

Women's Professional Soccer: What you need to know



A Guide For Young Players (And Coaches)

At Inspired XI, we are passionate about helping more American women play professionally. During the course of our work, we've seen that many women don't start learning about playing at the next level until they are about to graduate from college. You would never take such an approach with your major!

Our goal is to educate women early in their college careers so that they can feel confident upon graduation that they have all of the information they need to make the right decision for themselves about playing at the next level (or not).



The Women's Soccer Landscape

The landscape of women's professional soccer is changing rapidly. The 2019 World Cup was a watershed moment with the 2022 Women's EURO evidence of a new reality. Attendance records are being broken every day across the world while more leagues professionalize and new funding and television deals come online.

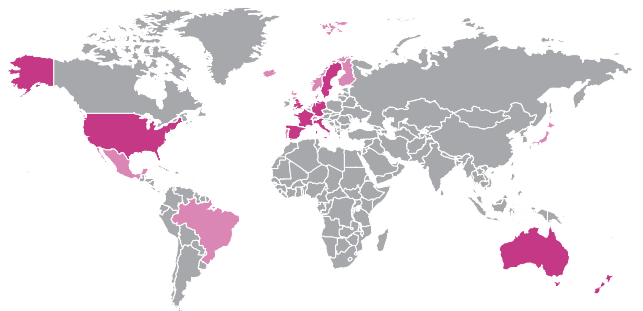
While playing opportunities are increasing and the future looks bright, there is much work left to be done. Most players still earn low salaries and many clubs lack the resources needed for adequate staffing, scouting, facilities and equipment. Investment needs to continue to grow in order for the women's game to realize its full potential across the world.

That said, there is a lot of evidence that the commitment to invest in the women's game is real. Exciting new clubs like Angel City FC fire the imagination and challenge old ideas about what is possible in the women's game.

Top Women's Leagues

Identifying the top leagues in the world is certainly a subjective process. That said, we have included some loose groupings below as food for thought. The NWSL continues to be one of the best leagues in the world and the most competitive when considering the spread of quality among its teams.

While top teams in European leagues may equal or surpass NWSL clubs, most leagues around the world are top heavy: 2-5 quality, professional squads dominate while leagues are rounded out with a number of non-competitive, semi-amateur teams. That said, in Europe and elsewhere, teams, leagues and federations are investing and looking to overtake American dominance in world soccer, with England leading the way.



First Tier

USA, France, Germany, Spain, England, Italy, Sweden, Australia/New Zealand

Second Tier

Czechia, Denmark, Iceland, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Finland, Portugal, Scotland, Brazil, the Netherlands

Just because a country is not on this list, it does not mean that a) there is not a lot of talent in that country or b) that

there might not be a great opportunity for you there. Also, please note that many of the countries that are on this list have second divisions which can be excellent places for American women to begin their professional careers. There are lots of women coming out of the NCAA looking to play professionally, making it very competitive. One year of playing in a professional league - just about anywhere - can differentiate you from the crowd and lead to new opportunities.



We would encourage you to become a fan of a team in the NWSL and to try to watch women's professional soccer when you can. Get a feel for the level in various countries. Many leagues can be watched on YouTube or with an inexpensive subscription to a service such as Paramount+, where, for example, you can find NWSL and WSL matches.

League Schedules

Professional leagues generally run on one of two calendars. The first is based on the calendar year with preseason beginning in January/February and the league running through October/November. The second is based on the Northern hemisphere school year with preseason in July/August and the league's conclusion in May/June of the following year.

Calendar Year

NWSL, Scandinavia

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
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School Year

UK, Most of Europe, Mexico, USL Super League (fall 2024), Australia/New Zealand

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
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Transfer Windows



Transfer windows are the periods during which you can join a new team. While you can have contact and negotiate - even sign with - clubs outside of these periods (with restrictions), the transfer windows are the only time when an amateur player (any player coming directly from the NCAA) can be registered. These periods vary greatly between countries and genders, but there are typically two major windows during the year: one in winter, one in summer. Some examples are listed below. You can find the full list on the FIFA website.

