

Slug: Bilka Boston Fleet

# Hannah Bilka is Skating Her Way Into Boston Sports Stardom

By Ryan Forgosh

The minutes wind down at Tsongas Center as the Boston Fleet try to defend their 2-0 lead over the Toronto Sceptres. The puck is in Toronto's zone, but number 8 on the Sceptres is making a mad dash for the neutral zone, puck on her stick. She's just a few short feet away when out of nowhere, a Fleet player streaks across the ice, slamming the unsuspecting Sceptre player into the wall and coming away with the puck. Hannah Bilka, a rookie on the Fleet, makes the save, keeping the puck in the zone.

Though just in her rookie season with the Boston Fleet, Hannah Bilka is already writing her name into the Boston sports history books. But this isn't where Bilka's Boston legend begins. Number #19 has been skating her way into Boston fans' hearts for over 5 years now, going back to her time as a Boston College Eagle.



Photo courtesy of The Boston Fleet

"I've always loved the city of Boston," Bilka said. "Between that along with the academics at Boston College, it was a great fit."

Just as Boston College was the perfect fit for Bilka, Bilka too was the perfect fit for the Boston College Eagles.

"Even in her freshman year, the way she skated was elite," Katie Crowley, the head coach of the Boston College women's ice hockey team, said. "Her shiftiness, the way she moved on the ice, you could see that was going to stay throughout her whole career."

The 23 year old is quick on her skates, able to glide past defenders at a blinding pace. This speed is what first stood out to Crowley when Bilka joined the team. Her speed creates opportunities for her on the ice and develops offense for her team.

"She makes great work of using her assets, which to me are her speed and the way she can skate."

Bilka's four years at Boston College were formative to her playstyle, attributing it to her coaches' openness to her trying new things and discovering who she was as a player.

"I wasn't scared to make mistakes or be a different player," Bilka said. "I contribute a lot of my development to my time at Boston College."

Though her archetype may not have been fully formed until later, Bilka's talent was evident from the beginning. Crowley first saw Bilka play when Bilka was about 14 when her Dallas team was in town, and she knew the potential Bilka had to be a star player.

"Even then, you could tell she would be a really good player," Crowley said. "But you never know if that will stay when they transition to college then the pros..." Crowley continued, "for [Bilka] there was no worry."

"You're 18 going into college and then you graduate four years later. You grow a lot in that time," Bilka said. "I'm lucky I had such great coaches to help me grow both then and now at the pro level."

Bilka's hockey journey started long before she took to the ice in Boston. Bilka played a number of sports growing up in Texas, but gravitated towards hockey through her brother, as it was the sport he played. There weren't many girls' hockey teams in the state, but that didn't stop Bilka, who opted to join the boys' program to play.

"When I was playing, it was strictly just boys programs, so that's what I did," Bilka said.

The next stop on Bilka's hockey journey would take her to Shattuck-St. Mary's high school in Minnesota, playing for its girl's hockey team coached by Gordie Stafford. Stafford saw Bilka's potential right away and has been with her ever since on her hockey journey.

"When she's on the ice, you can tell how much fun she's having..." Stafford said. "Seeing her play is like watching Michael Jordan play in his prime. He was so good, but he was having so much fun."

"That's a crazy comparison," Bilka chuckled, "But Gordy has been such a great mentor to me. He definitely helped me a lot in my development."

Just like Crowley, Stafford saw Bilka's speed and knew she was going to be a player to look out for.

"There's very few players who are as light on their feet as she is, but that's what sets her apart." Stafford said. "She doesn't have to slow down to make moves. And then not only does she handle the puck with world class skill, she also has a very quick release to her shot."

For her graduate season, Bilka transferred to Ohio State, helping the team win the 2024 National Championship. Bilka ended the season as the top scorer on the Ohio State Buckeyes. She was unstoppable, scoring 48 points in 39 games. It was a tough decision for Bilka to leave Boston, but she knew she had what it takes to be a champion, and Ohio State was where she could achieve that goal.

Bilka said, "Ohio State had a lot of great players, and their coaches are really dedicated to winning. And I thought to myself, 'I could be a part of that.' Luckily, it shaped out how it was supposed to."

After that championship season, Bilka entered the PWHL draft. The PWHL is still in its infancy, being founded in 2023. This isn't the first time a professional women's hockey league has been attempted. The Canadian Women's Hockey League was the first, being founded in 2007, but shut down in 2019. The National Women's Hockey League was another attempt at professional women's hockey, but the pay for players and the working conditions were not anywhere near the same level as men's hockey. The pay wasn't even enough for players to get by on. The PWHL sought to change that. For the first time, women hockey players have the chance to play the sport at a professional level and do so for a career.

On June 10, 2024, Hannah Bilka was selected fourth overall by the Boston Fleet, bringing her back to the city where she made a name for herself in college.



Photo courtesy of The Boston Fleet

"I didn't know what to expect going into the draft," Bilka said. "It's just a special moment when you hear your name called, and for it to be Boston, a city that I was so familiar with. I was just so grateful that I was drafted and am now playing here."

Bilka took the transition to the professional level in stride, already being used to playing with the best at college and high school level. Bilka pointed to the physicality of the pros and the scheduling as being the most difficult parts of the transition.

"You're playing a lot more games than practicing, which was definitely a change," Bilka said. "The travel as well. It's something that I've been trying to learn and get adjusted to."

Bilka's first game with the Fleet was their season opener in Toronto in front of a sold out crowd. Bilka said the atmosphere surrounding this game was her "welcome to the league" moment.

"You're on the blue line hearing the national anthem, and it was just so cool," Bilka said. "Even though it wasn't our fans, it was really cool to be in that game.."

In her first season, Bilka was leading rookies in time on ice, but in a tough match representing Team USA against Canada in the Rival Series, the young star sustained a lower body injury, but not before burying the puck in the back of the net. This goal helped Team USA beat Team Canada in the first round of the series. The Boston Fleet placed Bilka on long term injury reserve after the match. Bilka couldn't give a timeline for her return, but she assures Fleet fans that her recovery has been going smoothly. Even with her injury, Bilka is fifth in points on her team with 4 goals and 5 assists.

When Bilka's not on the ice, she can most likely be found in Boston's North End, her favorite part of the city. She loves exploring Boston, trying to see everything the city has to offer.

"[The North End] is such a cool and unique spot," Bilka said. "I'm just always finding myself down there."

"Traditionally, college has been the end for women's sports," Stafford said, "But now the idea of going pro is in the culture of girls' hockey."

"It's exciting to have an option for players to play after college." Crowley said. "It's amazing for little girls to get to go to those games and see women getting paid to play hockey. And for those of us that didn't get that opportunity, it's just an unbelievable, awesome, thing to watch."

And for Bilka, seeing the next generation of women's hockey stars have this support means the world to her.

"Having this much support for women's hockey is so great," Bilka said. "There's a lot more girls teams now. I didn't have that growing up, and it's really good to see."