

WNBA

Expansion Valkyries build with draft, face steep climb

Scooby Axson
USA TODAY

NEW YORK – When the Golden State Valkyries were awarded a WNBA franchise on Oct. 3, 2023, the work began to try to correct the disadvantages that every other expansion team faces.

Not only with finding the right people to lead, but also the complex, arduous task of building a team once the framework of a front office is decided.

That task is now in the hands of general manager Ohemaa Nyanin and head coach Natalie Nakase, who spent the previous three seasons with the Las Vegas Aces, helping them win two WNBA championships.

Even before the draft, Nyanin clarified what kind of player they sought.

“We aren’t looking for the face of our franchise just yet,” Nyanin said last week. “We need to build our identity, and throughout the season, hopefully, the face of the franchise emerges. I want it to be an organic process. Who is going to earn it? I don’t want it to just be given to anybody. I genuinely believe that if you work really hard at (becoming the face of a franchise), then you don’t mismanage it once it’s been given to you.”

The future started at the 2025 WNBA Draft on April 14 when the Valkyries, the first expansion team to enter the league since the Atlanta Dream in 2008, selected Juste Jocyte from Lithuania at No. 5 overall with their first-ever pick.

The 19-year-old, at 6-foot, can defend multiple positions and is a combo guard, whose offensive game shows that she has range from beyond the arc.



Shyanne Sellers poses with Commissioner Cathy Engelbert after being taken with at No. 17 by the Valkyries.
VINCENT CARCHIETTA/IMAGN IMAGES

She no doubt will need to get tougher, however, especially against the physical inside players, once inside the paint.

Jocyte, who doesn’t turn 20 until Nov. 19, averaged 12.7 points, 2.7 assists and 1.8 steals per game for Lyon ASVEL of the Ligue Féminine de Basketball. She is expected to compete for her country in the FIBA Women’s EuroBasket 2025, so her availability is a question mark.

“The national team is always my priority,” Jocyte told Basketnews. “If the WNBA told me I couldn’t go and I had to choose, I would definitely choose the

national team. I know that there is a possibility to arrange when you can be released a few weeks in advance, and this is a negotiation with the clubs about the dates.”

The Valkyries added Maryland star Shyanne Sellers with their second-round pick (No. 17 overall). Sellers did it all during an impressive four-year career for the Terrapins, becoming the first player in program history to clear 1,500 points, 500 rebounds and 500 assists.

With their third selection, Golden State took Kaitlyn Chen in the third round (No. 30 overall). Chen teamed with No. 1 overall pick Paige Bueckers to lead the UConn Huskies to the 2024-25 season national championship.

Very few professional teams have made the playoffs in their first season, but the Valkyries have advantages, that few, especially in the WNBA, have. The team already has a state-of-the-art practice facility and was the first league team to sell 10,000 season tickets.

But Nyanin said she didn’t know what the Valkyries will look like once the season starts. In December’s expansion draft, Golden State selected 11 players, including guard Kate Martin from the Aces and forward Kayla Thornton of the New York Liberty. Seven of those expansion draft players are international.

“We’re taking our sweet time to define that because once you define it – coming from experience – it’s really hard to change it,” Nyanin said.

The time to find that out will be very short as the Valkyries’ first regular-season game will be against the Los Angeles Sparks on May 16.

2025 WNBA DRAFT SELECTIONS

First round

- No. 1 Dallas Wings: Paige Bueckers, guard, UConn
- No. 2 Seattle Storm: Dominique Malonga, forward/center, France
- No. 3 Washington Mystics: Sonia Citron, guard, Notre Dame
- No. 4 Washington Mystics: Kiki Iriafen, forward, Southern Cal
- No. 5 Golden State Valkyries: Juste Jocyte, forward, Lithuania
- No. 6 Washington Mystics: Georgia Amooore, guard, Kentucky
- No. 7 Connecticut Sun: Aneesah Morrow, forward, LSU
- No. 8 Connecticut Sun: Saniya Rivers, guard, NC State
- No. 9 Los Angeles Sparks: Sarah Ashlee Barker, guard, Alabama
- No. 10 Chicago Sky: Ajša Sivka, forward, Slovenia
- No. 11 Chicago Sky: Hailey Van Lith, guard, TCU
- No. 12 Dallas Wings: Aziaha James, guard, NC State