Important! Players tend to have more power and more options early in a window when clubs are eager to get business done. Moving late in a window can be more challenging as clubs may have finalized their rosters, become more selective as they look to find the last piece or two for their rosters or only have room in their budgets to afford domestic players.

Country	Period 1	Period 2
Australia	Oct 18, 2022-Jan 9, 2023	Apr 21-May 18, 2023
England	Jun 9-Aug 31, 2023	Jan 1-31, 2024
Mexico	Jul 1-Sep 22, 2023	Jan 4-Feb 1, 2024
Sweden	Jan 9-Mar 31, 2023	Aug 3-31, 2023
United States	Feb 3-Apr 7, 2023	Jun 28 - Jul 25, 2023

NWSL Draft

In addition to moving within a transfer window, all players looking to move directly to the NWSL from an American university - whether US citizens or not - must enter the draft, where they have the opportunity to be selected by NWSL teams. The current draft format consists of 4 rounds of 12 selections (48 in total). In theory, each team has 1 pick in each of the 4 rounds, though these draft selections may be traded between teams for players or allocation money leading some teams to have more or less than 4 picks.

One of the drawbacks of the draft is that players do not have a say in which team chooses them. That said, they are not obligated to join the team that selects them, in which case they would also not be allowed to play in the NWSL that season. A player who leaves college to play professionally outside of the NWSL could return in the future and join an NWSL team outside of the draft. Such a move would be subject to the league's somewhat complicated discovery process though they would have more control of their destination. Undrafted players may join an NWSL team following the draft via the trial process as a Non-Roster Invitee (NRI).



Important! Just because you are drafted does not mean that you will be given a contract. It is important to get an honest assessment of your level and qualities in advance of the draft. Each year, many excellent players who might otherwise receive several contract offers from teams outside the US end up having to wait up to 6 months without a team after not getting a contract and being released by an NWSL club in preseason.

2022 Draft Example

To give you a perspective, we break down the results from the 2022 NWSL Draft below, in which 50 players were selected (two extra players due to expansion that year). As you can see, many entered the draft, but only a few - ten players - played significant numbers for their clubs. By the end of the season, 16 of the 50 players drafted had either not received a contract or had been released from their respective NWSL teams.

2022 Draft	Number
Players entered into draft	192
Players selected	50
Played > 1,000 minutes during 2022-23 season	10
Played < 100 minutes during 2022-23 season	19
Players released before or at end of season	16

Budgets, Compensation and Contracts

Budgets vary considerably between clubs and leagues. NWSL teams are subject to a US\$1,375,000 salary cap in 2023, though they also have access to US\$600,000 in allocation money. There is no limit to what NWSL clubs may spend outside of salaries. In contrast, the wage bill alone for Arsenal WFC, playing in the Women's Super League in England was US\$5.2 million in 2023, and FC Barcelona Femeni's overall budget has been reported at over US\$12 million.

For the majority of clubs around the world, however - even for countries in our top two tiers - clubs must work within far more limited budgets that are likely less than US\$1 million, if not much less. If you start adding up everything that is included in a budget - staff, players, facilities, equipment, etc. - you quickly realize that this is not a lot of money. As an illustration of what a game changer the Champions League can be, teams qualifying for the group phase earn a minimum of just over US\$400,000, which may double some clubs' total budgets.

Player Salaries

In a first- or second-tier league, salaries vary by club, player age and player ability. Excluding in-kind compensation, less-experienced players should expect to make between US\$750 and US\$2,500 per month gross. Average salaries would fall slightly above that range for many players with experience, while an exclusive group of top players at top clubs may make upwards of US\$1 million annually.

In the NWSL, the current minimum annual salary is US\$36,400, a number that increases gradually each year. Average salaries are between US\$50,000 and US\$60,000. The maximum salary is US\$75,000 though this may be augmented with allocation money. Top players currently earn nearly \$300,000 in the league.

While many other leagues have minimum salaries - either mandated by the federation or government - clubs may or may not adhere to those strictly depending on the revenue situation of their specific country, league and club. In most leagues, there is no salary cap.

