

Players prepare for sixth year of women's pro soccer

By Jody Lim
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The Portland Thorns are currently preparing for the official opening of the National Women's Soccer League's (NWSL) sixth season. Members of the squad — the defending champion of the nine-team league — are scheduled to play three preseason matches on Merlo Field at the University of Portland (UP) on March 11, 14, and 17. The 2018 Spring Invitational features two games each day.

The matches on Sunday, March 11 include the U.S. U-23 Women's National Team taking on the Houston Dash at 11:30am followed by a 5:00pm game featuring the Thorns and Chicago Red Stars. On Wednesday, March 14, the Red Stars meet the Dash at 1:30pm with the Thorns and U-23s competing at 7:30pm. The final day of the invitational, Saturday, March 17, pits the Red Stars against the U-23s at 1:30pm and the Thorns facing the Dash at 7:30pm. General-admission seating for the evening games is \$7 and the afternoon matches are free.

Thorns FC are playing this year's preseason games on Merlo Field due to renovations currently underway at Providence Park, which was originally built in 1926. This past fall, work began on phase one of the stadium's more than \$55-million privately financed expansion project. Goals of the project are to add approximately 4,000 seats, a new street-level colonnade along the east side of the stadium, a new stormwater detention vault, and more.

The 93-foot-tall covered structure includes four new levels on the expanded east side as well as a unique, pedestrian-friendly public arcade along S.W. 18th Avenue. The plan will complete the full U-shape stadium design that was envisioned in 1925 by the original then-Multnomah Stadium architects. Providence Park is scheduled to reopen in mid-April for season-opening matches for both the Thorns and Timbers. The project will continue after the end of the 2018 season, with construction expected to be fully complete in 2019 or 2020.

Since the stadium is currently unavailable for competition, Thorns FC begin the 2018 campaign on the road on Saturday, March 24 in North Carolina when they take on the North Carolina Courage. The game — a rematch of the 2017 championship — is the first NWSL Game of the Week this season, which is televised live on Lifetime. Portland will also be featured in the home opener for the Chicago Red Stars on Saturday, March 31 at Toyota Park, a match that is part of a doubleheader between the Portland Timbers and the Chicago Fire.

With nothing on the schedule during the first weekend in April, Portland's home opener is scheduled for Sunday, April 15 at 3:00pm against the Orlando Pride, with another home game set for Friday, April 20 at 7:30pm versus the Washington Spirit. After the Spirit match, the Thorns go on the road again to take on the NWSL's newest team — the Utah Royals — at Rio Tinto Stadium on Saturday, April 28. The Royals fill the NWSL slot previously occupied by FC Kansas City, which ceased operations late last year.

Each NWSL squad is playing a 24-game schedule in which they play every other team three times. The regular season ends in early September with semifinal playoff matches held September 14 to 16. The championship is scheduled for Saturday, September 22.

A new addition to the Thorns FC roster this season is midfielder Sandra Yu, the No. 8 overall pick in the 2018 NWSL College Draft. Yu, age 23, is from Strongsville, Ohio and played at Notre Dame. She appeared in and started 63 matches for the Fighting Irish, recording 13 goals and seven assists in three seasons, and served as team captain during her 2016 and 2017 seasons. At the U.S. youth international level, she was called into camp with the U.S. U-23s in 2016 and 2017, the U-20s in 2013, and also appeared in camp at the U-14, U-15, U-17, and U-18 levels.

Thorns fans may have mixed emotions during preseason and regular-season matches when Portland plays the Houston Dash, as fan-favorite Meleana "Mana" Shim signed with the Texas-based squad in February. After concluding four years at Santa Clara University in California, the Hawai'i native had played for the Thorns since the club's inception in 2013 after attending an open tryout. Shim appeared in 74 matches in Portland, the fourth-most in club history, and was a member of the squads that brought home the 2013 championship and the 2016 NWSL Shield. Late last August, the midfielder headed to Sweden to play for Växjö DFF. She is now back in the NWSL with Houston.

Also on the Houston Dash roster is striker Kyah Simon, an Australian player with aboriginal roots who made her debut with the senior national team in 2007 as a 16-year-old and has represented Australia in two Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)



SIXTH SEASON. Athletes are preparing for the official opening of the National Women's Soccer League's (NWSL) sixth season. Players across the league — including (L-R) Nahomi "Naho" Kawasumi (#36) of the Seattle Reign, Meleana "Mana" Shim (#6), formerly with the Portland Thorns and now with the Houston Dash, and 2018 NWSL College Draft pick Sandra Yu (#16) of the Portland Thorns — started training February 19. Thorns FC, the defending NWSL champion, are scheduled to play three preseason matches on Merlo Field at the University of Portland on March 11, 14, and 17.

Women's World Cups, in 2011 and 2015. Simon spent the winter playing in her home country with Melbourne City FC where she and her squad won the 2018 W-League Grand Final in February. Prior to joining Melbourne, she spent one season with the NWSL's Boston Breakers in 2016. Boston retained Simon's rights when she returned to Australia in 2017. On January 30, 2018, the 26-year-old was selected by the Dash with the sixth pick in the NWSL Dispersal Draft. The Dispersal Draft occurred after the Breakers ceased operations in January.

