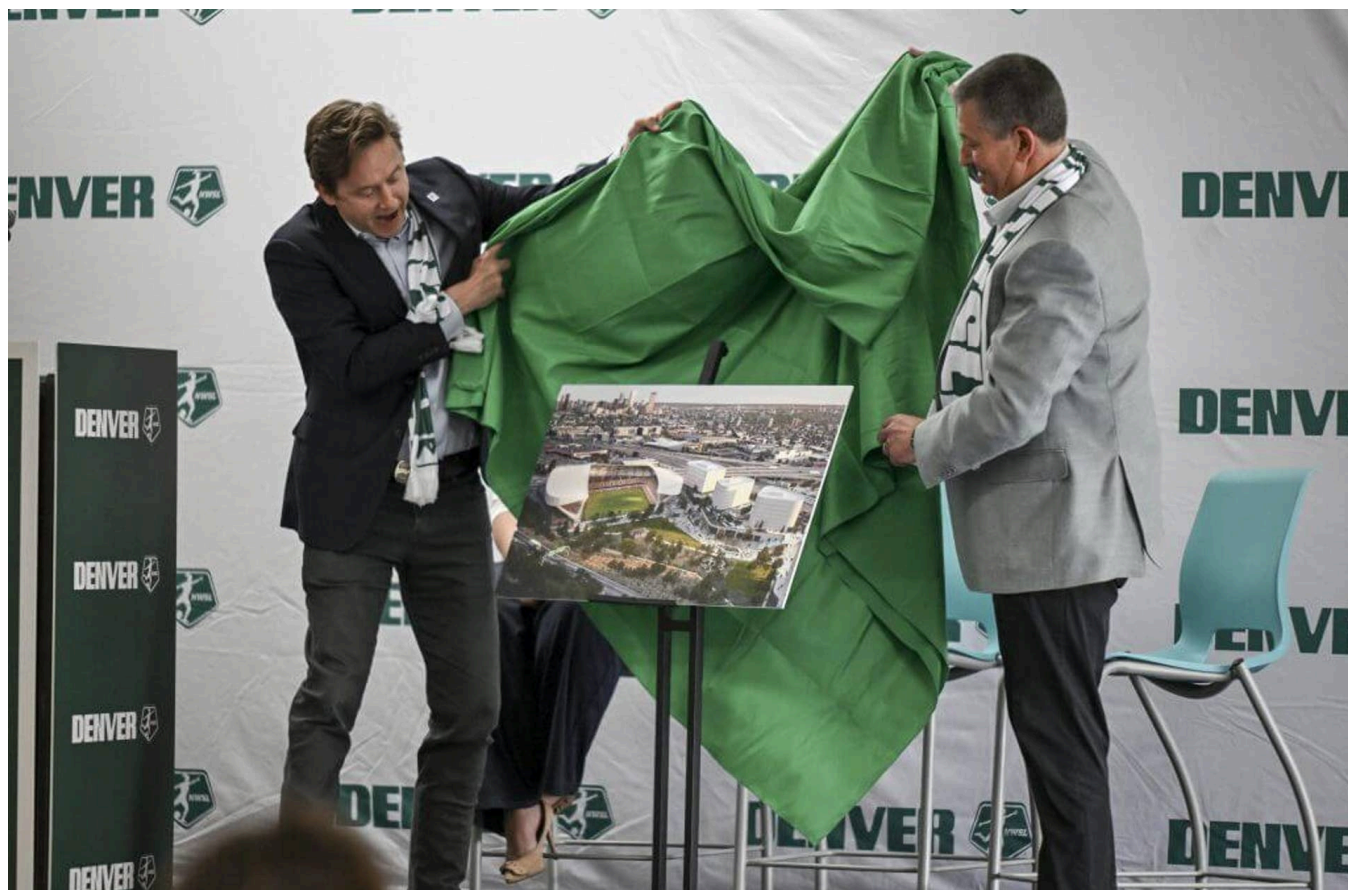


Meet NWSL expansion team Denver Summit: Hometown talent, attendance records and a blank canvas

 nytimes.com/athletic/7085768/2026/03/10/meet-nwsl-expansion-team-denver-summit-hometown

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March 10, 2026



In 13 months, Denver Summit FC has built a franchise essentially out of thin mountain air.

The National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) expansion team attracted a global star and U.S. women’s national team captain to “come home,” hired a coach with experience with men’s and women’s teams, solidified plans for a purpose-built stadium and training facility and sold a record number of tickets before even kicking the ball. The home opener is on track to break a league attendance record at Mile High Stadium, home of the NFL’s Denver Broncos.

“Denver’s done an amazing job,” Summit defender Kaleigh Kurtz said in January. “Obviously, we had heard rumors that other teams were going to be the ones to get that bid, and then Denver swooped in at the last minute. They just meant business from the start.”

The expansion club will debut in the NWSL on Saturday, joining the league [alongside Boston Legacy FC](#). The two expansion clubs were the last to be awarded entry under the league’s previous expansion model, which saw staggered growth over the last decade and has brought the

total number of teams to 16, twice what the league had when it started in 2013. The league has moved to rolling expansion, meaning the size of the league can increase any year.



[Inside Denver's winning NWSL bid: How grassroots and confidence beat stadium plans and Caitlin Clark](#)

[From grassroots efforts led by former player Jordan Angeli to a record-setting expansion fee, here's how NWSL ended up in Denver](#)

Denver was awarded the NWSL's 16th franchise in January 2025.

