



PWHL Minnesota's Grace Zumwinkle (13).

Rick Olson / MHM Photos

## PWHL MINNESOTA:

# ZUM ZOOMS TO TOP

GRACE ZUMWINKLE SETTLES INTO HER FIRST PRO YEAR NEAR THE TOP OF THE STATS SHEETS

By Heather Rule

**G**race Zumwinkle looked comfortable from the start. She scored a goal in PWHL Minnesota's first game in Boston before recording the first hat trick in league history at the team's home opener on Jan. 6 at Xcel Energy Center.

With only a few games left in the PWHL regular season, Zumwinkle is second in the league in goals with nine and fifth in

the league with 16 points. Both marks lead Minnesota.

It's easy to think about needing to score goals or needing to do this or that, but Zumwinkle keeps it simple.

"I think it's just focusing on the little things that hopefully will lead to goals or offensive production," Zumwinkle said. "It's just focusing on how many shots I can get each



game and focusing on the little things and hopefully chipping away each and every day.”

Focusing on the little things has helped put Zumwinkle and her team in a good position throughout this inaugural PWHL season. Minnesota is 8-4-3-4 (W-OTW-OTL-L) through 19 games at the end of March before the league took a multi-week break for the IIHF Women’s World Championship April 3-14 in Utica, N.Y.; Minnesota was expected to have six players competing for their country teams, including Zumwinkle for Team USA.

PWHL Minnesota returns to action later in April, as the PWHL season resumes on April 18. After a four-game homestand in March, Minnesota has four road games remaining and the regular-season home finale on April 27. They hope it will put them in a good position for a playoff run in the six-team league which includes Boston, Montreal, New York, Ottawa and Toronto. Minnesota went into the break on a season-long five-game winning streak, with the last four victories coming at home.

While many of the PWHL players throughout the league have bounced around between various hockey experiences the past few years before this new professional league was an option, Zumwinkle and teammate **Taylor Heise** stepped right from the collegiate ice sheet to the professional spotlight. It’s something Zumwinkle says she doesn’t take for granted, even if she jokes with Heise about how lucky they were to get that fifth year with the Gophers and then jump right in to structured practices and everything else that comes along with being a pro hockey player.

“Super grateful in the sense that so many people have paved the way to get us to where we are today,” Zumwinkle said. “So, I don’t think enough credit can go to them.”

**Continued on next page**







## GRACE ZUMWINKLE SETTLES INTO HER FIRST PRO YEAR NEAR THE TOP OF THE STATS SHEETS

Continued from previous page

Obviously, the timing piece benefited the recent collegiate players in that they didn't have to wait for a professional league, said Minnesota general manager **Natalie Darwitz**. However, she added that these younger players right out of college are the "most battled tested" coming right from the demands of the NCAA schedule.

It's the veteran players – like PWHL Minnesota players **Kendall Coyne Schofield**, **Kelly Pannek** and others – who have been used to playing a different type of season the past few years and need to get reacclimated to playing a college-type season again.

"I think the adjustment is probably from the older players," Darwitz said. "I think you're seeing the players like Grace and Heise jump right from college to here and have immediate success."

### ZUMWINKLE STILL HAS A LEARNING CURVE

Though Zumwinkle, who turns 25 on April 23, has shown what she can do on the scoresheet, there's still a learning curve that comes with moving from college hockey into the PWHL.

"I mean, in college you're coming from committing when you're in eighth or ninth grade, and then having the next five, 10 years laid out in front of you," Zumwinkle said. "And then heading into the professional league, now you're balancing not going to school... and finding your social networks again."

She added that while the college game has gotten more physical, the PWHL play is even taken up a notch in physicality, too. That's just one example of "those little learning things" that Zumwinkle hopes will compound over time.

Part of what makes Zumwinkle so good, according to Pannek, is her skating and "really powerful speed." While speed is noticeable right away with some players, like captain

Coyne Schofield, Zumwinkle's speed can take opponents by surprise because of her strength and how good she is on her edges, Pannek said.