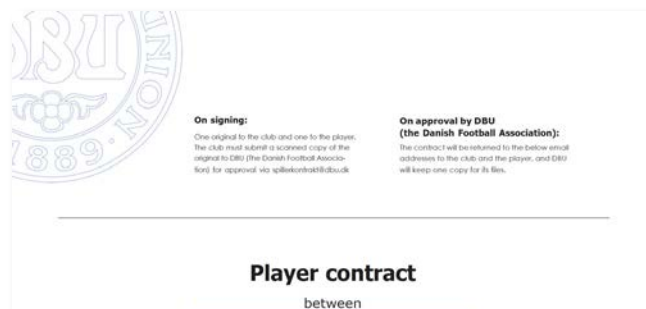
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Budgets, Compensation and Contracts (cont.)

Additional Compensation

It is very common at most clubs around the world, especially in cases where salaries are low, that overall compensation would also include some combination of in-kind compensation. Most common among these would be housing, flights, visa and food, but may also include transportation and bonuses. The NWSL CBA includes a long list of such items.



Contracts

In most, if not all, of the countries in our top two tiers, there is a standard contract for all players that has been developed by the specific country's federation or league. While there are sections in the contracts where modifications may be made for specific players to items such as pay, bonuses, sell-on clauses, etc., the vast majority of the terms of the contract will be shared by all players in the league. This can give players confidence in the terms under which they have been hired. In lower-tier leagues, there may not be a standard contract, in which case you would need to scrutinize the terms of your contract more closely.

Some things that are typically included in a contract are pay, in-kind compensation (housing, food, flights, etc.), time off, clauses related to advertising and club-related functions, equipment and medical care. Typically, health care for any injuries incurred while playing for your team are covered. Additionally, in many of the countries in our top tiers lists, general health care - outside of soccer - is either covered or readily available for a nominal fee.

Please note that signing bonuses are very uncommon in women's soccer. Additionally, there are currently no pension plans from which players can benefit when they retire.

Contract Length

Most leagues in the first tier will look to sign players to a minimum 18- to 24-month contract with 3- to 5-year deals for top players and promising young players. Second- and lower-tier leagues, as well as second division teams in all tiers, often sign players to 1-year contracts, even 6-month deals, in some cases.

In most leagues contracts are guaranteed, meaning you will get paid for the length of the contract, even if you sustain a long-term injury. In the NWSL, however, contracts are not guaranteed. A young player may be released at almost any time, though the CBA requires they be paid a 4-week severance.

Transfer Fees

Transfer fees are amounts paid by one club to sign a player currently under contract at another club. For example, if you are halfway through a 2-year contract and another club wants to sign you, they would pay your current club a fee. Depending on the arrangement you have with your current club (as well as with your agent), you may be entitled to a portion of this fee.

Residency/Nationality Requirements

Every league sets a limit to the number of foreign players that may be registered per team, but these vary greatly by country. If you are looking to play outside of the United States, you would want to take a close look at the specific restrictions of the countries you are interested in. Some examples:

Country	Requirements
England	International players must accrue 15 'points' to play in English leagues; see GBE requirements
Iceland	3 non-EU players; unlimited EU players
Italy	2 non-EU players; 10 Italians must be in matchday squad
Mexico	4 international roster spots
United States	5 international roster spots

When any club signs players from abroad, it is important to note that they are doing so because they believe that foreign player is going to be a game changer for them. Depending on the specific situation, it is likely that signing the foreign player will cost more (flights, visas, housing, minimum wage requirements, etc.), and, therefore, there will be higher expectations for the player's performance once they arrive.

Additional Revenue Streams

Players may also earn money 1) through marketing, sponsorship and commercial opportunities off the pitch, as well as 2) through playing for their national teams. Both can be significant sources of income and, in some cases, may exceed a player's playing salary.

Protecting Players



This section is primarily about the NWSL; however, many of the same issues apply elsewhere and similar steps are being taken to make women's football better, though those efforts are moving at different speeds in different geographies.

2022 was a challenging year in the NWSL. In January, the NWSL and NWSLPA signed their first collective bargaining agreement, which gave players unprecedented rights. In September, US Soccer signed a historic agreement securing equal pay between the women's and men's teams.