In a blockbuster trade that took place during the 2018 NWSL College Draft on January 18, the Chicago Red Stars obtained Samantha Kerr, the NWSL's 2017 Most Valuable Player and Golden Boot winner, who broke the NWSL single-season scoring record with 17 goals. Kerr also gave four assists while logging 1,918 minutes in 22 appearances. The Australian international scored two or more goals in a game on three occasions last season. She netted a brace in June against the Thorns before scoring a hat trick in July against FC Kansas City. She then became the first player in NWSL history to score four goals in a single match in August against the Seattle Reign. Amazingly, none of Kerr's 17 goals came from the penalty spot.

The Chicago roster also features Japanese international Yuki Nagasato, who joined the club in 2017. Nagasato began her professional career playing for NTV Beleza of the Nadeshiko League, Japan's Division I women's soccer league, for eight seasons. She is also a three-time FIFA Women's World Cup player, having participated in 2007, 2011, and 2015, as well as a two-time Olympian (2008 and 2012). She was an important member of the team that defeated the U.S. Women's National Team to win the country's first FIFA Women's World Cup in 2011. Nagasato missed much of the 2017 NWSL season due to rehabilitation for a knee injury, but returned to the team late in the season and was able to play in six matches.

The North Carolina Courage again features defender Abby Erceg, a New Zealander of Maori descent. Erceg has played in the NWSL since 2014, first spending two seasons with the Chicago Red Stars then one season with the Western New York Flash in 2016. When the Flash moved the franchise to North Carolina in 2017 and became the Courage, she made the move as well. Erceg, who is the first player, male or female, to secure 100 appearances for New Zealand's national team, recently returned to the national team after announcing her retirement from international football a year ago due to lack of support from New Zealand Football for the team's domestic-based players in addition to other reasons.

Also in North Carolina is defender Yuri Kawamura, who signed with the Courage in March 2017. Kawamura, a graduate of Niigata University of Health and Welfare, has been a member of the Japan Women's National Team since 2010 and played in the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup in Canada. She started her professional career in 2002 playing 10 seasons for Albirex Niigata Ladies. She transferred to JEF United Ichihara Chiba Ladies in 2013, signed a contract with Vegalta Sendai Ladies in 2014, then played for Albirex Niigata Ladies again in 2016. Kawamura logged 588 minutes in eight games for the Courage before suffering a season-ending knee injury on May 27.

Defender Caprice Dydasco, who was drafted by the Washington Spirit in the 2015 NWSL College Draft, is available for the 2018 season. The Hawai'i native played

for the UCLA Bruins from 2011 to 2014, winning the 2013 national championship and amassing five goals and 23 assists in her collegiate career. During her 2016 season with the Spirit, Dydasco won a starting spot and helped her team reach the championship game. Unfortunately, she tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her knee playing in that championship match. After surgery and rehabilitation, she missed the beginning of the 2017 season, but logged 1,118 minutes in 16 games after being cleared to play.

The NWSL squad with the most Asian talent is the Seattle Reign, which has Japanese internationals Nahomi "Naho" Kawasumi and Rumi Utsugi as well as Lydia Williams, an Australian player with aboriginal roots.

Naho first joined Seattle Reign FC in February 2014 on loan from Japanese side INAC Kobe Leonessa, where she was the league's second-leading scorer and was named league MVP in 2013. She signed with Seattle again in 2016, contributing three goals and two assists that season. In 2017, Naho logged 1,917 minutes in 24 matches and her nine assists were best in the league. She also scored six goals, which placed her total offensive production in 2017 at third-best in the NWSL. Internationally, Naho was a member of the Japan Women's National Team that won the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup and placed second in the 2015 tournament. She also won a silver medal at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

Defensive midfielder Utsugi joined the Reign in 2016. She began her professional career in 2004, playing six seasons for NTV Beleza of the Nadeshiko League. In 2010, she signed with French club Montpellier and remained with the organization until 2016. Along with Naho, she helped the Japan Women's National Team win the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup and take second in 2015. She also was a member of the 2007 squad that was eliminated in the group stage. This past December, she earned her 100th cap (international appearance) for Japan in a match against Jordan. Rumi scored one goal during the 2016 NWSL season and contributed a goal and two assists in 2017. A key part of the Seattle midfield, she was voted Reign FC's Most Valuable Player by her teammates for her efforts during the season.

Australian international goalkeeper Williams started her career in 2004 with the Australian Institute of Sport Football Program before moving to Canberra United of the Australian W-League in 2008, a club she continued to play for until 2016. Other organizations she was a part of during that time included the Chicago Red Stars of the Women's Professional Soccer in 2009 as well as Swedish football club Pitea IF in 2012 and 2013. Williams has been a member of several NWSL teams, including the Western New York Flash in 2014, the Washington Spirit in 2015, and the Houston Dash in 2016 and 2017. Seattle acquired Williams during the 2017 season just prior to the trade deadline. In her three matches with the Reign, she made 10 saves, had one shutout, and allowed two goals.

Soccer fans have much to cheer for during the upcoming seven-month NWSL season. Preseason matches are already underway and the regular season officially kicks off the weekend of March 24 and 25. The three Thorns FC preseason matches will be held on Merlo Field at the University of Portland, located at 5000 N. Willamette Boulevard in Portland. To view the complete NWSL schedule, visit <www.nwslsoccer.com>. To buy tickets to upcoming Thorns matches, call (503) 553-5555 or visit <www.thornsfc.com>.