the World Cup year," NWSL commissioner **Jeff Plush** said. "The amateur player rule allowed clubs to maintain their rosters and continue to grow stable business models and it gave more players an opportunity to compete in the league."

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Since its inception in 2013, the NWSL has made a point of being frugal in its spending as it has aimed to become the first successful professional women's soccer league in the United States. Two previous leagues - the Women's United Soccer Association and Women's Professional Soccer - both failed after just three seasons due to overspending, infrastructure issues and organizational problems.

Even fully contracted players in the NWSL in 2015 made between only **\$6,842 and \$37,800** for the six-month season and teams operated with a modest salary cap of \$265,000 to pay players that weren't allocated by the U.S., Canadian and Mexican federations. Due to the cost-saving measures, the NWSL has been able to expand from eight to 10 teams and is heading into its fourth season on stable footing.

The Oregonian/OregonLive spoke with nearly a dozen amateur players for this article, the majority of whom said that they enjoyed their experience in the NWSL and felt as if they gained valuable exposure, while also developing as players.

Still, many also said it was a struggle to cover monthly expenses. Players used money from their savings, relied on support from their families or took on outside jobs simply to afford basic expenses like rent and groceries.

Caroline Kastor spent the first half of the 2015 season competing as an amateur player for FC Kansas City. Kastor, a graduate student and paid graduate assistant at the University of Kansas, lived near the university during her time as an amateur so that she could continue to study and work for an income. She would make the roughly 50-mile trip from Lawrence to Kansas City for practices and games.

When Kastor asked whether FC Kansas City could reimburse her for gas, they told her that they weren't allowed to under league rules. This was a surprise to Kastor. She, like most amateur players, did not have an agent when she started training with Kansas City and did not fully understand the details of the amateur player rule.

"I hope the league will revisit the rules on this because it's really tough for amateurs," Kastor said. "You are calling players up to play in a professional league and in professional games and they are making sacrifices to play. You would get paid in every other walk of employment, so why not this one?"

Michael Colangelo, the [Assistant Director of the USC Sports Business Institute](#), could not point to any other national league that relies on both professional and amateur athletes as part of its business model.

While he said the model made sense for a fledgling league like the NWSL, he also said that this type of model could lead to high turnover rates for amateur players, who might ultimately decide that playing isn't worth their time.

"This is a model that will hopefully allow the sport and league to grow," Colangelo said. "Until the league and teams generate sustainable revenue that covers all expenses -- including players -- amateur players will be seen as a source of labor. In short, it should help the league get off the ground, but it probably isn't sustainable for the growth of professional women's soccer in the U.S."

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Plush said that the league needs to continue to grow in a sustainable manner and there was never any consideration about expanding roster sizes and offering paid contracts to more players during the World Cup year in 2015.

He said that over the league's three seasons, 20 percent of the 91 amateur players that have competed in the league have earned contracts. The World Cup gave amateur players even more of an opportunity to gain exposure, Plush added.

It is not uncommon for athletes to compete as amateurs in hopes of gaining exposure.

The Western Hockey League is a for-profit league that features solely amateur players between the ages of 16-20 years old. Like the NWSL, the WHL has rules against compensating amateur players. The Portland Winterhawks [were sanctioned in 2012 for violations](#) that included paying for parents to fly out to games.

Still, while WHL players can't receive certain types of compensation, they are paired with host families that provide them with regular meals and they also receive a very modest monthly stipend that can cover entertainment expenses. Players also receive college scholarships for each year that they play in the league.

"They come here for the opportunity to play in a professional environment and the opportunity to be seen by NHL scouts on a nightly basis," said Jamie Kompon, head coach and general manager of [the Winterhawks](#). "It's a great option for young players who have a passion to get to the next level."

Like the WHL, clubs in the NWSL often try to assist amateur players in finding paying jobs and housing.

Jen LaPonte, who began the 2015 season as an amateur player for the Houston Dash, said that she was able to move to Houston only because the Dash set her up with a host family.

In Portland, Kleiner said that she paid rent to live in an apartment complex with the rest of the Thorns, but the club was able to help the amateur players by setting them up with coaching opportunities through their academy teams.

"Every paycheck I got from coaching just went straight to rent and gas," Kleiner said. "It was definitely hard and I had to rely on my parents for money. ... I was definitely looking toward the long run and my future."

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The possibility of earning a contract is a huge motivation for amateur players, who have competed at the highest collegiate level and don't want to walk away from the game just when they believe they are on the cusp of making it professionally.

"I love this game," said Che' Brown, a goalkeeper who joined the Boston Breakers as an amateur player in 2015. "I keep going because this has been my dream since I was a little girl and I've been working so hard for it. I'm so close and I can't get myself to walk away without seeing what my full potential is."

The sacrifice proved to be worth it for Kleiner, LaPonte and Kastor, who all ultimately earned contracts within the NWSL last season, but Brown and many other players are still fighting for that breakthrough contract.

And without an income, staying in the league long-term isn't feasible for many amateur players.

"I think the experience is great for newcomers in the league so I wouldn't discourage anyone from being an amateur," said Sarah Jackson, who was an amateur player with the Thorns last summer. "But as time goes on, if I don't get a full contract, I probably wouldn't stick around as an amateur again."

While Jackson didn't earn a contract with Portland, she said she still really enjoyed her time with the Thorns. Taylor Comeau, another Thorns amateur player in 2015, said that she always felt like a full member of the team in Portland.

"It was an awesome experience," Comeau said. "It is a really great organization. Everyone that was involved in my experience there helped make it welcoming."

But other amateur players said that the experience wasn't always positive.

LaPonte spent nearly three seasons as an amateur player, competing for five different clubs during that time. She recalls showing up to games and being turned

away from the player parking lot because she wasn't on the roster. Instead, she paid to park. On other occasions, she would have to sit in the stands to watch games. During practices, she wasn't always given a numbered jersey and the coaches would often divide up the amateur and rostered players into separate groups.

"It's really sad actually," LaPonte said. "You're just desperately hoping a coach sees something in you. You have so many coaches say, 'We don't want to roster you, but stay around and train with us.' You feel used."

After being allocated to the NWSL by the Mexican Women's National Team and serving as a rostered player with the Boston Breakers in 2013, Anisa Guajardo was waived and ended up being asked by the Houston Dash to train with the team for the early part of the 2015 season. Guajardo, who lived off her savings during her time in Houston, said she sometimes felt like she was being taken for granted.

"Amateur players should be given the same privileges, the same training tops, the same treatment as signed players," Guajardo said. "We're all doing the same work at training, aren't we? Amateur players should be looked after, have a place to stay and a job where they can make enough to buy food."

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Plush said there are no immediate plans to make changes to the amateur player rule, but he said the league will continue to evaluate its rules and regulations.

In the meantime, the NWSL will continue to rely on amateur players to fill out trainings and game-day rosters as it strives for sustainability and success.

"In the long-term, of course, we'll look to make changes," Plush said. "We'll look at ways to refine our rules."

But many amateur players would like to see changes happen sooner.

"We want to play in this league and we want this league to succeed," LaPonte said. "But the league is going to lose out on amazing players if they can't expand roster sizes or give the amateur players the respect they deserve."

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