

Scott thrilled to play in historic Canadian women's soccer league

Realizing her wildest dreams

BEN LITTLE

THREE-TIME Olympic medalist Desiree Scott has one goal left to achieve in her storied soccer career — to star in Canada's first women's professional soccer league.

Scott, 37, announced her retirement at the end of the 2024 season after 346 appearances at the club and national level.

After much deliberation and nudging from Diana Matheson, league co-founder and Scott's former teammate, Scott was recruited to the upstart Northern Super League (NSL), joining Ottawa Rapid FC.

"At the end of the day, I was like 'I do not want to have any regrets,' and I knew I would regret not coming out of retirement and being a part of this historic league," said Scott.

Canada was one of only two nations in the last FIFA women's World Cup without a domestic league. That changed April 16, when Calgary Wild FC visited Vancouver Rise FC for a historic kickoff at BC Place.

Scott, a born-and-raised Winnipegger, said it's always been a goal of hers to play professionally in Canada.

"I thought about playing in front of Canadian fans on home soil... to help the next generation and continue having impact were the reasons why (returning) was a no-brainer for me," she said.

Scott's 187 national team appearances rank fourth most all-time. During that time, she won Olympic gold in 2021 at the Tokyo Games and back-to-back bronze medals at the London and Rio games.

The defensive midfielder made her professional debut in 2013 with FC Kansas City of the National Women's Soccer League. She enters her 12th professional season this year with Ottawa, having previously played for four different clubs.

She said a Canadian league gives young women more security in their athletic futures.

"Players would maybe get to their teenage years and be like 'Now what?'" said Scott. "This league is providing a pathway from grassroots all the way to the pros."

Scott was sidelined by a knee injury in 2022, causing her to miss the entire 2023 season. In March of last year, a couple of weeks before returning to the pitch, her mother died. Whispers of a new women's league in Canada helped fuel her motivation to return.

"It kind of gave me a reason to keep



Desiree Scott (left) is a three-time Olympic medallist, collecting gold at the Tokyo Games and bronze medals at the London and Rio games.

SILVIA IZQUIERDO / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

fighting and keep going, knowing that this opportunity was here," she said. "The opportunity of the (NSL), to write my own script and continue to have a legacy were all motivators for me to bounce back."

Walt McKee, who coached Scott at the University of Manitoba, said her return comes as no surprise.

"One thing you have to know about Desiree — when she puts her mind to doing something, she's going to do it," said McKee.

Scott played 64 games as a Bison. She holds program records for the most career points with 56, and most career assists with 31.

McKee said when he first met Scott, she told him she wanted to play for the national team.

"Right from the very first game, she made a difference," said McKee. "On the field and off the field, she was a

leader at all times."

In fact, Scott was one of the first 100 inductees to the Canada West Hall of Fame in 2019.

McKee said he believes the NSL will give more exposure to female soccer players across the country — especially those in smaller provinces such as Manitoba.

"I want to see our athletes stay in Canada," said McKee. "Make our country better and stronger. That's what I think (the NSL) is going to do."

Christina Litz, president of the NSL, echoed McKee's thoughts a domestic league will put more of a spotlight on athletes across the country.

"Desi (Scott) wants girls in Winnipeg not to have to go through the incredible journey that she did to get where she is," said Litz. "She will be the exception, not the rule."

A fellow Winnipegger, Litz said she's

excited to work in the same league as Scott.

"Just being so proud to be from Winnipeg and just seeing what she brought to our national team," said Litz. "If you've read anything about her journey, it is so incredible."

The NSL is the latest rung on the ladder of women's professional sport, where support and excitement continue to climb.

"This is kind of the business catching up with the athletes," said Litz.

"This is people consciously deciding that these athletes now deserve a spotlight that their male counterparts have had for decades."

For Scott, a professional women's league in Canada is a dream come true.

"The journey hasn't always been easy," she said. "I really didn't think in my wildest dreams I would be where I am today."

"Canadian people are leading the charge here," she added. "It's a league for Canadians, by Canadians, so there's that passion piece to it."

As for a message to the next generation of female athletes, Scott says the time is now.

"If young players can get out to those games, they can get in the stands, experience that atmosphere... you get that motivation of 'Wow, this is women's sport, this is amazing and could potentially be me one day!'"

Scott makes her NSL debut Sunday when Ottawa visits AFC Toronto. Kick-off is at noon Winnipeg time and will be live on TSN.

On May 31, Scott will earn her 188th and final cap with the Canadian women's national team, when she will be honoured in a friendly match against Haiti at Princess Auto Stadium.