The end of the year, however, saw the release of both the Yates report and the Joint Report by the NWSL and NWSLPA, detailing the systemic abuse that has plagued women's football for decades. Those reports offered suggestions for corrective actions moving forward. Our hope is that women's football is currently developing the mechanisms to protect players, provide players with strong processes to report and remedy grievances and remove bad actors from the game permanently. Players should be able to move on to play at the next level without having to worry about their safety or mental health.

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Working With An Agent



An agent, also known as an intermediary, is not necessary for you to play professionally. That said, a good agent can be helpful to a player in many

ways. Most obviously, an agent has contacts that can help facilitate you signing or trialing with a professional club. While you may not need an agent to assist you with negotiating a rookie contract if you are drafted into the NWSL, an agent's relationships can be invaluable in helping you get on the radar of an NWSL club or to navigate toward the right club outside of the United States.

All agents offer club placement and negotiation services while many also offer assistance with marketing and commercial opportunities, legal and financial services and a variety of other items such as moving, translation, visa / work permit issues, social media, technical and tactical training, nutrition, etc. Ideally, you should be able to focus on your performance on the pitch while your agent takes care of the rest.

Important! The player-agent relationship should be a relationship in every sense of the word and not just about a transaction or series of transactions. Take your time when choosing one. Ask questions. Ideally, you will work with an agent/agency for many years, so they need to be someone that is competent, that you feel comfortable with and that you feel will always keep your best interests at heart.

Representation Agreement

A representation agreement (see Additional Resources below) is the contract that you sign with an agent once you've decided you want to work with them. The agent needs to have this agreement with you prior to doing the work of presenting you to clubs. The length of this agreement is mandated by FIFA to have a maximum duration of two years. Most agents will prefer to sign an agreement with a player for the maximum term as

their efforts often take time to come to fruition. That said, like most aspects of the relationship between the player and the agent, the term is negotiable. Representation agreements may be terminated at any time. If not done for cause, however, you may owe something to the agent if you terminate early.

Agency Compensation

Regarding compensation, agents work on a commission basis - they are only successful if you are. Commissions may be structured differently deal to deal; however, they are typically based on your salary and/or any transfer fees related to you moving clubs. It is common for agents to look to receive a commission that is equal to 5% of the gross salaries paid to you by your club. Quite often this same amount would be accrued on any transfer fees paid. Mechanically, in women's soccer the commission is most often paid directly from the club to the agent **on top of** your salary. For example, if you earn US\$1,000, the club would pay US\$1,000 (less applicable taxes) directly to you then \$50 directly to the agent. Though not as common, in some cases, the commission may be paid **out of** your salary, so it is important to get an understanding on this point before signing your contract.

Additionally, some percentage of commercial opportunities (marketing / sponsorships) secured by the agent on behalf of the player is typically part of the agreement.

Important! You should not pay anything up front to an agent unless it is for something special, such as very high level training that you might pay for anyway outside of the agent relationship. DO NOT pay anything to an agent up front for placement or negotiation services.

Additional Things To Consider

While women's football is growing at pace, salaries are still low across the world. If you are below the age of 18, you should seriously consider playing university football and/or getting a university education while you play at a professional club. If there is an opportunity for you to get a college scholarship, this likely is much more valuable in financial terms (among others) than any professional compensation package. That said, if you

do choose the professional route at a young age, there are opportunities to study while you play, though universities are often not as willing as American universities are to tailor your coursework to your playing demands.

Important! You should keep in mind what you would like to do with your life long term. Even a fantastic professional career will likely only take you into your early 30s. What will you do after that?

If you are graduating from a university program and looking to play professionally for the first time, you should also consider a couple of other factors before joining a team:

Adaptation



This has two aspects: firstly, there will be an adaptation to life as a professional which includes a new, total focus on soccer and the pressures of having to perform every day. You may be with a group of people that are new to you and asked to play faster and with more technical precision than ever before. Secondly, if this new stage of your life involves moving to a new city - or a new country - you may also have to adjust to that new location, to a new culture, new ways of communicating, a new language, new foods, etc. Both of these aspects may cause your performance to dip at least initially. Since performance is so crucial to your success and growth, it is important to factor these aspects into your planning.

As a final point here, if you are coming from a top American university, you should also prepare yourself for joining a club

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Additional Things To Consider (cont.)

that has less resources, less staff and a lower quality of facilities at the next level. There are lots of very high-quality clubs around the world that do not have the financial backing that your soccer program had in the United States. That does not make the opportunity any less valuable.

