

Portland Winterhawks

By Michael Orr

Founded in 1976, the Portland Winterhawks are a junior hockey team based at Memorial Coliseum and the Moda Center. Following the dissolution of the popular Portland Buckaroos minor league team in 1975, former Edmonton Oilers coach Brian Shaw moved the Edmonton Oil Kings, a Western Hockey League (WHL) team, to Portland to fill the hockey void in the city. The WHL is a developmental league that routinely sends its top players to the National Hockey League (NHL).

Originally named the Winter Hawks, the team has won the President's Cup (known as the Ed Chynoweth Cup since 2007) as champions of the WHL three times and the prestigious Memorial Cup twice. The team name was changed from Winter Hawks to Winterhawks in 2009.

The Winterhawks are frequently among the best teams in the WHL's Western Conference, often averaging from 5,000 to 7,000 fans per game. With an uninterrupted franchise dating to 1976, the Winterhawks are the second oldest team in professional sports in Portland, trailing only the Portland Trail Blazers.

Through connections with the Chicago Blackhawks in the NHL, the world's top hockey league, Shaw acquired uniforms for the Winterhawks in their debut season. Though the uniforms were altered to make it clear that the team was in Portland, not Chicago, the team's name, logo, and color scheme were similar to the Blackhawks.

Several notable stars in the NHL played for the Winterhawks. Mark Messier is the most famous alumnus, though he played only briefly for the team in 1978-1979 before achieving superstardom with the Edmonton Oilers. Cam Neely, a longtime Boston Bruins star, holds the team's rookie record for points in a season, set in 1982-1983, with 56 goals contributing to a team scoring record of 495 goals. Both are members of the Hockey Hall of Fame. Mike Vernon (1981-1983), Ray Ferraro (1982-1983), Richard Zednik (1994-1995), and Marian Hossa (1997-1998) are among the best known Winterhawks alumni and among the twenty-eight NHL first round-draft picks produced by the team through 2013.

Led by Neely, Vernon, and Ferraro, the Winterhawks claimed their first Memorial Cup in 1982-1983, defeating the Ontario Hockey League's (OHL) Oshawa Generals 8-3 in the final game. The year before, the team reached the Memorial Cup round-robin as WHL champions but failed to qualify for the final game.

In 1997-1998, with Hossa leading the way, the Winterhawks won the WHL and qualified for the Memorial Cup tournament. With future Major League Baseball star Justin Morneau as a backup goalkeeper, the team cruised through the round-robin before defeating the OHL's Guelph Storm 4-3 in overtime for the Winterhawks' second Memorial Cup.

The Winterhawks reached the Memorial Cup tournament for the fifth time in 2012-2013, reaching the championship game before losing to the Halifax Mooseheads of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, 6-4. Seth Jones, the WHL's Rookie of the Year and the number four overall NHL draft pick, led the Winterhawks back to North American junior hockey's championship round. Though they were unable to capture the team's third Memorial Cup, the Winterhawks are among the most consistently successful teams in Portland sports, both at the box office and in league competition.

In 2021, the Winterhawks rebranded to distinguish the team from the Blackhawks. The logo was replaced by a hawk head with feathers in the shape of Mt. Hood, and their color scheme was adjusted to include "squall gray."

Ten years after its most recent Western Hockey League Western Conference crown, the Portland Winterhawks returned to the WHL Championship in 2023-24. In a season where the club led the league in goals scored, James Stefan scored 50, good for fourth most in the WHL, while Gabe Klassen's 71 assists tied for third most in the league. Though the offensively dominant season ended in a sweep at the hands of Moose Jaw Warriors, the Winterhawks' return to the top of the Western Conference table brought an end to a decade of frustrating early round playoff losses.

In 2023, the Hawks drafted goalie Morgan Stickney, age 15, to the team, the second ever (and first American) female player to play in the WHL.

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