"You don't want to give her space, so you want to feel like you play her tighter," Pannek said. "But you play her too tight, she'll just go around you. She has a really, really great ability to finish around the net."

Minnesota and PWHL fans are fortunate to see her skillset on display on such a big stage.

Thank goodness for a kindergarten crush.

Zumwinkle didn't grow up in a hockey family. But a boy she liked in her kindergarten class brought a flyer about hockey to school. So, she convinced her parents to let her try out the sport; her dad bought the \$150 starter kit.

"The night before, I started crying in my bed," Zumwinkle said. "I was like, 'I don't want to go anymore.' My dad said, 'no, we're going. I spent all this money.'

"And then from there on out I've loved it."

Zumwinkle is familiar to Minnesota hockey fans going back to her days at Breck. Although, she was not a Zumwinkle who won girls' state high school championships on the Xcel Energy Center ice in 2018-20. While her Breck teams always fell short in the section final during rival The Blake School's dominance, her sisters **Anna Zumwinkle** and **Emily Zumwinkle** each celebrated state championships.

"Yeah, I think there's some bragging rights," Grace said. "They both won one when I was not on the team. So, I was like 'maybe I was the unlike one.' At the end of the day, we're such a supportive family. ... We're also happy for each other at the end of the day."

Still, Grace left her mark in hockey, being named 2017 Ms. Hockey and the 2017 Athena Award recipient. The Excelsior native then went on to have a successful career with the Gophers, while also winning a silver medal with Team USA at the 2022 Olympics,



plus silver medals in the 2021 and 2022 IIHF Women's World Championships.

Pannek and Zumwinkle have played a lot of hockey together, from the 2022 Olympic team to the Gophers when Pannek was a fifth-year player and Zumwinkle was a sophomore. Pannek has also found herself on a line with Zumwinkle throughout this PWHL season.

"She's really easy to play with in the sense of you know what she's going to bring to a game, what her skill set is," Pannek said. "I think she poses a real, tangible threat to opponents. So, anytime she's on the ice, they have to be aware of just her speed and her physicality, her shot, her presence.

"I just try to find her and set her up to get her shots off."

#### 'AUTOMATIC' IN THE SHOOTOUT

Minnesota headed into the break with a 3-2 shootout victory over Montreal on March 24. Minnesota was down 2-0 early on a pair of quick goals before tying the game and getting goals from their young stars in the shootout.

In the PWHL, players can shoot multiple times in the best-of-five shootout. Against Montreal, Zumwinkle got Minnesota on the board with a move where she skated out wide before coming back in tight with the goal and popping the puck past the goaltender. Heise followed that up with a backhand shot for a goal before Zumwinkle gave her team the win with a shot that went five-hole.

"I learn from Grace," Heise said. "She's automatic."


Added Zumwinkle: "I don't know about that. But they're fun. I enjoy them."

Zumwinkle wasn't aware she'd be going twice in that shootout round until right before the time came. Choosing between multiple shootout moves in her arsenal involves "a little bit of read and reacting and also sticking with what you know," Zumwinkle said.

Heise was correct with her "automatic" comment since Zumwinkle leads the league with three shootout goals in three attempts. Heise is right behind her going 2-for-2 on shootouts. In that game against Montreal, each of them led all players in the game with seven shots on goal apiece.

There was "no question" Zumwinkle was going to be in the mix for the shootout lineup that day, said PWHL Minnesota's **Ken Klee**, who added that the team did a shootout drill in practice the day before and also likes to select players for the shootout based on who's having a good day on the ice. If Zumwinkle didn't score the goal that ended the game, Klee said he was going to go right back with Heise for the next shot.

---

 **Anytime she's on the ice, they have to be aware of just her speed and her physicality, her shot, her presence."**

— **Kelly Pannek**

---

"They're skilled players, there's no question," Klee said.

Players like Heise and Zumwinkle are the "face of our organization" locked up on three-year contracts, Darwitz said.

"Would love to always keep them in the Minnesota crest and have them be franchise players for us," Darwitz said. "Those are the faces we need to grow this game." ●