Lastly, it is important to note that Americans have an excellent reputation abroad. Coaches and sporting directors across the world praise American players' drive, work ethic, competitive spirit, professionalism, athleticism, attitude and, in most cases, technical level. One common criticism, however, is that Americans are not prepared for a game that is more tactically nuanced or demanding. It is important to keep this aspect in mind: playing abroad is a great opportunity to develop tactically, but also something that will require adaptation.

Game Minutes

While there may be circumstances under which it makes sense to join a club primarily for training, the most important push for your development at the next level will likely be game minutes. While most players value a challenge and look to push themselves, it is best to be realistic and honest about your level and your qualities and to choose a professional team / league that matches those attributes and will give you an opportunity to play regularly.

Value professionalism and opportunity to grow over labels. Following on from the previous point, you should place a great deal of emphasis on aspects such as the professionalism of the coaching staff, the treatment of players and the quality of instruction you will get at a certain club as key factors in your decision. Don't get hung up on whether or not the club you may join is in the first, second or lower division. If you can add new skills, improve your technical level and/or tactical understanding while getting good game minutes - and getting seen and scouted - playing at a team in the second division, this will benefit you much more in the long run and lead to a more meaningful experience than joining a first-division team that may not be as professional or on which you won't play regularly or improve.

Example: Your Timeline

If you are currently a college student-athlete graduating in December, a potential timeline for the six months leading up to graduation might look like this:

Date	Action
Summer	Stay fit; Play USL W League or WPSL
August	College preseason begins; start evaluating agencies
September to October	Ball out on the field and in the classroom!
November	Finalize decision and agreement with agency; you focus on doing well in the postseason and on graduating; your agent begins prepping for the Draft and a potential move abroad
December	College season ends; graduation; agent begins contacting NWSL and foreign clubs
January/February	NWSL Draft; choose team and finalize contract; move to new club; preseason

If you are graduating in May, your timeline would look very similar to the one shown above with modifications depending on your situation:

- if entering the draft, follow the timing as stated then look to join your new team after graduation
- if looking to move during a summer transfer window, simply start the process 5-6 months later

Additional Resources

FIFA Transfer Windows	bit.ly/fifa-tw
NWSL Roster Rules	nwslsoccer.com/roster-rules
NWSL Draft	nwslsoccer.com/nwsl-draft
GBE Requirements (England)	bit.ly/gbe-reqs
NWSL Players Association	nwslplayers.com
NWSL CBA	nwslplayers.com/cba
Yates Report	bit.ly/yates-report
Joint NWSL-NWSLPA Report	bit.ly/joint-nwsl-report
Sample Representation Agreement	bit.ly/sample-ra
Women In Soccer	womeninsoccer.org
The Equalizer	equalizersoccer.com
Women's Football Weekly Podcast	bit.ly/womens-fbw
Attacking Third Podcast	bit.ly/a3-pod
NCAA Women's Soccer	ncaa.com/sports/soccer-women
Paramount+	paramountplus.com
United States NWSL	nwslsoccer.com
France D1 Féminine	bit.ly/d1-arkema
Germany Frauen Bundesliga	bit.ly/frauen-bundesliga
Spain Liga F	ligaf.es
England WSL	womenscompetitions.thefa.com
Italy Serie A Femminile	figc.it/it/femminile
Sweden Damallsvenskan	obosdamallsvenskan.se
Australia/NZ A-League Women	keepup.com.au/a-league-women
Mexico Liga MX Femenil	ligafemenil.mx



INSPIRED XI

Inspired XI is a United States-based agency dedicated exclusively to professional women's soccer. We believe in the power of women's sport to change society. We are looking to do things the right way and to build long-term relationships with players, coaches and clubs. You can learn more about our organization and philosophy at inspiredxi.com.

We Are Looking To Serve

If we can assist you - as a player or a coach - in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out to us:

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A Personal Evaluation

We live in the world of professional soccer every day and understand what coaches, scouts and sporting directors are looking for. If of interest, we would be happy to evaluate your profile and film to provide an honest assessment of your potential to play at the next level.