Second round

- No. 13 Las Vegas Aces: Aaliyah Nye, guard/forward, Alabama
- No. 14 Dallas Wings: Madison Scott, guard/forward, Ole Miss
- No. 15 Minnesota Lynx: Anastasiia Olairi Kosu, forward, Russia
- No. 16 Chicago Sky: Maddy Westbeld, forward, Notre Dame
- No. 17 Golden State Valkyries: Shyanne Sellers, guard, Maryland
- No. 18 Atlanta Dream: Te-Hina Paopao, guard, South Carolina
- No. 19 Indiana Fever: Makayla Timpson, forward, Florida State
- No. 20 Indiana Fever: Bree Hall, guard, South Carolina
- No. 21 Los Angeles Sparks: Sania Feagin, forward, South Carolina
- No. 22 Chicago Sky: Aicha Coulibaly, guard, Texas A&M
- No. 23 Washington Mystics: Lucy Olsen, guard, Iowa
- No. 24 Minnesota Lynx: Dalayah Daniels, forward, Washington
- No. 25 Connecticut Sun: Rayah Marshall, center/forward, Southern Cal

Third round

- No. 26 Seattle Storm: Serena Sundell, guard, Kansas State
- No. 27 Dallas Wings: JJ Quinerly, guard, West Virginia
- No. 28 Los Angeles Sparks: Liatu King, forward, Notre Dame
- No. 29 Seattle Storm: Madison Conner, guard, TCU
- No. 30 Golden State Valkyries: Kaitlyn Chen, guard, UConn
- No. 31 Dallas Wings: Aaronette Vonleh, center, Baylor
- No. 32 Washington Mystics: Zaay Green, guard, Alabama
- No. 33 Indiana Fever: Yvonne Ejim, forward, Gonzaga
- No. 34 Seattle Storm: Jordan Hobbs, guard, Michigan
- No. 35 Las Vegas Aces: Harmoni Turner, guard, Harvard
- No. 36 Atlanta Dream: Taylor Thierry, forward, Ohio State
- No. 37 Minnesota Lynx: Aubrey Griffin, forward, UConn
- No. 38 New York Liberty: Adja Kane, forward, France

Van Lith-Reese chemistry intensifies

Meghan L. Hall
For The Win | USA TODAY NETWORK

NEW YORK – Hailey Van Lith’s reunion with Angel Reese is seemingly a gift from the basketball gods.

When Van Lith left LSU after a tumultuous tenure, it was evident the Tigers weren’t a fit for her. She often appeared visibly lost on the court, and her production showed that the chemistry with the team left a lot to be desired. Still, when Van Lith transferred to TCU and her journey became one of the best stories in college basketball, she never lost contact with her former teammate.

Fittingly, Reese publicly supported Van Lith with multiple social media posts over the past several months, often with three simple letters: H-V-L. On April 14, after the Chicago Sky drafted Van Lith No. 10 overall, she couldn’t help but seemingly blush (and flash her megawatt smile) speaking about Reese.

“Angel has maintained contact with me this whole past year she’s been in the league, and I transferred,” Van Lith said. “I really appreciate her.”

She explained that the two have a very mature relationship with mutual

respect for both the character and the people they are off the court. Van Lith revealed that she and Reese are on the same page with what’s important to them, before flashing her signature smile again and saying what many in the league and the room knew:

“She’s a dawg, man.”

“She turns up the intensity of everyone around her,” Van Lith reflected. “So, I’m excited to be in that environment with her again where she can pull more out of me than I think I have.”

Van Lith likely has an uphill battle to make the Sky roster – they are loaded with guards – but having Reese in her corner gives her a significant foundation to work with.

Additionally, last season, the on-court chemistry between Chicago’s guards and its post players was painful to watch. Often, there was little synergy, and the paint production and pick-and-roll action suffered. Reese and Van Lith together again, at minimum, puts a band-aid on a visible eyesore. At its best, it opens up a world of possibilities.

Reese gets a reliable guard that she’s comfortable with and can work with to build their connection again. Van Lith gets a familiar face in a new environment and will also learn from one of the league’s best veteran point guards, Courtney Vandersloot.

Also, lost in the hoopla of Reese and Van Lith running the floor again is that Van Lith also will benefit from having head coach Tyler Marsh. Marsh is a developmental wizard, who found success while working with Las Vegas Aces guard Jackie Young. He improved her overall game as one of the top guards in the league, working on her 3-point shot, a main staple of her career.

Van Lith should thrive under Marsh, and with Reese in her corner, the sky – pun intended – is the limit. What happens now once she arrives in Chicago, is completely up to her. However, if her final season in college is any indication, Van Lith should settle into the Windy City. She exudes confidence and happiness despite every obstacle (including mental health struggles) in her path, and that has seemingly guided her to this moment.

“I feel so much joy,” she said shortly after being drafted. “When you persevere through the things that I’ve had to persevere from, you’re just glad to walk around every day.”

The message in that simple thought likely reaches far beyond what anyone likely knows. But for now, it’s Reese and Van Lith, back together again, for more joy and more smiles, and of course, more basketball – just the way the universe drew it up.

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