

Talk about a “Welcome to the Big Leagues” moment.

By Mike McIntyre, Winnipeg Free Press

Amy Martin, a 30-year-old referee from Manitoba, got one last weekend in Montreal. Invited to help officiate the NHL prospect challenge tournament featuring young stars from four teams, her very first assignment came under the bright lights of the Bell Centre in a clash between the hometown Canadiens versus the Winnipeg Jets.

It didn't take long before roughly 20,000 fans were chanting “ref you suck” in her direction after what they perceived as a missed infraction.



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PHOTO

Stonewall's Amy Martin
suited up for her first
NHL assignment last

Offended? Not at all. For Martin, it was a badge of honour.

“I was skating with this huge smile on my face. It was hilarious,” Martin told the *Free Press* on Friday. “That was really special. The Montreal fans are a different breed.”

The Stonewall native's path to the NHL spotlight has been anything but ordinary. She began officiating while playing minor hockey, then started focusing on it in high school. Over the years, she's become a fixture in the Manitoba Junior Hockey League — all while completing her engineering degree at the University of Manitoba and landing a full-time job in that field.

“It's been a lot of balance and juggling in recent years,” said Martin, who also began receiving assignments for the Professional Women's Hockey League two years ago. She's also done international women's events including the Women's World Championship, U18 Women's World

Championship and the Canada Winter Games.

“I use pretty much all my vacation time to travel for hockey,” she said.

This summer, Martin's dedication paid off in a big way when she received an invitation to attend the NHL officiating combine in Buffalo. She was the lone Manitoban — and one of just 10 women among 100 participants.

“It was a weekend of fitness testing, on-ice testing, some hockey games. And then, while I was there, I got asked about attending the rookie (tournament),” she said. “I was very excited about that.”

Martin worked the Jets-Canadiens game on Saturday, followed by Jets-Senators game on Sunday.

“Definitely the fastest games I’ve ever seen,” said Martin. “I knew going in it was going to be a jump. You try to adjust your skating and your positioning to allow for it. But things happen so much quicker.”

The feedback she received was positive, and Martin hopes it could open doors to opportunities at the Western Hockey League or even American Hockey League level — places where women are increasingly breaking through in officiating.

“I would love to pursue higher levels,” she said. “If the opportunity presented itself to move to hockey full time, or even just drop to a lesser role for my engineering career, I would definitely take it. It’s just not really been available as of yet.”

Manitoba may produce a ton of quality hockey players at both the men’s and women’s level, but the province is lacking when it comes to professional officials. Linesman Justin Johnson, for example, is currently the only local rep at the NHL level right now.

“She is a role model for all officials in Manitoba to aspire to,” said retired NHL linesman Ryan Galloway, who lives in Pinawa and helps train young officials in the province. “I’m excited to see where it takes her next.”

Martin admits officiating hasn’t always been easy. Abuse from fans — and sometimes coaches or players — chases many young officials away from the game.

“For whatever reason, people step into a hockey rink and, you know, the rules of society get left. They feel they can treat 14-year-old kids quite rudely,” she said.

“Unfortunately everyone experiences that to some degree. I know I did. The thing is, it does get better as you move along and age. And the more higher, elite levels, there’s much better respect amongst everyone, because everyone’s there to do a job. There’s an expectation that you deserve to be there and are competent. It’s worse at the minor levels, absolutely.”

Martin credits the mentorship and guidance of more experienced officials in Manitoba for helping her keep her head on straight over the years.

“The whole community is really close, and everyone supports each other. All of my closest friends are from reffing, my partner, too,” she said.

“Only other officials really know what you go through. It’s good to be able to rely on people in similar situations.”

Martin said donning an orange armband and strapping a whistle to her finger has fundamentally changed the way she views the sport she's loved since being a little kid — especially when watching at home on television now.

“Absolutely. I think every person who's ever officiated will say the same thing. Once you've seen the game on the other side as an official, you'll never watch another game the same way,” she said.

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