

## **Bobcats Winning Where It Counts, In Development**

First year franchises in hockey, traditionally, are a bit of fodder for leagues they come into. They are not the team people look at as being a favorite to win the whole thing, nor even perform well. These teams struggle for a myriad of reasons starting with roster construction. The superstar league talent already has a home and are usually protected by their previous year's team and can make it hard to make an impact right away.

The Southern Professional Hockey League is commonly referred to as a development league. The purpose of the league is to develop talent to move to the ECHL or in the rare circumstance, the AHL, both of which feed the highest level, the NHL. The eleven teams that comprise the SPHL all are out to win a championship at this level, but also to aide in making their players better to advance their careers. The players who make their way to the SPHL know the name Scott Darling who played in the SPHL before getting to have his name engraved on the Stanley Cup as a member of the Chicago Blackhawks. Knowing they are but a couple of short steps away from that level and that someone who played here has done it.



The league added its 11<sup>th</sup> team this year as the Vermilion County Bobcats joined the ranks of the SPHL. After some early season front office and coaching changes, the goal of the organization was to find a way to prepare its players for the next level and find ways to make this a destination for players looking for a chance to prove themselves. Through the midway point of the season owner Ellen Tully and head coach Nick Niedert can already congratulate themselves on a job well done. Vermilion County boasts itself as second in the league in terms of attendance by capacity and first in the league in players called up to the next level with fourteen.



Upon putting a team in Vermilion County, Ellen Tully, the first female owner of a professional hockey team, sought to make an impact by upgrading the atmosphere of the arena and adding in a big league feel to a traditional small-town market. Fans who came to games now saw a pre-game video and light show, new video boards, an upgraded locker room, and more than anything else fans in the stands.

Being a new owner in any league has its challenges, but the players have felt the support of their ownership since they got here. "Since the beginning Ellen has supported us. There's been so many things upgraded from the rink to the locker room and throughout the organization. Ellen has done a great job pushing us to reach for higher levels and helping us achieve our goals." Danville returnee Mitch Atkins said. Captain Ben Boukal echoed his teammate "It has been interesting to see all the changes here to the Arena to the team and even more to the culture. Everyone here wants what is best for you. Birmingham and Quad City have both struggled through tough inaugural seasons and success takes time, but our owner cares and it shows." The team got off to a rocky start as they tried to find their identity, but it did not take long for teams to notice the hard work of the players and coaches at the David S Palmer Arena.



The Bobcats have seen fourteen players called up to the next level with goaltender Corbin Kaczperski being called up twice and making his way to the AHL for two stints one with the Utica Comets, an affiliate of the New Jersey Devils and the other with the Syracuse Crunch, an affiliate of the defending Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning. Zach White, the Bobcats first ever goal scorer, has played an impressive twelve games already in the ECHL with six points to his credit with the Iowa Heartlanders, the ECHL affiliate of the Minnesota Wild. In addition, Justin Portillo, who started this season in the Federal Prospects Hockey League came to the Bobcats and provided heart, determination, and an openness to growing his game that has seen him earn a call up to the Kansas City Mavericks the ECHL affiliate of the Calgary Flames.



These players credit Coach Nick Niedert with their ability to move up. Goaltender Corbin Kaczperski said “I would not be here without Coach Niedert. He pushed every coach to try to sign me. He tries to get guys to the next level and is constantly on the phone with coaches telling them about our players.” Zach White echoed that “Nick told me I was going to play at the next level. He pushed us to succeed, and it is a testament to him as a coach that he wants us to play. Coach Niedert is a good coach who’s able to keep guys engaged despite the adversity in our first season.”



Though these are just a few players who have made their way to higher levels others such as Captain Ben Boukal, Mitch Atkins, Skyler Smutek, Brian Wilson, Joe Murdaca, Chase Perry, Ryan Devine, Connor Graham, and Aaron Ryback have also found themselves called up during the season. The Bobcats have continually had to revamp their roster on the fly as any first-year team does as they try to find their identity, but throughout the struggle they have maintained an eye to the future mentality.



Owner Ellen Tully comes into running a hockey team with an eye not only on winning, but on development. “When we were building the Bobcats, we were looking for talent and when you find talent you want them to be successful. We took the view from the outset that we did not want people to come to Vermilion County and be complacent. We wanted everyone to aspire to get to the next level from the guys in our room, our coach, our staff, and anyone else touched by the Bobcats. We aren’t just an organization or a team we are a family.” Tully said.



When a coaching change became necessary early in the season Tully stuck to that mantra bringing in 17-year veteran player Nick Niedert to take over the helm of the franchise. Niedert played at every level of minor league hockey and brought insight and connections to an organization that needed to find their own identity. Within days of arriving Nick already had two goalies on the move to the ECHL’s Cincinnati Cyclones and on the way to a road trip, his first with the team, in Roanoke the team stopped in Cincinnati for a morning skate. “I want guys to see the next level. I want them to experience what it is like and to understand how close they are to it. Stopping here and skating gave our guys the chance to see the ECHL ice, but also gave the ECHL staff a chance to see our guys.” Niedert said.

The Bobcats as an organization have become an appealing place for players to play as the players continue to move up to the higher levels and the players talk about their experiences. Zach White said “I’ve enjoyed my time with Vermilion County. They gave me my shot at the SPHL, and I have the utmost respect for what the staff is doing there.” Corbin Kaczperki echoed that as well “The fans in

Vermilion County are amazing. They are on our side and always behind us. It means everything to the guys in the locker room. With the fans and the staff there, the Bobcats are a great place to be.”



As the schedule moves into the second half of the season Vermilion County is still attempting to find their identity and what this team hopes to accomplish in their first season on the ice in the SPHL, but off the ice the message has been clear and heard from every person whose laced up their skates or sat down at the David S Palmer Arena, come here, work hard, and reach for the next level.