

# Hockey Flows Through Their Blood

## UNH Resigns Both Men's and Women's Hockey Head Coaches

**Tim Keough, Sports Writer**

DURHAM, N.H. – As of March 19, the University of New Hampshire (UNH) was proud to share an announcement from Director of Athletics, Allison Rich, that both the New Hampshire men's and women's ice hockey head coaches would sign a three-year contract extension through the 2026-27 season.

The men's ice hockey head coach is Mike Souza and the head coach for the women's ice hockey team is Hilary Witt. When the 2024-25 ice hockey season starts up, Souza will be entering his sixth year as head coach while Witt is entering her 10th season at the University of New Hampshire.

Through loads of excitement coming from both hockey teams this season, the Wildcat ice hockey programs were able to reach a new and higher level of play, compared to recent years, which allowed for plenty of success in both programs.

Allison Rich says competing for the best recruits they can bring in, but also conference championships is a big goal with the hockey programs here in Durham. Both head coaches being able to provide a sense of leadership and culture to the hockey programs, here in Durham, allows for the overall academic excellence and athletic greatness from the student-athletes as Rich mentions in the press conference on the day of the announcement.

Mike Souza

Mike Souza has been a part of the New Hampshire staff since 2015, first starting as an assistant coach. Later, by 2018, Souza would eventually become the head coach of the Wildcats after relieving a hockey legend in Durham, Dick Umile.

Despite having a few tough seasons as the head coach of the men's hockey team, Souza has been able to turn the hockey program around by just having his first winning season since the 2019-20 season.

During the 2019-20 season, UNH had finished 15-15-4 overall with a 9-12-3 Hockey East conference record. The Whittemore Center, used to bringing in great crowds with immense noise, was able to host 10 UNH home wins that season with a 10-5-2 overall home record. Some big wins include against 15 seed Boston College, number two ranked UMass Amherst and 11th seed Northeastern.

This past season, Souza had led the Wildcats to a 20-15-1 overall record with a 12-11-1 Hockey East record. This was the first time since 2013-14 that UNH had more wins overall in both the season (22-18-1) and in the conference (11-9-0).

As usual with the University of New Hampshire, the men's hockey team was able to have an impressive 14-4-1 record at home causing any opponent who entered the arena to feel flustered from start to finish.

Impressive wins against number one Boston University, at the time, four seed Quinnipiac, 17th Northeastern, 14th ranked UMass Amherst and two-time seven seed Maine filled throughout the successful season the men's ice hockey program had.



Lindsey Murphy

Courtesy of UNH Athletics.

Despite not beating them, UNH was able to put up two physical battles against Boston College, losing 0-1 and 3-5, with a last minute empty net goal.

UNH had quite the season overall, ultimately finishing it off in a Hockey East Quarterfinal loss against border battle rival UMaine, in a 0-5 loss.

After the season was over, UNH finished at 18 in the country being nationally ranked for 21 weeks straight including its first 20-win season in a decade. Due to the impressive season, Souza was able to be named a finalist for the Bob Kullen Award, Hockey East Association Coach of the Year, which is presented by Bauer.

Souza's first time ever in Durham wasn't in 2015, rather his return to the UNH campus where he looked to bring the same kind of IQ he once had during his hockey career in Durham. Yes, you read that right, Souza was once a forward on the University of New Hampshire ice hockey team way back in 1996 until 2000.

Souza was able to help bring in such great skill and speed for New Hampshire that eventually they would reach the 1999 NCAA Division I Men's Ice Hockey Championship. Souza was able to grab himself a big time goal in the third period which would force overtime against UMaine. However, Maine went on to win in overtime.

Souza would get drafted in 1997 by the Chicago Blackhawks at the 67th overall pick before finishing his playing career at UNH. Mike actually ended up playing 12 seasons in the NHL later joining Brown University's coaching staff as an assistant head coach. Eventually, he'd end up at UConn as the assistant head coach for the Huskies for two years until leaving for the New Hampshire assistant spot that opened in 2015.

Souza is touched and more than happy to be serving as the head coach of his alma mater and says nothing can be compared to it. He looks to succeed as the UNH men's ice hockey head coach for some time only building on all the steps the team has taken already.

Hilary Witt

Like Souza, Witt had always had a love for the game of hockey especially before becoming a coach in the sport. Witt had attended Northeastern University in 1996 due to her strong athletic resume she once had back at Canton High School while she was growing up in Canton, Massachusetts.

She had played for the Assabet Valley Club team for four years including two National Championships won. During her freshman year, she helped the Huskies to a 27-9 season leading to winning a ECAC Championship. Funny enough, Witt had scored a game winning goal in a 3-2 title game against New Hampshire resulting in her taking home the tournament MVP.

As years passed, Witt would soon enough become a member of the U.S. National Team in 2001, resulting in a silver medal in the IIHF World Women's Championships.

Her stellar career at Northeastern would lead to her becoming the all-time leading scorer for Northeastern along with two Beanpot Championships (1997,1998) and an ECAC Championship (1997). Her total statistics with all-time team ranks looked like such, 113 goals with 95 assists, third all-time, for a total of 208 points, second all-time, among Huskies players.

