

CASE STUDY: LMWF Assists Professional Sports Teams and Foreign Athletes with Unique Immigration Challenges

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As we approach the 100th anniversary of the National Hockey League (NHL) expanding into the U.S. (with the founding of the Boston Bruins in 1924), hockey is now among the most popular sports in the U.S. Every year, talented athletes from all around the world come to the U.S. to play on both major and minor league professional teams. In fact, more than 72% of the players in the National Hockey League (NHL) are not American (according to quanthockey.com), with athletes from Canada, the Czech Republic, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Germany and Japan making a huge impact on hockey in the U.S. each year.

The sport continues to gain national momentum; for example, in 2015, the National Women's Hockey League (NWHL) was established. Among the players to participate in the NWHL are more than two dozen former and current United States National Team players, including Olympic stars such as Gigi Marvin, Haley Skarupa, Hannah Brandt and Amanda Kessel, as well as foreign elite players such as Canadian Olympian Shannon Szabados.

Athletes and support staff who are not U.S. citizens can find great opportunities to participate through the NHL, NWHL and other major and minor league teams in the U.S.—but working your way through the U.S. immigration system to that end goal of a visa can feel slower than riding a Zamboni in a speed skating event. Athletes facing off against the U.S. visa application system often feel benched until they have that all-important government approval in hand.

The nature and business of professional sports also create unique challenges for teams bringing foreign talent to the U.S. For example, professional hockey teams frequently hold their draft picks and contracts close to the chest until a deal is in place, and often need quick or immediate access to foreign players after they have officially signed. However, immigration service centers and U.S. Consulates and Embassies issuing physical visas routinely have backlogs of cases they have to get through before they can address an athlete's case. Contract terms also may present obstacles; athletes' duties often extend both pre-and post-season, but teams and their players can encounter challenges to obtaining or maintaining P-1 athlete status outside the season schedule and/or timeline noted in their contracts. All in all, the system and its built-in roadblocks can make obtaining a visa feel like trying to skate on half-melted ice.

LMWF assists athletic teams and individual athletes—including U.S. hockey teams, both male and female across major and minor leagues—with bringing the best and brightest players from around the world to play in the U.S. We use creative strategies to help players obtain status across the entire recruiting, sports reporting, etc. We also have developed best practices to make certain that cases are streamlined from start to finish—working with teams,

athletes and U.S. government resources around the world to expedite processes where needed and obtain visas and status within tight time frames. For athletes, our broad experience supporting them across the entire timeline of their careers allows them to achieve both their short- and long-term goals, irrespective of borders. And for both major and minor league sports teams and organizations, having the ability to sign, trade and train the best players—and have quick access to valid work status for those players—can make the difference between a winning season and a mediocre or losing one.

LMWF also coordinates strategies to support team personnel, including coaches, scouts, sports scientist and other key staff.

We are honored to assist athletes, sports staff and their teams across multiple sports, including hockey, football, lacrosse, taekwondo, tennis, golf and soccer. If you have a need for a strategic team to back your sports organization or your goals as a professional athlete, please feel free to reach out to one of our seasoned immigration professionals. We understand the challenges you face, and have proactive strategies to allow you/your team to maximize your talent.

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