Led by businessman Rob Cohen, the group is backed by Project Level, a subsidiary of Ariel Investments [overseen by businesswoman Mellody Hobson](#) and former Washington Commanders president Jason Wright. The team's minority investors include some of the state's greatest sporting legends, such as NFL Hall of Famer Peyton Manning and [Olympic skier Mikaela Shiffrin](#).

The team unveiled its well-received identity last year and has plans to build a 14,500-seat soccer stadium at Santa Fe Yards in Denver by 2028. Until then, the team will play their home matches at an interim 12,000-seat stadium at Centennial's Potomac Park near their planned performance center. Their home opener will take place at Empower Field at Mile High on Saturday, March 28, after three matches on the road.

What the team has been building on the pitch has been equally impressive, especially considering they built a team without the NWSL's previous expansion draft mechanism, which was nixed in the current collective bargaining agreement signed in 2024. The draft had allowed new teams to select from a list of unprotected players around the league.

Summit signed its first player in August, [acquiring forward and Colorado Springs native Ally Brazier \(formerly Watt\)](#) from Orlando Pride in a move that set the pace for the club's ambitions. The 28-year-old was a vital part of Orlando's historic championship and shield-winning season in 2024, and her signing signaled the club's desire to build a team around standout players from Colorado. Their biggest local signing came five months later, [when Summit secured USWNT captain, Lindsey Heaps](#), on a 3 and a half year contract from OL Lyonnes in France.

The club's 23-player roster, as of March 10, features a quintet of Coloradans: Brazier, Heaps, Canadian national team standout Janine Sonis, seven-year league vet Jordan Baggett and incoming NWSL rookie Jordyn Nytes, a three-time Big 12 goalkeeper of the year.

Colorado has long been considered a hotbed for the sport and is home to some of the United States' biggest stars, including Heaps, Sophia Wilson and Mallory Swanson. Any of these would have been a dream signing for Summit, and Heaps seemed the least likely to sign in the NWSL because of her contract abroad. But the club's vision, paired with the opportunity to be close to family, made the move inevitable for her.

She joins another member of the team with European experience. Nick Cushing, an experienced coach with spells at WSL club Manchester City Women and Major League Soccer's NYCFC, will lead the team on the field.

Cushing signed with Summit in August and has been building the roster from the ground up ever since with the help of [general manager Curt Johnson, who brought his NWSL experience with the NC Courage to the team](#).

"There is a huge responsibility for me, as head coach, and us as a soccer team, to play a style of the game that is going to really excite our fans from day one," Cushing told *The Athletic* after he was hired. "It's about initially recruiting the players that will fit the style of the game, the attacking style of the game, that I want to play and that we want to play."

What also makes the project in Denver attractive is its mix of veteran talent with stars on the rise, such as 2025 MAC Hermann Trophy winner Jasmine Aikey and recent USWNT call-up Ayo Oke. Other exciting prospects include former Paris Saint-Germain defender Eva Gaetano.

Two members of the club's veteran contingent, Sonis and Heaps, grew up playing together. The two played on rival youth clubs and played together in the youth U.S. national team system until Sonis, born in Denver to Canadian parents, opted to represent Canada. The two stayed in touch, even training together during COVID.



Janine Sonis and Lindsey Heaps grew up playing on opposing teams. Now, they'll be teammates. Erin Chang / Getty Images

“That was actually really special,” Heaps said in January. “We were both in Colorado, and it was the only person I could train with. We always said, ‘One day we want to play on a professional team together,’ and then you see the Denver team come about.

“I think we both texted each other, like, ‘What if?’”

Sonis debuted as the team’s captain in their first preseason scrimmage against Utah Royals last month, with Kurtz wearing the armband in their second match against the San Diego Wave. Summit won both matches, 2-0 and 5-2, respectively. The team’s first goal came off a cross by Brazier to forward Melissa Kössler, who sliced the ball in.

Kurtz hails from South Carolina and is a four-time NWSL Iron Woman, having played every minute of the past four NWSL seasons. She holds the league record for consecutive regular-season minutes, games and starts and spent the last eight seasons with the Courage.

But she was itching for a new challenge.

“I knew the (Courage) coaching staff really well. They helped me grow a lot, but I felt like I was stalling a little bit in that progress,” she said in January. “I just wanted to change it up so that I could grow and continue to learn.”



Defender Kaleigh Kurtz sees Denver Summit FC as a refreshing new challenge. Luiza Moraes / Getty Images

The 31-year-old was drawn to Denver because the city “fit (her) as a person,” from her love of the outdoors and adventures, to sustainability and helping the environment. From a soccer perspective, she felt Cushing challenged her and could help accelerate her growth.

“We’re gonna look to attack” as a team, Kurtz, who plays center-back, said. “There is that piece of possession that Nick (Cushing) wants, but there’s also this desire to get forward and really attack. He wants to score goals. He wants to create an attack. He wants to make it hard for other teams. From day one, you’re going to see something really exciting — a spark of energy.”

What’s most exciting, though, is the “blank canvas”.

“Everyone is really excited to get going, to get the culture figured out, to make sure that we understand the tactics,” Kurtz said. “With an expansion side, you really want to make sure that every single player wants to be there, and it’s a market a lot of people wanted to be in.”

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