After finishing up her playing career with the U.S. National Team, Witt would join the Yale Bulldogs coaching staff as an assistant coach in 2001-02. Later, Witt became the head coach the following season.

In 2002-03, Witt would be named the ECAC Women's Coach of the Year making her name known throughout the Bulldogs campus. Years later in 2005, Witt became Yale's all-time leader in wins, setting many school records in overall wins (16) and conference wins (12). This would earn a trip to the ECAC semifinals for the first time for Yale University.

Witt announced that she would be leaving Yale in June of 2010, but was able to bring so much to Yale during her time. While she was at Yale, Witt was actually an assistant coach for Team USA at the 2006 Four Nations Cup.

After leaving Yale, Witt was actually able to return to her alma mater and become an assistant coach at Northeastern from 2010 to 2012. Later, she became the head scout for the USA Hockey's national program, and an assistant coach for the National and Olympic team in 2014. This occurred before entering her current tenure as the University of New Hampshire women's ice hockey head coach in April of 2014.

Witt highlights on big moments at UNH, first being the 2019-20 season where the women's hockey team had finished at an overall record of 18-15-4 and a conference record of 12-12-3. That season the 'Cats took home wins against 10 seed Boston University, nine ranked Harvard and Boston College to give them good momentum before Hockey East Tournament play.

Huge wins in a best of three series in the Hockey East Quarterfinal matchup between Providence College really showed the toughness the 'Cats had. This would lead to UNH playing in the Hockey East Semifinal game. Sadly, their season would come to a close when facing off against UConn in the semifinal game, losing 0-4.

The recent season finished with almost the same record as their 2019-20 season record. Their final record was a 18-16-2 overall record with a 9-10-2 Hockey East Conference record to finish the 2023-24 season. Exceptional play from freshman goalkeeper, Sedona Blair, graduate student, Rae Breton, junior forward, Kira Juodikis and senior, Charli Kettyle, helped the Wildcats succeed all year long. Along with many other players on the team, UNH was able to compete at a high level all season giving the Wildcats some hopes at a potential NCAA tournament appearance. Wins against UMaine, Vermont, UConn and Boston College would highlight the season they just played.

After two huge wins against Boston College at the end of the season, New Hampshire was able to host their first Hockey East tournament game in a long time at the Whittemore Center Arena against Vermont. UNH would go on to win 3-0 against Vermont advancing to the Hockey East Semifinal game against Northeastern. The semifinal appearance in the Hockey East Tournament would actually take place at Witt's alma mater, Northeastern University.

All season, Northeastern had always seemed to have an edge over UNH, beating them in the three matchups (1-2, 2-3, 3-4 OT) played this season. With that info, another tight game between the two in the Hockey East Semifinal would last all the way until the end of the 3rd period. Eventually, the game would result in a Northeastern victory after scoring a go ahead goal with a minute and 45 seconds left to play. This later led to two goals in the last minute, winning at the end, 4-1. Despite the devastating loss, UNH had been able to compete with Northeastern all season long even if they were unsuccessful to win a matchup against them.

Coach Witt described that semifinal loss as one of her worst moments here.

"It was tough because you care so much about these kids and they were devastated. Such a great season, such great upperclassmen, and to know their careers are ending on that game was really really hard for me," she said.

Away from that, Witt loves UNH, and mentions that there are always going to have ups and downs, good days and bad days. Overall, she loves the players, acknowledges it for being a great place to be and really appreciates Durham.

Witt reflected on being finalist, again, for the Hockey East Coach of the Year by acknowledging her staff.

"Reality of it is, it's about the team and it's about the entire staff. I think when your team has success and your players do well, it's just nice for all of the staff to get recognized," said Witt.

Witt's thoughts on the UNH women's ice hockey program are all about the hard they have put in to compete within the Hockey East.

"Feel like we work very hard to rebuild and get us to a point where we can compete in the Hockey East again. Had a great run prior to the pandemic making it to the Hockey East Semifinals, but have been rebuilding ever since after losing eight players who put a lot into the program," said Witt.

Witt, also, gives credit to how much extra work and time needed to be put in to adapt to playing during a pandemic.

"Replacing with eight freshmen who came to campus without parents and began their college careers during a pandemic was a little crazy and tough, but we've worked really hard to get back to the semifinal game. Really excited about that and the future," said Witt.

With many players leaving, Witt looks back at their time together as a positive impact on the program.

"We graduated a lot of players, gonna miss some of the experiences we had and we are going to be a little bit younger. Our fifth years were awesome Wildcats, culture changers, and kids who really led our program," said Witt.

Some would include Annie Berry, Tamara Thierus, Rae Breton and Jada Christian.

Despite those losses, Witt is still looking forward to their future.

“Excited about the future. We return most of our production, our points. We’re going to be a little young on D, but we have great goaltenders. We’re excited about next year and on and on,” said Witt.

Witt wants her student athletes coming into the program to know there’s room for improvement as a coach each year from her perspective.

“No coach knows everything...No matter how successful you are, even if you win the national championship, there’s things you have to do better the next year,” said Witt.

Even with successful years throughout her whole career, Witt only looks to make others happy and cherish the moments they have playing hockey because they’ll never know when it could be their last time skating on that ice.