Jets have already turned the page

MIKE MCINTYRE

THERE has never been a perfect Stanley Cup champion.

Don't believe us? Look through the NHL's record books and you'll find blemishes on the last team standing every spring. Some left quite a mark.

For example, the Florida Panthers lost eight games over their four rounds last year — including doozies by scores of 6-3 in the first round (against Tampa Bay), 5-1 in the second round (against Boston) and 8-1 in the Stanley Cup Final (against Edmonton). Nobody remembers those now, of course, because their 16 combined wins ultimately rendered their losses moot.

The 2023 champion Vegas Golden Knights dropped six in total, including ones by scores of 4-1, 5-1 and 5-1. The 2022 Colorado Avalanche only fell four times that year, but two were by scores of 4-1 and 6-2. Fact is, since the NHL moved to four best-of-seven rounds in 1987, not a single squad has gone 16-0.

Bottom line: Teams are going to get knocked down when playing emotional, high-stakes hockey. Games sometimes get out of hand and momentum shifts can be extreme this time of year. Even the greatest clubs are going to lose. Likely several times. Maybe even in ugly, lopsided ways.

Which brings us to the Winnipeg Jets. It's far too early to say if this group will be sipping out of Lord Stan-

Road to Stanley Cup glory rarely straightforward

ley's mug in about seven weeks from now, although hopes were certainly raised when they quickly jumped out to a 2-0 series lead over the St. Louis Blues with a pair of hard-fought home-ice victories (5-3, 2-1).

However, any thoughts of a perfectly paved road to the promised land were tossed out the window Thursday night in the form of a 7-2 beatdown at the hands of the St. Louis Blues.

Anything that could go wrong seemingly did go wrong. From a "You've got to be kidding me?" goal by Pavel Buchnevich 48 seconds into the contest, to a controversial Cole Perfetti no-goal that sure looked like a goal, to a Connor Hellebuyck puckhandling blunder that ended up in the back of his net, this was a disaster on multiple levels.

The Jets didn't just lose the game, but their cool, too. They tried to take their pound of flesh in the third period but ended up filling up the penalty box, which allowed the home team to keep piling on, much to the delight of their fans.

As far as we know, Winnipeg hospitals didn't experience an overnight surge thanks to scores of Jets fans limping in with ankle and foot injuries. It sure felt like plenty of folks were jumping off the crowded bandwag-

on fast and furious over one lousy, out-of-character performance.

Cause for some concern? OK, we'll give you that. A reason for full-blown panic? Hardly.

"It's one game. We lost one game. Whether it's 7-2 or 1-0, we lost one game in this series," Jets head coach Scott Arniel said in St. Louis.

This wasn't a case of the bench boss simply trying to put on a brave face. Arniel is speaking the truth.

While it may not feel this way to some, the Jets are still in a solid position by holding a 2-1 advantage in the series with Game 4 set for Sunday at noon. There's no cumulative score here. It's the first team to four wins that moves on. That perspective is important. As is some additional hockey history.

We take you back to 2018, which remains the benchmark for playoff hockey in Winnipeg. The Jets won their first post-season game in franchise history in the form of a 3-2 squeaker over the Minnesota Wild, then followed that up with a 4-1 victory in Game 2.

That was the only other time, until this week, the Jets were off to a 2-0 series start off a pair of home wins. How did Game 3 go on the road that year? A 6-2 loss, which sure looked

a lot like what went down in Missouri on Thursday. Winnipeg couldn't match the desperation of Minnesota that year, which was basically in a "must-win" situation. Same goes for St. Louis.

Let the record show the Jets quickly picked themselves up off the mat and responded with a rock-solid 2-0 road triumph in Game 4, then a 5-0 victory in Game 5 at Canada Life Centre to quell any hopes of a Wild comeback, ultimately making it to the Western Conference Final.

We have no idea if a similar script might be followed this time around, but it should at least demonstrate one ugly loss does not automatically spell doom. Not for Winnipeg. Not for any playoff team. Just ask the Lightning, Bruins and Oilers from last year, who weren't able to turn dominating wins over the Panthers into sustained success and a series victory.

It's why you won't see or hear the Blues taking any victory laps over one impressive, 60-minute effort.

● JETS, CONTINUED ON E2
● MORE HOCKEY ON E2, E5



Winnipeg's Adam Lowry (centre) and St. Louis's Justin Faulk battle for control of the puck during the first period in St. Louis Thursday.

SCOTT KANE / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS