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“Venus to the Hoop,” But Not to the Bank: Gender Inequity in Professional Basketball

Mercedes Ann Townsend
Master's Thesis
Women's History Graduate Program

*Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College,
May 2016*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has been, as they say, a team effort. While much of the work is a solitary endeavor, this project would not have been possible without the love and support of my starting lineup—my family, friends, and mentors, who have all taken on the roles of cheerleader, color commentator, and coach throughout this process.

My sincerest thanks go to my thesis advisors, Dr. Lyde Sizer and Dr. Priscilla Murolo. They are remarkable women and academics, not because of their vast knowledge on pretty much *everything*, but because of the profound love they bring to each of their students' work. I have benefitted so greatly from their prompts to “dig deeper,” as I now feel that I have struck gold with this work. Their commitment has allowed me to learn more about myself as a scholar and as a citizen of the world, and this thesis and any future projects that stem from it are in great part possible because of their teaching and care.

Much of the financial burden entailed in this work was lifted by a generous grant from the Women's Equal Pay Network. As I enter my first semester of law school this fall, I am humbled to know that in three short years I will be joining the company of such outstanding women attorneys.

I would like to thank the staff of Sarah Lawrence's Office of Student Affairs. In my two years here, I have taken on many roles, but the one that I am most confident of as I enter this new phase is that of a leader. Your support has been invaluable and is so deeply appreciated.

Finally, my deepest love and gratitude goes to my family. It seems impossible and almost silly to try to put into words how much you mean to me. Despite being 1,400 miles away, you've been with me for every step of this journey. Just as I carried my passion for sports into all of my graduate work, so too did I carry my love for you. Cody, you keep me grounded and humble, and

always challenge me to do more, want more, and be more. Daddy, my love of sports begins and ends with you, and you are in everything I do whether you know it or not. Mama, your love and support are overwhelmingly incomparable, and I know everything good in me comes directly from you.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are a professional American athlete. After being named the top collegiate player for your sport in your state, conference, and the country, you lead your team to a national championship title. Shortly after your graduation, you represent your country at the Olympics, where you help secure a gold medal win. You return to the Olympics four years later and take home bronze. When talks about founding a professional league for your sport begin, you are quickly approached to help establish the new league and are slated to be one of its top players. Throughout your seven seasons in the newly founded league, you start in 220 straight games, make four championship appearances, are named a league All-Star five times, and are twice named Defensive Player of the Year. After an illustrious collegiate and professional career that spans two decades, the most you can hope to earn a season is \$87,000. While this is certainly higher than the average American's annual income, it is considerably low for a professional athlete in the United States. In this case, you are not just any professional athlete, but NCAA Champion, U.S. Olympian, and Women's Basketball Hall of Famer, Teresa Weatherspoon.

Weatherspoon joined the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) for its inaugural year in 1997. During her senior season at Louisiana Tech University in 1988, she helped secure a national championship title for the Lady Techsters and was named the Louisiana Player of the Year, the American South Conference Player of the Year, a Kodak All-American, the Wade Trophy winner for the best women's basketball player in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I competition, and the Broderick Cup's Outstanding Woman Athlete of the Year. After her graduation from Louisiana Tech, Weatherspoon was named to the NCAA Women's Basketball Team of the Decade. She was

also named to the U.S. Olympic women's basketball team in 1988 and 1992, in which the U.S. took home the gold and bronze.¹

At the time of Weatherspoon's graduation from Louisiana Tech, there was no professional women's basketball league in the United States. Weatherspoon played eight seasons abroad—six seasons in Italy and two in Russia—before being approached about joining the WNBA for its first season in 1997. After spending six storied seasons with the New York Liberty and a final season with the Los Angeles Sparks, Weatherspoon retired in 2004. That year, the WNBA's salary cap for a veteran with a minimum of six seasons of play, was \$87,000,² while rookies in the National Basketball Association (NBA), America's professional men's basketball league, were guaranteed a *minimum* of \$385,277.³ A decade after Weatherspoon's retirement, a six-season veteran of the WNBA can make, at most, \$107,500⁴ a season; the minimum for a rookie in the NBA is \$507,336.⁵ Using the WNBA's New York Liberty and NBA's New York Knicks as cases in point, this thesis investigates and discusses the causes and implications of this profound pay inequity.

The WNBA is the longest running professional league for a women's team sport in American history. This longevity can be attributed to the WNBA's financial backing by the NBA and the corporate and television partnerships the league has obtained in recent years. Because of the NBA's ownership of the WNBA, WNBA games are played in some of the most renowned arenas in the world, including Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, the Staples Center in Los Angeles, the Phillips Arena in Atlanta, and the

¹ WNBA. "Playerfile: Teresa Weatherspoon," *WNBA.com*, n.d.
<http://origin.wnba.com/playerfile/teresa_weatherspoon/bio.html> (accessed May 2, 2015).

² See WNBPA, "WNBA Collective Bargaining Agreement," December 1999.

³ See NBPA, "NBA Collective Bargaining Agreement," December 2001.

⁴ See WNBPA, "WNBA Collective Bargaining Agreement," December 2014.

⁵ See NBPA, "NBA Collective Bargaining Agreement," December 2011.

Verizon Center in Washington, D.C. In August 2011, the WNBA signed the most lucrative sponsorship deal in the league's history with pay-as-you-go cell phone provider, Boost Mobile, a subsidiary of Sprint. While the WNBA and Boost did not disclose the deal's worth, the company is the league's sole marquee sponsor, sponsoring the WNBA Playoffs and Finals, and having its logo on eleven of the league's thirteen teams' jerseys, courts, and arenas.⁶ In 2013, the WNBA signed a six year contract extension with ESPN. Valued at \$12 million a season, ESPN will televise thirty of the WNBA's 208 games.⁷ Business ventures like these have allowed the league to supplement their revenue and establish more platforms for the league and its players.

Despite the gains of the WNBA, however, professional sports in America continue to be plagued by gender inequity that can be seen at all levels of professional women athletes' careers. The pay gap that exists between players in the WNBA and NBA is not unique to professional basketball. Instead, most professional women's athletes earn only a fraction of their male counterparts. The total prize money for the Professional Golf Association's (PGA) 2014 tour was over \$340 million, while the total prizes in the Ladies' Professional Golf Association (LPGA) amounted to less than one-fifth of that, at \$61.6 million.⁸ Similarly, the 2015 Women's World Cup Champions, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) were awarded \$2 million, while Germany's men's team took home \$35 million for winning the men's tournament in 2014. The U.S. Men's National Team (USMNT), finishing in eleventh place, collected \$9 million, while each men's team that was eliminated in the first round of the 2014 World Cup got \$8 million each (four

⁶ USA Today Sports, "ESPN and WNBA work out broadcast deal." *USAToday.com*. Mar. 28, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/wnba/2013/03/28/wnba-espn-abc-new-deal/2028977/> (accessed May 2, 2015).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Women's Sports Foundation, "Pay Inequity in Athletics," *Equity Issues*, nd. <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/en/home/research/articles-and-reports/equity-issues/pay-inequity> (accessed 17 Jan. 2016).

times as much as the 2015 women's championship team).⁹ Forty-three years after the infamous "Battle of the Sexes" in tennis between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, women of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) make an estimated twenty-five percent less than their male counterparts. On the international circuit in 2007, Wimbledon organizers declared that equal prizes would be awarded for the winners of their men's and women's tournaments, over 120 years after the Ladies' Championship was first introduced at Wimbledon in 1884.¹⁰

This gendered wage gap only further separates men's and women's professional athletes and parallels the historical practice of pay inequity in the United States. Today, fifty-two years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, pay inequity still adversely affects the socioeconomic well-being of American women. The causes of this wage inequality and, in some cases, its very existence are highly contested by scholars and legislators,¹¹ despite the growing amount of scholarship that concludes a gendered pay gap exists in nearly all sectors of the American workforce. This thesis adds to this scholarship, showing that the extent of pay inequity is such that it reaches beyond traditional workplaces and into professional sports. Drawing on sports marketing and management scholarship, history, and feminist theory, this interdisciplinary investigation considers the ways in which gender norms affect the construction of consumer markets for professional sports and, in turn, the labor markets that determine players' pay. Using the WNBA's New York Liberty and NBA's New York Knicks as cases in point, this

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Denise Venable, "The Wage Gap Myth," National Center for Policy Analysis. No. 392. (2002):1-2, [ncpa.org](http://www.ncpa.org/pub/ba392), 15 Sept. 2015. <<http://www.ncpa.org/pub/ba392>>; Travis Waldron, "Wisconsin State Senator Says Women are Paid Less 'Because Money is Less Important to Women,'" Think Progress. (2012) thinkprogress.org, 30 Oct. 2015. <<http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2012/04/09/460917/wisconsin-state-senator-money-less-important-wome/>>; and Carrie Lukas, "It's Time That We End the Equal Pay Myth," Forbes. (2012) forbes.com, 30 Oct. 2015. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2012/04/16/its-time-that-we-end-the-equal-pay-myth/>>

research is chiefly concerned with analyzing the importance of marketing for league and player success and the ways in which these marketing efforts rely on or resist gender stereotypes.

A multitude of reasons are cited as the causes of pay inequity between professional men and women athletes, but most suggest that fans and sponsors are less interested in the women. Because of this lack of corporate and consumer support, women's leagues do not generate as much revenue as their male counterparts, making their players' lower wages not only inevitable, but also, according to some observers, fair. As *The Daily Beast's* Lizzie Crocker argues, "the sports gap isn't a big, sexist conspiracy. In the current economic environment, it's not at all unfair that female athletes make less than their male counterparts. It's simply a matter of supply and demand."¹² What Crocker and those who share her thoughts on the issue ignore are the causes of this lack of demand. As this thesis reveals, while the pay gap in professional sports may not be "a big sexist conspiracy," the ideologies that surround women in sports and the marketing of their professional leagues certainly have the makings of one.

While instances of pay disparity can be found throughout professional sports, the WNBA's ownership by the NBA makes professional basketball a model case study. Because WNBA and NBA teams share the same arenas, represent the same cities, and are marketed to the same regional fan bases, one could expect the leagues to market their teams in similar ways, specifically through an appeal to hometown pride. However, this is not the case. Instead, there are distinct differences in the ways these leagues are marketed which, I argue, are dependent on traditional ideologies of gender. Through an analysis of

¹² Lizzie Crocker, "Stop Moaning About Women's Soccer Pay," *thedailybeast.com*, Jul. 10, 2015 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/10/are-women-soccer-players-close-to-scoring-equal-pay.html> (accessed Apr. 20, 2016)

league and team promotional materials, commercials, and player interviews, I show that the marketing narrative established by the WNBA is one that largely promotes its players in traditionally feminine roles. This, in turn, has been detrimental to the success of the league. As I argue, the WNBA's preoccupation with gender norms, as opposed to player ability, is a chief factor limiting the league's appeal to larger fan bases, helping to maintain the deep disparity in pay between the WNBA and NBA.

In *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class and Race in the New Economy* (2001),¹³ sociologist Leslie McCall argues that the call for comparative worth—the idea that different work of equal value warrants equal pay—is no longer an appropriate device for remedying economic inequities. Throughout the book, McCall discusses how stereotypical ideals of gender have allowed the pay gap to remain and argues that the workplace for women is defined not just by pay inequality between men and women, but also by pay inequality between groups of women. Using case studies of economic conditions of women in Dallas, Detroit, Miami, and St. Louis, McCall argues that women's economic inequality in the United States varies “considerably and systematically”¹⁴ across the lines of race, class, education, and region. She argues that there is no universal policy that will end the problem of economic inequality, as even the best-intentioned models, such as comparable worth, have the tendency to become racialized and classist, making them ineffective in a changing economic landscape. Instead, McCall argues, closing the wage gap requires constant consideration of intersectional identities and a reinvigorated investigation of the sources of old and new forms of pay inequity.

¹³ Leslie McCall, *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class and Race in the New Economy* (UK: Taylor and Francis Group, 2001)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

Steven Peter Vallas argues that work and wages are not only a product of the marketplace, but also a social and political construct in his book, *Work: A Critique* (2012).¹⁵ Vallas argues that understanding inequalities requires not only a consideration of the structure of work, but also emphasis on the social and cultural forces that shape and define the “appropriate types of people who ‘should’ be channeled into particular jobs.”¹⁶ Discussing the lasting effects of two broad and overlapping cultural ideologies—the idea of “True Womanhood” and the “cult of domesticity”—he offers that the ideal of a subservient, dependent woman first inspired the division of labor between women and men that still persists today as a major cause of pay inequity.

In *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings & Social Consequences* (2014),¹⁷ historian Alice Kessler-Harris analyzes the power of the cultural construction of pay in America and explores the various meanings of a “woman’s wage.” She writes that the slogan “Equal Pay for Equal Work” has been used by women’s groups since the end of the nineteenth century, and its continued use speaks not to the popularity of the phrase, but to the persistence of the issue of pay inequity. Through an analysis of various sources, including letters sent by women workers to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the 1986 Supreme Court case *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Sears, Roebuck and Company*, a study of the implications of the 2007 recession, and Sheryl Sandberg’s book, *Lean In* (2013), Kessler-Harris presents a compelling updated version of her 1990 edition of the book. Echoing McCall’s *Complex Inequality*, she argues that the idea of a universal experience of womanhood prevents us from seeing the complex effects

¹⁵ Steven Peter Vallas, *Work: A Critique* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87

¹⁷ Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings & Social Consequences* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014, 1990).

of pay inequity on women from varying intersectional identities. Kessler-Harris continues, arguing that giving focus to the “top of the pay and education ladders”¹⁸ defines an acceptable wage for women as one that rewards women whose behavior is most like that of successful men, rather than achieving a gender- neutral market wage. Kessler-Harris concludes that establishing a “truly equal wage”¹⁹ requires an extensive examination and reappraisal of our cultural institutions and values.

The work of McCall, Vallas, and Kessler-Harris represents the conversation this thesis enters, as all demonstrate that pay inequality is not the result of lower skill levels or productivity amongst women, but is instead the result of hegemonically and systemically imposed ideologies of gender. As Teresa Weatherspoon’s exemplary career makes clear, her earning one-fourth (if not less) of her male counterparts’ salary does not reflect her ability or skill as a basketball player, but instead exemplifies the effects on pay of traditional views of gender.

The most significant contribution of this thesis to the debate on pay inequity is its focus on the effects of gender ideologies on the creation and structuring of consumer markets and, subsequently, labor markets. While scholars on pay inequity foreground gender in their investigations of inequities in hiring and pay practices, they routinely treat the labor market as a pre-existing, static entity, and do not analyze how the ideologies held by those who compose the market—employers, employees, consumers, and so on — figure into its construction. Kessler-Harris does note that, through studying women’s participation in the workplace, it is clear that the labor market is “socially, not abstractly,

¹⁸ Ibid., 140.

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

constructed,”²⁰ but does not offer specific examples of this. Focusing on how gender ideologies shape labor and consumer markets in professional basketball, my research offers new ways to think about pay inequity and its implications.

Chapter One, “How the NBA Came to Control Professional Women’s Basketball in the United States,” outlines the history of professional women’s basketball in America and the WNBA’s relationship with the NBA. By considering the professional leagues that preceded the WNBA, I discuss the importance of the NBA’s sponsorship of the WNBA during the league’s early years. I analyze the ways in which the NBA’s ownership of the WNBA has now become obstructive towards the WNBA’s success, and argue that this relationship has caused the WNBA to become limited in status as a “niche” sport.

In “The Family-Friendly Ladies of the WNBA,” I use marketing and media materials— ranging from print ads and television commercials—to discuss the ways in which the WNBA and New York Liberty markets have been created. I assess the implications of how the “value” of WNBA players is constructed and presented to consumers, and argue that these narratives depend on and further perpetuate hegemonic views of gender. Consequently, the scope of the WNBA’s reach to general audiences is limited which, in turn, limits the WNBA and its teams’ ability to create sustainable, revenue-generating markets. Because of this, the league has become unable to offer to players competitive salaries.

Finally, in the third chapter, “‘Spin Moves’: The Marketing Maneuvers of the WNBA,” I discuss the ways that the WNBA has been able to “spin” some of the biggest issues the league faces into causes for celebration—the growing trend of WNBA players

²⁰ Kessler-Harris, 113.

competing overseas in the off-season in order to supplement the low wages and the league's resistance towards embracing its LGBT fan base. I argue that these marketing efforts only further reveal the league's struggle to attract and maintain sustainable fan bases, and suggest that the league is more committed to the projected image of its players than their actual personal and financial well-being.

This research further demonstrates the importance of marketing for league and player success in professional sports, and allows for new understandings of the relationship between marketing, fan perception, and league sustainability. It also provides new ways of understanding pay inequity in broader contexts, as it considers the role of consumer marketing and ideologies in the structuring of labor and wages.

CHAPTER ONE

How the NBA Came to Control Professional Women's Basketball in the United States

In the forty years since the passage of Title IX, more American women have played basketball than any other sport.²¹ Women's intercollegiate basketball is among the most celebrated women's sports in the United States today, with 2015 being the eighth consecutive season in which over eleven million fans were in attendance at NCAA women's basketball games.²² Since the 2000 season, no fewer than 18,000 fans have been in attendance at each day of the women's Final Four tournament.²³ Storied programs such as the Baylor Lady Bears and Notre Dame Fighting Irish outdraw their male counterparts in home game attendance²⁴ and a reported twenty-one women's teams generate more basketball revenue than their school's men's squads.²⁵ Women's collegiate basketball created an arena in which professional-caliber players emerged and, with such growing visibility and support, the creation of a professional women's league was considered the natural next step for the sport in the late 1970s. However, it would take over twenty-five years after Title IX's passage for the United States to see a professional women's basketball league that lasted longer than three seasons. Nearing the tip-off of its twentieth season, the WNBA is the longest running American professional women's basketball league to date. It was preceded by four attempted professional women's basketball leagues in the United States: the Women's Professional Basketball League (1978-1981), the Liberty Basketball Association (1991), the Women's

²¹ Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*. (New York: The New Press, 2007), 1.

²² NCAA, "Women's basketball attendance tops 11 million for eighth consecutive year," *ncaa.com*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.ncaa.com/news/basketball-women/article/2015-07-06/womens-basketball-attendance-tops-11-million-eighth> (accessed Mar. 17, 2016).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James Bowman, "Are there women's basketball programs that outdraw men's basketball?" *swishappeal.com*, Nov. 12, 2012 <http://www.swishappeal.com/2012/11/21/3659730/ncaa-womens-basketball-attendance-mens> (accessed Jan 29, 2016).

²⁵ Chris Smith, "When It's Okay to Lose Money" *The Business of Women's College Basketball*, *forbes.com*, Mar. 29, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/chris-smith/2012/03/29/when-its-okay-to-lose-money-the-business-of-womens-college-basketball/#6ddc6cd01a99> (accessed Apr. 5, 2016).

American Basketball Association (1992-1995), and the American Basketball League (1996-1998).

Hoping to capitalize on the momentum of the U.S. Olympic women's basketball team's silver medal win in the 1976 Montreal Games, Bill Byrne founded the first professional women's basketball league in the United States in 1978, the Women's Basketball League (WBL). The league was composed of eight teams—Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Dayton, Milwaukee, Chicago, New York, and Houston—each of which was given a \$50,000 team budget. The league drafted collegiate standouts such as Ann Meyers of UCLA, but was unable to attract the number of star players it was hoping, due to unattractive salaries, which ranged from \$3,000 to \$5,000 a season. The first game of the WBL was played on December 9, 1978, between Chicago and Milwaukee in front of 8,000 fans. By the end of the first season, the Dayton team folded.

In its second season, the WBL welcomed seven new expansion teams in Washington, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Dallas, California, San Francisco, and New Orleans. However, as quickly as the league expanded in its second season, it imploded in the lead up to season three. By the end of 1980, the league had lost six teams, including its championship teams, Houston and New York. For the players on the remaining eight teams, the third season of the WBL was characterized by late paychecks and insignificant team budgets for meals and travel. By the time the WBL declared bankruptcy in the summer of 1981, each of the remaining teams had lost an average of \$350,000 a year.²⁶

After the WBL disbanded, there was no professional women's basketball league in the United States for ten years. Former Continental Basketball Association commissioner, Jim Drucker, hoped to change that when he launched the Liberty Basketball Association

²⁶ WNBA. "History of the WBL." *WNBA.com*. n.d. www.wnba.com/history (accessed Apr. 26, 2015).

(LBA) in 1991. With its six teams—Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, and a national team, the LBA All-Stars—the LBA sought to redefine the play and promotion of women’s basketball. In an attempt to combine skill and sex appeal, the LBA’s regulations provided for shorter courts, lowered rims, free throw lines closer to the basket, and, most infamously, one piece, lycra unitards for its players.²⁷ Hoping to attract more male fans, the league commissioned Danskin, a women’s active wear company, to design a uniform that would accentuate players’ curves while still allowing them to run across the court. The league’s Executive Director, Doug Verb, offered that the players the league recruited were certainly talented, but “were lacking a certain excitement level to bring to the average sports fan.”²⁸ Unfortunately for the LBA, this “certain excitement level” that they thought tighter, body-hugging uniforms afforded and did not incentivize fans. Instead, with 10,573 fans in attendance, the LBA played its first and only game at the Palace of Auburn Hills, Michigan on February 18, 1991.

Established in 1992 by Lightning Mitchell, the Women’s Basketball Association (WBA), formerly Women’s American Basketball Association (WABA), was the first professional women’s basketball summer league. The WBA’s eight teams—Nebraska, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, and Iowa—played three, fifteen-game seasons to crowds averaging nearly 3,500 fans a game. From 1992 to 1995, the WBA’s games were broadcasted by Liberty Sports of Dallas. The WBA, having found four expansion teams, planned to play as a twelve team league in 1996. However, the WBA was

²⁷ Paul Lukas, “Snug NBA All-Star jerseys aren’t a first.” *Page 2:ESPN.com*. Feb. 17, 2011. http://espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=lukas/110217_liberty_basketball_association&sportCat=nba (accessed Apr. 28 2015).

²⁸ Scripps Howard News Service, “New League Streamlined for Success,” Feb. 21, 1991

dissolved before its fourth season by Fox Sports after the broadcasting company purchased the league's franchising rights.²⁹

Despite the disbandment of the WBA, 1996 was a banner year for women's basketball. The U.S. Olympic team's gold medal win at that year's Summer Olympics in Atlanta marked a turning point for women's basketball in the United States. For the first time in sport's history, women's basketball was sponsored by multi-million dollar sponsors, as the team had landmark endorsement deals with Reebok, Nike, and Gatorade. The team's gold medal game against Brazil was played in front of 77,000 fans, at the time an attendance record for any women's sport in the United States.³⁰ The Olympic win also sparked the formation of two women's basketball leagues that year, the American Basketball League (ABL) and the WNBA.

Organized by a group of individual owners based in San Jose, California, the ABL played its inaugural game in October 1996. With teams in Columbus, Richmond, Atlanta, New England, Colorado, San Jose, Seattle, and Portland composed of NCAA women's basketball stars, the ABL was considered the first modern professional women's basketball league.³¹ The following summer, the WNBA was launched by NBA Commissioner David Stern, playing its first game on June 21, 1997. The WNBA's eight teams—Charlotte, Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Sacramento, and Utah—were all strategically partnered with their respective city or region's NBA team (for example, New

²⁹ Robert Bradley ed., "The History of Women's Professional Women's Basketball." The Association for Professional Basketball Research." n.d. <http://www.apbr.org/women.html> (accessed May 2, 2015).

³⁰ Kate Fagan. "More than a dream." *espnW.com*. 19 June 2012. Web. 3 May 2015.

³¹ James Bowman. "The 1996-97 ABL Players: Where Are They Now?." *swishappeal.com*. Sept. 25, 2005, <http://www.swishappeal.com/2012/9/25/3385298/the-1996-97-abl-players-where-are-they-now> (accessed Apr.27, 2015).

York Liberty and New York Knicks) in order to encourage market support, hoping NBA fans would support their favorite team's "sister" squad.

The ABL and WNBA's inaugural seasons were marked by their competition with one another for talent and fans. The ABL was able to offer higher pay and more substantial benefits for its players, while the NBA-sponsored WNBA had access to more high-profile arenas and publicity. Players in the ABL made an average of \$80,000 a season and were offered year-round medical insurance and options to purchase stock in the league; WNBA players made an average of \$30,000 a season and were not provided with a benefits package.³² Which of the two leagues would prevail became clear as early as their first games. Debuting in June 1997, the inaugural game of the WNBA was played in front of 14,000 fans, almost three times that of the ABL's debut in October of the previous year. In 1998, not even a third of the way into its second season, the ABL filed for bankruptcy, citing over \$10 million in losses.

The NBA's sponsorship of the WNBA gave the new league advantageous access to broader and more expensive marketing platforms compared to its predecessors and competitor, the ABL. Since its founding in 1996 by former NBA Commissioner, David Stern, the WNBA has been defined by both its dependence on the NBA as the league's most prominent benefactor and the assumed competition between the two leagues for fan and consumer support. The NBA has played a major role in WNBA team ownership and marketing. As Joel Litvin, former President of League Operations for the NBA stated during a presentation at Sarah Lawrence College, "The Big Business of Professional Sports: The Complicated Interplay Between Race, Sport, and Your Favorite Game," "Just as a legal

³² Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*. (New York: The New Press, 2007), 225.

matter, the NBA owns the WNBA. It owns 50.1 percent and the owners of the individual teams own 49.9 percent. But ultimately, because it's our brand—the *WNBA*—we have to make the decision about things like marketing the league and things like the Logowoman³³.”³⁴

The most obvious representation of the relationship between the WNBA and NBA is the pairing of WNBA teams with “brother” NBA teams. The eight original WNBA franchises were all given a team name and logo that resembled the NBA teams they were partnered with. The WNBA's Charlotte Sting, Cleveland Rockers, Houston Comets, New York Liberty, Los Angeles Sparks, Sacramento Monarchs, and Utah Starzz were marketed as the sister squads to the NBA's Charlotte Hornets, Cleveland Cavaliers, Houston Rockets, New York Knicks, Los Angeles Lakers, Sacramento Kings, and Utah Jazz. The thought behind these pairings was that the WNBA's teams would be considered an extension of each sponsoring NBA team's brand, allowing the WNBA to benefit from the existing regional markets in these areas. This was intended to generate higher revenues for the new league, as its teams would appeal to local fans, but this has not been the case. Because of their locations, the WNBA's original eight teams could not capitalize on the existing markets for women's basketball created by storied collegiate programs such as the University of Tennessee's Lady Volunteers, UConn Lady Huskies, and Notre Dame Fighting Irish. With none of the teams housed in areas where women's college basketball reigns supreme, such as Tennessee, Connecticut, and Indiana, the WNBA was quickly cast as the women's auxiliary to the men's league. Unable to create an identity separate from the NBA, the league has struggled to attract fans and, in turn, maintain its franchises. While all of the aforementioned

³³ The “Logowoman” is the WNBA's universal logo, which is a silhouette of a woman shooting a basketball.

³⁴ Joel Litvin, “The Big Business of Professional Sports: The Complicated Interplay Between Race, Sport, and Your Favorite Game,” Sarah Lawrence College. Dec. 3, 2015.

NBA franchises are still in operation, only the New York Liberty and Los Angeles Sparks remain from the WNBA's original eight teams, and the Utah Starzz was relocated to San Antonio, Texas in 2002. The team was renamed the San Antonio Stars, reminiscent of the NBA's San Antonio Spurs.

Despite providing little benefit to the league, this practice continues today,³⁵ and in 2015 the Tulsa Shock was relocated to Dallas, Texas and refranchised as the Dallas Wings, a play on the NBA's Dallas Mavericks. Despite the Shock's improved attendance since being moved from Detroit to Tulsa in 2010, Majority Owner Bill Cameron thought the move to the Dallas-Fort Worth area was necessary to attract more fans and sponsors.³⁶ Minority Owner of the Sparks, Stuart Price, filed suit against Cameron and argued that the choice to move the franchise was "ripping the heart out of our children, our community, our organization, and all of those people and organizations that have been there for the Shock, even when we were losing." Similarly, Tulsa Mayor Dewey Bartlett issued a public plea to Cameron and the WNBA to keep the Shock in Tulsa. Despite the outpouring of support by fans and local leaders, the Shock's move was finalized in July 2015. Senior Sports Columnist for *Tulsa World*, John Klein, argued that the move was reflective of the league's larger issues, particularly in respect to impatient owners who are "unwilling to make a serious investment"³⁷ in the cities that they choose to call their team's home. Klein asserted, "The WNBA needs stability, not ownership that wants to move to the first small college gym that

³⁵ See Figure 1.

³⁶ Dillon Hollingsworth, "WNBA Shock Announce Plans To Leave Tulsa for Dallas, But Minority Owner Files Suit," *Tulsa World*, http://www.tulsaworld.com/sportsextra/shock/tulsa-shock-announces-plans-to-move-to-dallas-fort-worth/article_3f774a7d-356b-540b-8ed5-a27315a07318.html, July 21, 2015 (accessed Mar. 29, 2016).

³⁷ John Klein "Shock failures were about the team, not Tulsa," *Tulsa World*, July 21, 2015, http://www.tulsaworld.com/homepagelatest/john-klein-shock-failures-were-about-the-team-not-tulsa/article_05b21cd0-5f96-59f8-8204-97f3f4b4641d.html (accessed Mar. 29, 2016).

[FIGURE 1]



Logo for the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks



Logo for the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers



Logo for the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx



Logo for the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves



Logo for the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury



Logo for the NBA's Phoenix Suns

will take them.”³⁸ Instead of continuing to grow its existing fan base in Tulsa, the WNBA moved it to Dallas where it could be marketed with the Dallas Mavericks. While the Shock’s move was considered a strictly economic choice, it does reveal some of the shortcomings of the WNBA’s approach to cultivating its fan bases.

Structuring the WNBA around NBA teams, rather than women’s basketball fans, seems counterintuitive, and calls into question the motives behind the operation of the league, and even its initial formation. While the U.S. Women’s Basketball team’s Olympic win in Atlanta is often considered the catalyst for the creation of the WNBA, Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman argues that this was not, in fact, the case, as the NBA had announced its plans for the new women’s league before the team brought home the gold. Instead, she offers in her chapter in *Legal Issues in Professional Basketball* (2011), “We Got Next: The Once and Future WNBA,” that the NBA took measures to ensure the team’s Olympic victory, investing over \$3 million to assemble the team’s coaching staff and recruit and train players.³⁹

Through its financial backing of the 1996 Olympic team, the NBA was cultivating a consumer fan base for women’s basketball. While this has led to greater visibility and opportunity for women in athletics, the NBA’s intent was, arguably, strictly financial. Bridgeman writes that the WNBA’s use of NBA arenas not only cut costs for the new league, as it did not need to finance hiring and training new staff, but allowed these facilities to garner revenue in the summer when the arenas were typically out of use, which helps explain the strategy behind the creation of the league’s original franchises.

The NBA’s ownership of the WNBA allows it to regulate the growth of professional women’s basketball, enabling it to maintain an almost monopolist control over the consumer

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman, “We Got Next: The Once and Future WNBA,” in *Legal Issues in Professional Basketball*, ed. Lewis Kurlantzick, (California: Academia Press, 2011) 223-225.

market for professional basketball. With the WNBA playing in the summer, the women's game does not interfere with the NBA's season, which runs from mid-October to early June, meaning that the leagues do not need to compete over viewership and attendance. By maintaining majority ownership over the WNBA, the NBA controls not only league operations, such as the timing of the season, but also the image of the WNBA and its reach. The NBA has a history of being able to effectively reinvent its image amongst American consumers, as discussed in the next chapter, but has suspiciously and uncharacteristically been unable to elevate the image of the WNBA and make it more popular amongst sports fans. As one impassioned blogger, John Leach, suggests, "if the NBA wanted the WNBA to be more popular—[it] would be."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ John Leach, "The WNBA and the NBA," *The Wrath of John*, Apr. 18, 2013.

CHAPTER TWO: The Family-Friendly Ladies of the WNBA

The screen goes black and is replaced with an image of the New York Liberty's starting lineup running onto the court at Madison Square Garden. Directing her message to a presumably critical audience, the voice of four-time WNBA All-Star Swin Cash comes through the speakers, asserting,

I know what you're thinking. You think I can't. You think I can't go as hard as you. Cross you up, and go coast to coast.⁴¹ You think I can't train like a beast, give it everything I have and still be flawless. You think I can't open doors, be legendary, box her out⁴², get her to school on time, show them I care. "D" you up.⁴³ Be who I want. Love who I want. Inspire her, her *and* him. Take the charge. Sink the "J."⁴⁴ Make 'em dance. You think I can't do this, this and that? All while chasing my dream? Watch me.⁴⁵

Described by the Phoenix Mercury's press team as "brilliant" and "strategically and genuinely captur[ing] everything the league is about at its core in just 60 seconds,"⁴⁶ this television spot for the 2015 WNBA Playoffs, entitled "Watch Me," is filled with footage of past and present WNBA stand-outs. Cutting between videos of stars like 2015 league MVP Elena Delle Donne working out, three-time Sixth Woman of the Year DeWanna Bonner shooting a three, and three-time All-Star Brittney Griner dunking in her debut game, the commercial promises performance and challenges viewers to watch as the women of the WNBA continue to "inspire" and "chase [their] dream." But spliced between these images of physical prowess are shots of a two-time league MVP Candace Parker, strategically posed naked for ESPN's annual "Body Issue,"⁴⁷ then walking her young daughter to school.⁴⁸

Dulling the "brilliance" of the commercial and subverting Cash's declaration of equality,

⁴¹ In this context, to go "coast to coast" means to run from one end of the court to the other.

⁴² To "box her out" means to defend against an opponent trying to recover a rebound

⁴³ To "D up" is to defend against an opponent.

⁴⁴ A 'J' is a jumpshot.

⁴⁵ WNBA, "Watch Me," Sept. 2015.

⁴⁶ Phoenix Mercury, "WNBA Debuts 'Watch Me' Campaign," mercury.wnba.com, Sept. 22, 2015 <http://mercury.wnba.com/news/wnba-debuts-watch-me-campaign/> (accessed Oct. 1, 2015).

⁴⁷ See *Figures 2 and 3*.

⁴⁸ See *Figures 4 and 5*.



Figure 2: Candace Parker's Photo Shoot for ESPN's "The Body Issue"
Image captured from "Watch Me" Commercial

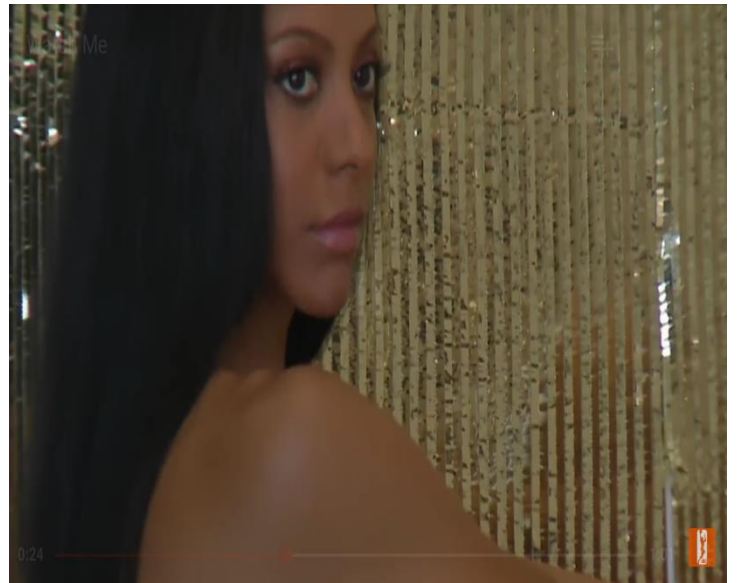


Figure 3: Candace Parker's Photo Shoot for ESPN's "The Body Issue"
Image captured from "Watch Me" Commercial



Figure 4: Candace Parker and daughter
Image captured from "Watch Me" Commercial



Figure 5: Candace Parker walking daughter to school
Image captured from "Watch Me" Commercial

integrity, and athletic accomplishment is the reminder that the players on the screen are women. They're covergirls. They're mothers. They're friends. They're "flawless."

Marketing and media are the key factors that have transformed professional sports from mere competitions between talented athletes to the billion-dollar business we recognize today. By creating a culture of heightened consumer interest and corporate involvement, sports marketing elevated sports into what one popular textbook on the subject describes as "the most competitive entertainment and leisure landscape ever."⁴⁹ Sports have now become ubiquitous in American culture with days of the week dedicated to watching professional football, the month of March reserved for the "madness" of collegiate basketball, athletes endorsing everything from clothing to car insurance, and teams and leagues competing for space in an ever more saturated and fragmented market. As consumers now have seemingly endless opportunities to spend their time and money as sports spectators, teams and leagues must compete against each other for the attention and loyalty of fans. The cultivation of sustainable sports leagues has come to depend on marketing campaigns that can not only create fans, but also encourage them to buy tickets and team apparel.

Economist Roger D. Blair argues in *Sports Economics* that a key factor in fans' attraction to a particular team is the team's record; as "winning leads to more fans and greater attendance; athletic performance improves economic performance—that is, profit, of the team."⁵⁰ In turn, Blair observes, winning records and high-level performance by athletes are rewarded with bonuses and salary increases. Bearing this in mind, how can one explain the deep disparity in pay between players of the winning-most Liberty and poor performing Knicks?

⁴⁹ Michael D. Shank, *Sports Marketing: A Strategic Perspective* 2nd edition. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002,1999),167.

⁵⁰ Roger D. Blair, *Sports Economics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 3.

In the 2015 season, the Liberty went 23-11 (0.676) in the regular season and 3-3 in the postseason, after entering the playoffs as the number one team in their conference. In the 2014-2015 season, the Knicks went 17-65 (.207) in the regular season and did not qualify for the postseason playoffs. Having the most losses in franchise history, the Knicks finished fifteenth out of fifteen teams in their conference. In the same unprecedentedly unsuccessful season, the highest paid player on the Knicks' roster, forward Carmelo Anthony, was paid \$22,458,401,⁵¹ nearly twenty-five times more than the Liberty's team salary cap of \$901,000 and almost 212 times more than the most highly compensated players on the Liberty, Tina Charles and Swin Cash's, each of whom is paid \$106,000 per season. The lowest-paid Knick, former power forward Travis Wear, got \$507,336,⁵² nearly fifty-six percent of the Liberty's team salary cap. Since 2000, the Knicks have spent \$1.3 billion on the player payroll, the highest in the NBA, but have only made four playoff appearances. In fact, according to financial analyst Sreekar Jasthi, the Knicks are the "least-efficient spenders"⁵³ of all franchises in professional football, baseball, and basketball—America's most prominent sports leagues.

Despite its historic losses, the Knicks remain one of the most celebrated and avidly supported teams amongst NBA fans, which explains how the franchise can still issue exorbitant salaries to its stars. In the 2014-2015 season, the Knicks ranked fourth in fan attendance out of the NBA's thirty teams, with a total of 812,292 fans at home games—an average of 19, 812 per game.⁵⁴ That was more than double the Liberty's average

⁵¹ HoopsHype, "NBA Salaries- New York Knicks," *USA Today Sports*, n.d. http://hoopshype.com/salaries/new_york_knicks/ (accessed Mar. 12, 2015).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sreekar Jasthi, "Which MLB, NBA, NFL Teams Are the Most Cost-Efficient With Payrolls?," *nerdwallet.com*, July 6, 2015, <https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/cities/data-studies/which-mlb-nba-nfl-teams-are-most-cost-efficient-with-payrolls-2015/> (accessed Jan. 29, 2016).

⁵⁴ ESPN, "NBA Attendance Report-2015," ESPN.com, n.d. <http://espn.go.com/nba/attendance> (accessed Feb. 1, 2016).

attendance—just 9,159 fans per game in the 2015 season.⁵⁵ Strategically designed advertising and other forms of promotion have the potential to increase fans’ willingness to pay to watch their favorite professional team in person,⁵⁶ and as the Knicks’ season attendance suggests, divert attention away from poor performance.

According to sports marketing scholar Matthew D. Shank, teams are able to create a “distinct” identity and “directly” affect consumer behavior by building a specific marketing narrative and brand. In the case of the WNBA and New York Liberty, the “distinct” identity that is formed through the team and league’s marketing efforts often upholds traditional female gender roles and position players as “family friendly” and feminine.

The marketing strategy seen in the “Watch Me” commercial—depicting the women of the WNBA as not only players, but also as pillars of their homes and communities— is not new to the league. Instead, this approach dates back to the WNBA’s inaugural 1997 campaign, “We Got Next.” In 1997, the women of the WNBA declared, “We Got Next,” a nod to male pickup game culture, proclaiming that it was their turn to play basketball professionally in the United States. This newest attempt to found an American professional basketball league for women coincided not only with the U.S. Olympic Women’s Team’s gold-medal finish at the 1996 Atlanta Games but also with a federal court’s ruling in the case *Cohen v. Brown University* (1993), that Title IX requires “full and effective accommodation of women in collegiate athletics.”⁵⁷ Highlighting an increase in women’s participation in athletics, these developments increased the numbers of fans of women’s sports.

⁵⁵ Sports Business Daily, “WNBA Has Record-Low Attendance In '15; Stars Down Big At Temporary Venue,” *sportsbusinessdaily.com*, Sept. 16, 2015, <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/2015/09/16/Research-and-Ratings/WNBA-gate.aspx> (accessed Feb. 1, 2016).

⁵⁶ Blair, p. 7.

⁵⁷ *Cohen v. Brown University*, 991 F.2d 888 (1993)

In her article, “‘We Got Next’: The WNBA Advertising Campaign’s Negotiations with ‘Femininity,’” media studies scholar Kara Keeling notes, that the “We Got Next” campaign “stands as the most visible (and most expensive) of the serious attempts to foster a market for professional women’s basketball.”⁵⁸ Largely funded by the NBA, the \$15-million campaign included print ads, billboards, television commercials, and marquee banners at NBA games. In a 1997 article for the *Wall Street Journal* on the league’s inaugural season, “With Big Sponsors and TV Deal, WNBA Seeks a Niche With Fans,” Roger Thurow offered, “If that orange-and-oatmeal [WNBA] ball doesn’t bounce across your radar screen sometime this summer—you are either totally unplugged or vacationing on the moon. For the NBA isn’t merely launching a new sports venture. It is unleashing a marketing monster.”⁵⁹

The “We Got Next” campaign and the television broadcasting of the inaugural season were vital to the cultivation of a WNBA fan base and, subsequently, the success of the league. However, as seen in the “Watch Me” ad, familiar images of femininity could be found in the campaign’s most prominent ads. “Sisters are Doing it for Themselves,” a 1985 duet by The Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin, served as the theme song for NBC’s commercials promoting the inaugural game between the New York Liberty and Los Angeles Sparks. As players showcased their skills on the screen, the song proclaimed, “We’re coming out of the kitchen, so there’s something we gotta say to you. Sisters are doing it for themselves.”⁶⁰ League commercials such as “The Runway” and “A Woman’s Work,” projected a similar narrative—seemingly rejecting the restraints of gender roles, but

⁵⁸ Kara Keeling, “‘We Got Next’: The WNBA Advertising Campaign’s Negotiations with ‘Femininity,’” *Contributions to the Study of Mass Media and Communications*. Greenwood Press. Vol. 57. 1999. pp. 201.

⁵⁹ Roger Thurow, “With Big Sponsors and TV Deal, WNBA Seeks a Niche With Fans,” *The Wall Street Journal*. June 12, 1997, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB866065466480140500> (accessed Mar. 7, 2015).

⁶⁰ Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart, *Sisters are Doing it for Themselves*, The Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin, RCA Records.

celebrating a balance between athleticism and conventional femininity. Featuring WNBA star Lisa Leslie and two team members, “The Runway” showcased players in full-face makeup sauntering down a fashion runway towards a locker room, presumably to dress for that night’s game, while the “A Woman’s Work” ad featured quick shots of women playing basketball, closing with the adage, “Women’s work never ends.”⁶¹ By likening WNBA players to models and suggesting they went from the kitchen to the court, these commercials reminded audiences that, while these women were playing a fast-paced and competitive sport, they were still women doing “women’s work.” In short, the “We Got Next” campaign sought to placate the anxiety over the association of female athleticism with mannishness and lesbianism, and by doing so, reinforced the hegemonic gender norms that already burdened the public perception of the league.

Because women’s athletics challenges gender norms, the WNBA is put in a precarious position when marketing the league. The push-and-pull nature of the league’s and its players’ negotiations with traditional views of gender is seen throughout the WNBA and its teams’ marketing efforts even today—twenty years after the league’s inaugural season.

Consider, for example, the differences between the New York Liberty’s and New York Knicks’ marketing materials for season tickets. The front cover of the Liberty pamphlet⁶² features the team’s logo at the center, a photo of center Tina Charles (player #31) at the top left, and a photo of former point guard Cappie Poindexter (player #23)⁶³ in the bottom right corner. The bottom left reads, “Nothing divides our team, or our fans. When the Liberty plays, the Garden is a family. We stand for Liberty[.]” The top half of the back

⁶¹ WNBA, “Women’s Work,” 1996.

⁶² See Figure 6.

⁶³ Poindexter was traded to the Chicago Sky in February 2015. See Associated Press “Sky land Cappie Poindexter in trade,” *ESPN.com*, http://espn.go.com/wnba/story/_/id/12333178/new-york-liberty-trade-cappie-pondexter-chicago-sky-epiphanny-prince (accessed Nov. 10, 2015).

cover⁶⁴ features a picture of Poindexter making a jump shot in a game against the Washington Mystics, a picture of a section of children from The Park Slope Day Camp cheering on the Liberty, and the slogan “WE STAND FOR LIBERTY.” The bottom half of the guide is a season ticket order form that includes contact information for the Liberty.

At first glance, the five images and few lines of text on the covers of this season ticket guide seem simple and straightforward; the team wants you to buy tickets and to “Stand for Liberty.” However, the pamphlet conveys a more specific narrative to consumers; the Liberty is worth watching because it is a family-friendly team. As stated on the front cover, the women of the Liberty can transform the fans of Madison Square Garden into a family, so much so, that the season ticket office email address, found on the pamphlet’s back cover, is LibertyFamily@msg.com. This reference to family is not unusual. As Matthew Shank notes, family, along with achievement, success, and youthfulness, is one of the core values “continuously stressed”⁶⁵ by American sports marketers. The problem is that the Liberty, like many other teams in the WNBA, relies almost exclusively on marketing that stresses family, which appeals to a limited segment of sports consumers.

The pamphlet also suggests the Liberty marketing assumes the target audience lacks interest in or knowledge of the team. The image of the Brooklyn campers is blurry, and one of the young campers is grimacing, looking away from the camera. This suggests that showing children at a game was more of a priority than the actual quality of the picture. Even more revealing is that the pamphlet is clearly outdated. This particular advertisement was distributed in June 2015, nearly two weeks into that year’s season, yet it features a photograph of Cappie Poindexter, whom the Liberty traded in February 2015. The inclusion

⁶⁴ See *Figure 7*.

⁶⁵ Shank, pp. 167.

of Poindexter's image four months after her departure from the team suggests a shockingly low standard for the team marketing materials, and an assumption that her absence from the roster would most likely go unnoticed by the majority of consumers.

By focusing on the family in its advertisements, the Liberty and WNBA put themselves and their consumers in a box. Because the WNBA anticipates that it is a league that is most attractive to families, it directs most of its advertising efforts to this demographic group and, unfortunately, succumbs to the characterization of the league as a "niche" sport that only appeals to a family-focused consumer base. This "family" market is primarily composed of women and children and is specifically concerned with affordability and "family friendliness," which requires that the Liberty's players seem accessible and relatable and, most important, compliant with traditional gender roles.

The Liberty season ticket pamphlet presents the value of the team as deriving from their ability to bring people together, not in their ability to play. This stands in stark contrast to the sense of value created for the Knicks by its season ticket ad.⁶⁶ Featuring action shots of forward Jerian Grant (#13), forward Carmelo Anthony (#7), and forward-center Kristaps Porzingis (#46) and reading, "No Place Like the Garden[.] Secure Your Season Tickets," this marketing presents that Knicks as a high-performing team whose tickets are highly sought after. The use of the word "secure" in its prompt to get fans to purchase season tickets creates a sense that there is a risk that these tickets will run out. Though this is not the case, it creates a sense of high demand for Knicks' tickets and, in turn, suggests that the Knicks are of high value, exemplifying the team's ability to create a brand identity that is independent from and, arguably, indifferent to the team's actual performance.

⁶⁶ See Figure 8.

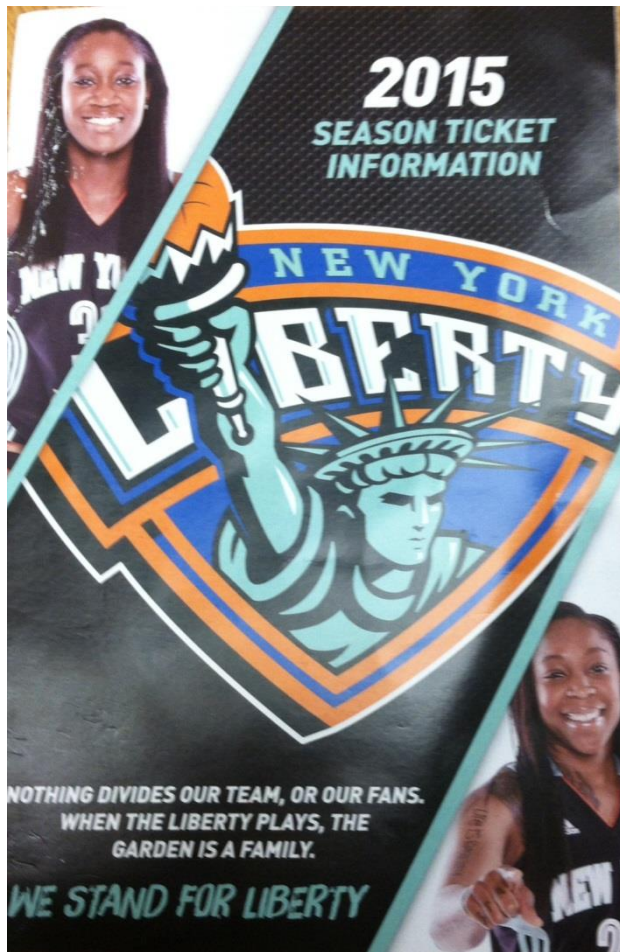


Figure 6: Liberty 2015 Season Ticket Pamphlet Front Cover

WE STAND FOR LIBERTY

CONTACT

Phone: 212.465.6766 Fax: 212.465.6250 Email: LibertyFamily@msg.com

NYLIBERTY.COM

SEASON TICKET ORDER FORM

FIRST _____ LAST _____

ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ STATE _____

PHONE _____ EMAIL _____

CREDIT CARD _____ EXP DATE _____

SECTION _____ ROW _____ SEAT(S) _____

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

Figure 7: Liberty 2015 Season Ticket Pamphlet Back Cover



Figure 8: Knicks 2015-2016 Season Ticket Ad

The differing images on these season ticket advertisements and the messages they convey to consumers fall in line with traditional views of gender as seen in athletics. While Grant, Anthony, and Porzingis are pictured sweating on the court during a game, Charles and Poindexter are seen posed with their hair done and minimal, but noticeable, makeup on. Grant, Anthony, and Porzingis have their “game faces” on, looking up at the goal as they prepare to take a shot or looking at a defender as they try to secure the ball, while Charles and Poindexter offer warm and welcoming smiles.

The WNBA’s presenting itself as a family-focused league can, arguably, be considered a direct response to the “bad boy” reputation of the NBA and its players. Historically, basketball has been seen as a sport for wayward boys. Dr. James Naismith created the sport in 1891 as a way to keep the boys of the YMCA occupied and out of trouble on the days that the weather would not permit them to play outside. In his 1896 essay for Spalding’s guide for basketball, “Ethics of Basketball,” Dr. Luther Gulick argued that “the greatest danger” presented during play was not injury, but male players’ conducting themselves in an “ungentlemanly [and] discourteous”⁶⁷ manner. Gulick concluded by offering, “Sport which violates the principles of courtesy and good character is never good sport.” Echoing this sentiment, William H. Bail argued that the success of men’s basketball was dependent on the “intense desire”⁶⁸ of Naismith and coaches to reject the objectionably brute verbal and physical retaliation incited by losses or calls that players believed were unfair. This characterization of basketball being a sport that potentially jeopardizes players’ behavior on and off the court has remained.

⁶⁷ Dr. Luther Gulick, “Ethics of Basketball.” *Spalding’s Official Basket Ball Guide: 1896-1897* (Spalding Athletic Library: 1896): 9.

⁶⁸ William H. Bail, “The Spirit of the Game,” *Spalding’s Official Basket Ball Guide: 1915-1916* (Spalding Athletic Library: 1915): 9.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, around the same time of the WNBA's first seasons, a number of drug scandals and assault charges amongst NBA stars like eleven-time NBA All-Star Charles Barkley, five-time NBA Champion Dennis Rodman, and ten-time NBA All-Star Jason Kidd, made the reputation of the NBA plummet in the eyes of the American public, and the league was referred to as the "National Brawlers' Association." In what became known as "Malice at the Palace," in November 2004, a fight broke out between players for the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons, eventually leading to player Ron Artest assaulting a fan. As a response to the actions of its players, the NBA established "NBA Cares," which focused on players' community service and volunteer endeavors. With the creation of the WNBA, "WNBA Cares" was established, and what started as an effort at image repositioning in the NBA had become a vital aspect of the WNBA brand.

While the WNBA has tried to market itself as the wholesome alternative to the NBA, it takes for granted that the scandalous behavior of NBA players actually adds to the league's fan appeal. As Todd Boyd argues in *Young, Black, Rich & Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture*, the lifestyle of NBA players has not only caused fans to double down on their interest and commitment to the league, but has created a new idealized lifestyle. Boyd argues that the "internationally known, nationally recognized, and locally accepted"⁶⁹ image of the NBA and its players has ushered in "a new American dream," one that focuses on lavish wealth and behavior.

Aside from the entertainment and economic value of sports, fans are motivated to watch or attend sporting events because of the escape from the mundane it provides. Both Shank and Blair cite diversion from everyday life and the psychological phenomenon known

⁶⁹ Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich & Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture*, (University of Illinois Press: 2008), p. 171.

as BIRGing—basking in reflected glory,⁷⁰ as key factors influencing sports consumption. Since the WNBA’s focus on the family makes their players more relatable to the league’s targeted demographics, it serves more as a reflection of everyday life, and does not project the excitement that the majority of sports fans—upper-income men—find attractive. With the acceptance and celebration of the unruliness of some of the biggest names in the NBA, the WNBA’s promotion of its good-natured principles is unlikely to attract these consumers. This focus has, in fact, had adverse effects on the WNBA, not only limiting its appeal to a more widespread fan base, but also reinforcing the WNBA’s characterization as a down-market alternative to the NBA and detracting attention from the issues of player pay.

In her 2015 essay for *The Player’s Tribune*, “(In)Visibility,” WNBA star Maya Moore wrote about the challenges and frustrations of transitioning from the highly celebrated world of college basketball to a professional level that is marked by “Less coverage. Empty seats. Fewer eyeballs.”⁷¹ Moore offered that the league needs to revamp its marketing in order to give women’s basketball the platform its players have earned:

Our own marketing is something that needs to improve, no question. Every player in the league knows this. The marketing needs to match our product. There should be more time and effort spent celebrating the basketball...I don’t want to compromise our identity as basketball players to become something that we think people will like on a superficial level. Celebrate us for the things that matter—the stories, the basketball, the character, the fiery competitiveness, our professionalism.⁷²

As Moore observes, the league’s current approach to marketing is only attracting fans on a “superficial” level that compromises the skills and identity of its players.

Because of the superficiality of its marketing narrative, the WNBA is unable to attract fans on a widespread level and, in turn, generate increased revenue. Despite this, however,

⁷⁰ See Shank (2002) pp.189-190 and Blair (2012) pp. 332.

⁷¹ Maya Moore, “(In)Visibility,” *The Players’ Tribune*, Apr. 30, 2015, <http://www.theplayerstribune.com/maya-moore-wnba-visibility/> (accessed Apr. 11, 2016).

⁷² Ibid.

the league continues to insist on focusing on the gender of its players, rather than their athletic ability. When asked about her plans to revamp the WNBA's marketing, the league's new president, Lisa Borders offered, "We're going to start marketing individuals, on and off the court. When you think about athletes in general, we marvel at how fast they can run, how high they can jump, and we tend to forget that they are people too and they have real lives. They have children, they have dogs, and they have interests beyond the court. It might be fashion, hair, makeup, or whatever it is."⁷³ Borders takes for granted that a major problem the WNBA faces is that fans do not "marvel" at the athletic prowess of its players, and her plan to focus more on sharing the stories of players' home lives only perpetuates the family narrative that WNBA marketing is already marked by. Borders's focus on players' interests in fashion is problematic but not surprising. Instead, it reiterates the gendered ideologies that the WNBA's administration are guided by, and it is quite telling that the only outside interests of WNBA players that Border lists are hobbies that promote traditional images of femininity.

What has emerged from this wholesome imaging of the WNBA is what can be described as a "sacrifice narrative." The players of the WNBA have been cast as selfless, family-friendly women who are more interested in playing the sport they love and entertaining their faithful fans than in taking home an impressive pay check—willing to sacrifice personal gains for the betterment of the sport. Juliette Terzieff, author of *Women of the Court: Inside the WNBA* argues that the commitment of WNBA players, in spite of their low salaries, is a testament to their loyalty to and love of the game. Terzieff minimizes the financial needs of the WNBA and its players, noting "No fancy equipment is needed; no

⁷³ Alana Glass, "WNBA President Lisa M. Borders Says NBA And WNBA Are Joined At The Hip," *forbes.com*, Apr. 4, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/alanaglass/2016/04/04/wnba-president-lisa-m-borders-says-nba-and-wnba-are-joined-at-the-hip/#44b2a762478d> (accessed Apr. 10, 2016)

special training; just passion, passion, and more passion.”⁷⁴ Similarly in *Why She Plays: The World of Women’s Basketball*, Christine Baker argues that the low salaries WNBA players earn is actually good for their game and the league; with fewer perks and accommodations, WNBA players are able to focus their energy on playing basketball, and their “sacrifice will ensure the league’s longevity.” Baker continues, “The key is the women of the WNBA don’t complain.”⁷⁵

The sentiments of Terzieff and Baker are echoed by writers for major sports publications such as *Sport Illustrated* and ESPN.com. In their article “The Case for...The WNBA,” Andrew Lawrence and Ted Keith offer that WNBA players are “mold-shattering women...[who] should be an inspiration to us all.”⁷⁶ Their “case” for the league does not include the athletic talents of the WNBA’s players. Similarly, Michael Buteau of *Businessweek* commends WNBA owners for “making history, not profits,” and describes playing in the WNBA as an opportunity for “soul-searching,”⁷⁷ empowering women, and providing role models for young girls. While all of this is true, the WNBA also represents an opportunity for women to play basketball and, more important, get paid to play at the professional level. Lawrence, Leith, and Buteau offer an almost romanticized version of life for WNBA players, and ignore the effects of their low wages not only on their personal lives, but also on the future of the league.

This narrative of self-sacrifice has been adopted by players in the league. When asked about pay inequity between the WNBA and NBA in a 2013 interview for *Sway in the*

⁷⁴ Juliette Terzieff, *Women of the Court: Inside the WNBA*. (New York, NY: Alyson Books, 2008), pp.65.

⁷⁵ Christine A. Baker, *Why She Plays: The World of Women’s Basketball*. (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 2008) pp. 121.

⁷⁶ Andrew Lawrence and Ted Keith. “The Case for...The WNBA.” *Sports Illustrated*. Sept. 22 2014. Vol. 121, Issue 11.pp.30.

⁷⁷ Michael Buteau. “WNBA Owners Make History, Not Profits.” *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Sept. 20, 2010. Issue 4196. p. 22.

Morning, Skylar Diggind, guard for the Dallas Wings, told host Sway Calloway, “I mean, I agree, but I think that if you play for the money, you shouldn’t be playing. I think it’s about the love for the game and the passion. That’s why I play.”⁷⁸ Not only does this sentiment cast players who aspire to earn higher wages from playing as disloyal to the league; it also perpetuates the gendered narrative that the marketing of the league has become characterized by.

This sacrifice narrative and the characterization of the WNBA as a “family-friendly,” down-market alternative to the NBA not only maintains low wages in the league, but celebrates them. Some players like Moore have publicly resisted this gendered narrative, but the WNBA has yet to answer their call for the league to focus on what matters, “the stories, the basketball, the character, the fiery competitiveness, [their] professionalism.”

⁷⁸ Skylar Diggins, interviewed by Sway Calloway, *Sway in the Morning*, Sirius Radio, December 13, 2013.

CHAPTER THREE

“Spin Moves”: The Marketing Maneuvers of the WNBA

When asked about the challenges of making the WNBA and its players more marketable, league stylist Rachel Johnson answered, “From a sports perspective, these women holler, scream, sweat and aren't posing when they play, so they aren't going to look their best....It's not easy to be a woman in that place.”⁷⁹ Johnson's response concisely captures the image constraints that the WNBA and its players are burdened by. It *is* hard being a woman in “that place,” because that place is not simply the arenas or locker rooms that WNBA players call home. Instead, “that place” is the product of the sports-media complex—the collective consciousness of sports journalists, broadcasters, fans, and the general consuming public—where players are examined and scrutinized for their adherence to traditional gender norms. At the same time, they are also being assessed by their ability to play, which, in turn, challenges said norms. Despite the unladylike screaming and hollering that Johnson speaks of, *New York Times* sportswriter William C. Rhoden suggests that these image constraints have left the WNBA as “maybe the quietest sports league in the United States.”⁸⁰ Because the league's successes fly so under the radar, so do its failures, and the WNBA is able to spin the challenges the league and its players face—namely, the league's resistance to recognizing its LGBT fans and the growing problem of overseas play in the off-season.

Describing the fan base that the league fostered in its first few seasons, former WNBA President Val Ackerman, stated, “We have created a new audience for the sport of

⁷⁹ Chavie Lieber “Why WNBA Stars Struggle to Build Personal Brands,” *racked.com*. Aug. 7, 2014.

⁸⁰ William C. Rhoden, “Amid Successes, W.N.B.A. Is Still Facing Challenges,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/sports/basketball/amid-successes-wnba-is-still-facing-challenges.html?_r=0, (accessed Oct. 2, 2015).

basketball with the WNBA. We have created it from scratch. These are fans that may not, and in most cases, do not, support men's professional sports.”⁸¹ In a very roundabout way, Ackerman hinted that the WNBA's central fan base was composed of lesbians. This skirting around the fact that the WNBA attracted members of the LGBT community persisted, much to the dismay and frustration of these fans. In 2002, a group self-described as “Lesbians for Liberty” staged a “kiss-in” during the televised New York Liberty versus Miami Sol game at Madison Square Garden, as a means of protesting the Liberty's lack of acknowledgment and promotion of its strong lesbian fan base. According to a report by *The South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, lesbians made up thirty percent of the WNBA's fan base at the time,⁸² but the league did not actively recognize the group in its teams' promotions and appearances. The Lesbians for Liberty call to action asked, “Are you tired of the WNBA and the New York Liberty denying that lesbians are packing Madison Square Garden week after week for women's basketball games?”⁸³ Liberty administration responded to the kiss-in with a placating statement that described the WNBA as “an environment where every single person—regardless of age, ethnicity or sexual preference—is treated equally.”⁸⁴ The message, however, did not celebrate the fact that LGBT fans were part of the WNBA community. Instead, it suggested that the WNBA was a league for everyone, including the straight male fans of men's sports. It would take over a decade for the league to finally respond in a substantial and meaningful way to the frustration of these and other LGBT fans, by launching its annual WNBA Pride Night in 2014.

⁸¹ Althea Knight, “The WNBA is Growing But Not Without Pains,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 23, 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/2000/08/23/the-wnba-is-growing-but-not-without-pains/d1a13524-82a8-401f-8788-2b3e2fa0b965/> (accessed Feb. 27, 2015).

⁸² Ira Berkow, “Sports of the Times; A Lesbian Group Protests Too Much,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 5, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/05/sports/sports-of-the-times-a-lesbian-group-protests-too-much.html> (accessed Mar. 28, 2016).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The initiative made the WNBA the first professional sports league to specifically target and recruit lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender fans, but, for many league supporters, WNBA Pride was much overdue. Rick Welts, the executive vice president and chief marketing officer of the NBA when the WNBA was created, “We guessed very wrong on that.... I remember sitting in a few meetings where we had really interesting thoughtful discussions of: ‘Should we be proactive marketing to the LGBT community? What does that say if we do?’ We certainly didn’t want to position the league of being exclusionary to anyone. What were we saying if we did it more proactively? Society and sports culture is very different today than it was back then. Teams were trying to figure out the right thing to do.”⁸⁵

While many believe that the growing number of WNBA players coming out as gay prompted the league to embrace its LGBT fans, Tom Van Riper of *Forbes.com* suggests that the Pride initiative seems more like a last-ditch effort by the league to cultivate a more sustainable fan base than an act rooted in a sense of social responsibility. Van Riper writes, “The WNBA resisted for as long as it could. But with few options left to shake up its struggling league, it’s going where it never really wanted to—as the specific go-to place for gay fans.”⁸⁶ Reminiscent of the concerns Welts cites, Van Riper argues that the WNBA is “embarking on a strategy to rally the base, rather than broaden it.”⁸⁷

The league’s inability to attract larger fan bases and maintain those that it has already established has had consistently adverse effects on players’ pay. In what one sports journalist

⁸⁵ Doug Feinberg, “WNBA to market to LGBT community,” *Associated Press*, May 21, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/wnba/2014/05/21/ap-newsbreak-wnba-to-market-to-lgbt-community/9364893/> (accessed Mar. 29, 2016).

⁸⁶ Tom Van Riper, “Is It the Beginning of the End For the WNBA?,” *Forbes.com*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tomvanriper/2014/05/23/is-it-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-the-wnba/#4bd370383c07> (accessed June 23, 2015).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

has referred to as the “dirty little secret of the WNBA,”⁸⁸ increasing numbers of players have resorted to playing year-round, spending their summers at home playing for the WNBA and their winters playing overseas, in order to supplement their pay. In the 2015 off-season seventy-seven of the WNBA’s 147 players played for fifty-two international teams, the majority of which belong to the International Basketball Federation’s EuroLeague Women (FIBAW). Founded in September 1958, FIBAW is the premier professional league for women’s basketball in Europe.⁸⁹ Since 1991, thirty of FIBAW’s scoring leaders have been American, twenty-four of these since the emergence of the WNBA in 1997.⁹⁰

While WNBA players’ salaries are capped at \$107,500 after a minimum of six seasons with the league, FIBAW players make upwards of \$1 million a season, as the majority of international clubs are sponsored by local businesses, municipal governments, and wealthy team owners who prioritize player pay over all other expenses. Aside from these higher salaries, players also enjoy travel perks not yet offered by the WNBA, such as private jets, five-star hotel suites, and privately-catered meals. Their accommodations during the season often include lofty apartments, personal drivers and translators, and extravagant gifts.

Unlike the WNBA, international teams such as Russia’s Ekaterinburg, China’s Zhejiang, and the Czech Republic’s USK Praha do not televise their games nationally, and typically average only 1,000 attendants at a game. Even a quick glance at the websites of FIBAW and WNBA teams reveals stark differences between their marketing strategies. The only pictures on the FIBAW team websites are live-action player shots, team photos, and

⁸⁸ L. Jon Wertheim. “The Big Score.” *Sports Illustrated*. 4 Nov. 2002. Vol. 97 Issue 18. p. 24.

⁸⁹ FIBAW, “Mainini: calendar, system of competition and 3x3 our biggest priorities” [Press release] Mar. 15, 2015, <http://cc.bingj.com/cache.aspx?q=mainini%3a+calendar%2c+system+of+competition+and+3x3+our+biggest+priorities%22&d=5041528649941930&mkt=en-US&setlang=en-US&w=mwB7MX5AVST0nxcHY4wEAfPsw8wlVG5h> (accessed Jan. 12, 2016).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

photos of coaches and staff; there is no “In the Community” section that highlights players’ philanthropic efforts when they are off the court, as found on the Liberty’s and other WNBA teams’ websites. The “History” recounted on the FIBAW teams’ sites includes only notable wins, while the WNBA’s sites include the history of women’s basketball in the United States, team wins, league development, and changes to coaching and operational staff.

The perks of playing overseas often come at the expense of players’ health. In 2011, the WNBA’s season started with two of the league’s star players, the Los Angeles Sparks’ Candace Parker and Seattle Storm’s Lauren Jackson, having to sit out with injuries sustained shortly after returning from their seasons abroad. Untimely injuries like Parker’s and Jackson’s are not uncommon in the WNBA, however, and, for many players in the league, are not enough to deter them from returning to play overseas. In an interview with Melissa Rohlin of *The Los Angeles Times*, Sparks guard Ticha Penicheiro said, “Physically, mentally, it's a lot of sacrifices to make....I've been doing it 13 years. Sometimes you play with injuries, but you never have time to recover. It's like you're always playing hurt.”⁹¹ Echoing these sentiments, Courtney Watson, trainer for the Sparks, offered, “If there was a little more resting time in between [the FIBAW and WNBA seasons], we wouldn't see half as many of the injuries we see now.”⁹²

In an attempt to spin this unfortunate truth that players are playing year-round at the risk of burnout and premature retirement, and that the perks of playing in the WNBA pale in comparison to those available overseas, the WNBA annually publishes “WNBA Players

⁹¹ Melissa Rohlin, “Year-round play is becoming hazardous duty for some WNBA players,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/12/sports/la-sp-0713-wnba-money-injuries-20110713> (accessed Apr. 17, 2016).

⁹² Ibid.

Playing Overseas” on its website. The page serves as a way of updating fans on the happenings of their favorite players in the off-season. It reads:

When the WNBA season wraps up that doesn’t mean the basketball stops. Plenty of players across the league head overseas to continue playing. Fresh off a WNBA championship and a WNBA Finals MVP honor, Sylvia Fowles is playing in the Women’s Chinese Basketball Association. Indiana’s Marissa Coleman is playing for Turkish team Fenerbahçe. Reigning Rookie of the Year Jewell Loyd is starring for Galatasaray. And those are just a few. Take a look at where your favorite WNBA stars are playing overseas below.⁹³

The message’s nonchalant tone and use of “fresh off” is quite telling. While the WNBA recognizes that its players are getting very little time to recuperate after the summer season ends, they are able to spin concern for a player’s health and well-being into a narrative of perseverance, a variation of the sacrifice narrative. By failing to address the fact that players go overseas to earn higher pay, the WNBA suggests that its players are willing to sacrifice their bodies to yearlong play so that the conclusion of the WNBA’s season “doesn’t mean the basketball stops.” Instead, fans can enjoy the game they love yearlong.

After spending the majority of their off-season playing basketball in a foreign county, the women of the WNBA return in the summer to a league seemingly indifferent to the low salaries that send them abroad. As WNBA players’ experiences in FIBAW reveal, the pay disparity between the WNBA and NBA cannot just be written off as the result of weak consumer support for the women’s league. This weak support is, instead, the result of a system in which players’ appeal is limited by the same league investors and administration that do not prioritize their pay.

⁹³ WNBA, “WNBA Players Playing Overseas,” *WNBA.com*. nd, www.wnba.com/wnba-players-playing-overseas (accessed May 10, 2015).

Sports Illustrated writer L. Jon Wertheim offers that the “fun-house-mirror economics of women’s pro basketball”⁹⁴ in the United States will lead the league’s top players into the welcoming arms of teams abroad on a more permanent basis. This looming risk came to realization in February 2015, when Diana Taurasi, star of the Phoenix Mercury, announced that she would sit out for the 2015 season at the request of her Russian Premier League team. Since being drafted in 2004, Taurasi has played year-round, every year—summers with the WNBA and winters overseas. Sportswriter Kate Fagan projects that this “forced existence of a professional women’s basketball player”⁹⁵ could lead to the downfall of the WNBA. Taurasi spoke about her decision to sit out in a 2015 interview for *Grantland*. When asked by host Jalen Rose about Taurasi making ninety-nine percent of her \$1.6 million annual income overseas, Taurasi responded:

I mean, it’s just, people always ask me this question. It’s like, okay. Messi goes to Barcelona to play soccer. Does he go to Argentina and play for the, you know, recreational league during the summer? No. So why, why have we been put in a position to do that? And I know it’s different. You know, Europe is different. Free market. You know, you got all these billionaires who just love it. They’re not doing it for profit, they’re not doing it for media. You know, it’s just like one rich Russian who loves basketball, and pays you a lot of money. You’re like the hired assassin. And you know, the WNBA is trying to be a league of longevity. We’re near nineteen [years], hopefully it gets to 40. And, you know, it’s just been a little bit of a crawl lately, and I think it needs to start running a little bit.⁹⁶

Taurasi’s comparison of the WNBA to a recreational league is a characterization that naysayers have used to denigrate the league. But coming from 2004 first overall draft pick, three-time WNBA Champion, and seven-time WNBA All-Star Taurasi, the comparison

⁹⁴ Wertheim, 24.

⁹⁵ Kate Fagan “Diana Taurasi’s decision to sit out should spark WNBA salary changes.” *espnW.com*. Feb. 3, 2015, http://espn.go.com/wnba/story/_/id/12272036/diana-taurasi-decision-sit-spark-wnba-salary-changes (accessed Mar. 1, 2015).

⁹⁶ Diana Taurasi, interviewed by Bill Simmons and Jalen Rose, *Grantland*, ESPN, March 17, 2015.

suggests a certain level of player frustration with the league that is rarely revealed. Taurasi is the first marquee player in the league's history to sit out from the WNBA at the request of an international squad, but the consistently low wages offered by the league suggest that she will not be the last.

Another aspect of the Taurasi interview that is very telling is her self-characterization as a "hired assassin." While the interview focuses on how the WNBA's goal of league longevity is pursued at the expense of player pay, Taurasi's brief self-description, when analyzed further, provides insight into what life is like for WNBA players abroad. These players are contracted by international teams for very limited amounts of time and for a very specific purpose—to win.

While they are financially supported, their time abroad can subject them to many personal challenges. In 2013, in a day-in-the-life video for *WNBA.com*, "Candace Parker's Life in Russia," the two-time WNBA MVP talked about raising her three year old daughter, Lailaaa, while playing in the off-season for Russia's UMMC Ekaterinburg. Parker says:

I've been in "mommy mode" since I've been professional, but it's tough in a foreign country. I don't have a lot of help, so its Lailaa and I...I think we're starting to get the culture. When I first came here [in 2010], I had a six-month-old, so it was just survival mode. I think my biggest concern coming over was the sacrifice—not only that I was making, but my family was making. You know, mainly my daughter. It's really tough to be separated from my husband and Lailaa not to be able to see her dad everyday on a consistent basis. I think we're looking at it as a short-term thing. You know—basketball, overseas, our playing careers. It's not going to last forever and this is a great opportunity for our family. For everything we're giving up from being over here, we're gaining that much more.⁹⁷

Stories like Parker's can be told throughout the league by players whose hands are practically forced by the financial promise of playing overseas that the WNBA cannot yet match. These stories of "sacrifice" and "survival mode" are not the ones conveyed by the league when it

⁹⁷ WNBA, "Candace Parker's Life in Russia," *WNBA.com*, 8 May, 2013.

highlights off-season play. More concerning, as Parker's video reveals, is that this lifestyle challenges and disrupts the family structure that the WNBA so tightly clings to in its marketing narrative. This suggests that the image of these players that the league projects is a greater priority than their financial and personal well-being.

CONCLUSION

As Brittney Griner neared the end of her senior season with the Baylor Lady Bears, her post-college career plans became a topic of national conversation. Named the Wade Trophy Player of the Year in 2012 and 2013, Griner helped reinvigorate the women's game and set a new standard for collegiate players everywhere. In 2012, the six-foot, eight-inch center led her team to the NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Championship and a 40-0 season, making Baylor the first college basketball team—women's or men's—to finish with a perfect record. In her four years as a Lady Bear, Griner scored 3,283 career points, blocked 748 shots, and reestablished the dunk in women's basketball with eleven in her senior season alone,⁹⁸ catching the attention of sports pundits across the country.

One of Griner's most prominent supporters was the owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, Mark Cuban. In a pre-game interview in April 2013, Cuban remarked that he would have “no problem whatsoever”⁹⁹ picking Griner during the second round of that year's NBA draft or having her try out for the team's Summer League. Griner responded via Twitter, “I would hold my own! Let's do it,”¹⁰⁰ but her tryout never materialized. On May 13, Griner was selected by the Phoenix Mercury as the top overall pick of the 2013 WNBA Draft, and went on to make \$49,440 in her rookie season¹⁰¹—about one-tenth of what Mike

⁹⁸Tim MacMahon, “Mark Cuban may draft Brittney Griner,” ESPN.com, Apr. 3, 2013, http://espn.go.com/dallas/nba/story/_/id/9127664/mark-cuban-give-brittney-griner-opportunity-dallas-mavericks (accessed Mar. 29, 2016).

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Cork Gaines, “Brittney Griner Makes 12 Times As Much Money Playing Basketball in China,” *BusinessInsider.com*, Apr. 21, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/brittney-griner-basketball-china-2014-4> (accessed Apr. 16, 2015).

Muscala, the player whom the Mavs did select in the second round, was guaranteed under the NBA's 2011 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). Later that year, Griner was selected by the Women's Chinese Basketball Association's (WCBA) Zhejiang Golden Bulls to play in the WNBA's off-season, for which she was paid \$600,000.¹⁰² Griner's contract with the WCBA brought her total earnings for the year to less than eight percent of the top overall pick of the 2013 NBA Draft, Anthony Bennett, under his \$8.5 million annual contract with the Cleveland Cavaliers.¹⁰³ Today a WNBA Champion and three-time WNBA All-Star, Griner's makes a living as do many other players in the league—by splitting her time between her WNBA team and the international squad she plays for in the off-season to help supplement her pay.

While the firestorm that surrounded Griner's potential draft by the NBA was short-lived, it did spark conversations on the future of professional basketball, namely whether or not women could or *should* play for the NBA. Many argued that Cuban's offer was insincere and was simply a means of turning attention away from the Mavericks' lackluster season. Kelly Dwyer of *Yahoo! Sports* described Griner as "a once-in-a-generation athlete,"¹⁰⁴ but concluded that she still would not be able to play in the NBA, as her size and skill made her comparable to only the league's most mediocre players. Even Geno Auriemma, storied coach of the UConn Lady Huskies who has publicly referred to the men's game as "a joke,"¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Kevin Pelton, "Anthony Bennett worth the (new) price for the Raptors," *ABC Sports*, Sept. 25, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Sports/anthony-bennett-worth-price-raptors/story?id=34054278> (accessed Apr. 12, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ Kelly Dwyer, "Mark Cuban mentions drafting Brittney Griner because 'hey everybody, let's look at Mark Cuban!'" *Yahoo! Sports*, Apr. 3, 2013, <http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/nba-ball-dont-lie/mark-cuban-mentions-drafting-brittney-griner-because-hey-140122493--nba.html> (accessed Apr. 20, 2016).

¹⁰⁵ Satchel Price "Geno Auriemma says men's college basketball is 'a joke'," *SBNation*, Apr. 1, 2015, <http://www.sbnation.com/2015/4/1/8326705/geno-auriemma-mens-college-basketball-joke> (accessed Apr. 15, 2016).

spoke out against Griner's playing for the NBA, offering, "I think it would be a sham. The [idea] that a woman could actually play right now in the NBA and compete successfully against the level of play that they have is absolutely ludicrous."¹⁰⁶ With prominent proponents of women's basketball such as Auriemma coming out against a woman's potential to play in the NBA, the idea of a co-ed professional basketball league was written off as laughable.

In response to the criticism his remarks received, Cuban asserted, "Nothing harms an organization or company more than a closed mind."¹⁰⁷ Regardless of Cuban's intent in extending his informal invitation to Griner, truer words could not have been spoken of the biggest burden facing the WNBA and its players. Guided by a steadfast loyalty to traditional views of femininity, the league's marketing conveys a close-minded narrative, one that paints players as mothers, and sisters, and friends before bringing attention to, let alone showcasing, their athletic abilities. This, in turn, only reinforces the idea that it is "ludicrous" to see such ladies playing for the NBA, or any professional basketball teams for that matter, and continues to stunt the image of the WNBA amongst general sports consumers. The WNBA is no closer to parity with the NBA than it was twenty years ago when the new league first declared "We Got Next." As the NBA season becomes longer and player salaries reach unprecedented heights, the WNBA still struggles to find and maintain a fan base, secure endorsement deals for its players, and offer competitive wages—problems that cannot simply be written off as effects of the league's youth or shortened season. What does it mean that a league that touts itself as the "the home for the best women's basketball talent in the

¹⁰⁶ Katie Van Veghel, "Brittney Griner to the NBA? Realistic, or a PR Stunt?" *College Spun*, Apr. 3, 2013, <http://collegespun.com/features/brittney-griner-to-the-nba-realistic-or-a-pr-stunt> (accessed Apr. 17, 2016).

¹⁰⁷ Sean Highkin, "Women's coach tells Mark Cuban not to draft Brittney Griner," *USA Today Sports*, Apr. 3, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/gameon/2013/04/03/dallas-mavericks-mark-cuban-baylor-ncaa-brittney-griner-nba-draft/2048459/> (accessed Apr. 24, 2016)

world”¹⁰⁸ is unable to convey this message of greatness to consumers? And, moreover, what are the implications of the fact that the perceived pinnacle for women basketball players in the United States is not playing for the WNBA, but, instead, its male counterpart, something that has been described as inconceivable?

On March 30, 2016, five soccer players of the United States Women’s National Team (USWNT)—Alex Morgan, Becky Sauerbrunn, Carli Lloyd, Hope Solo, and Megan Rapinoe—filed a wage discrimination lawsuit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) against the U.S. Soccer Federation. Citing unequal salaries and travel stipends in comparison to those of their male counterpart, the United States Men’s National Team (USMNT), the team’s complaint seeks to reevaluate the USWNT’s Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). Above all, the women say that they are seeking “equality, respect, and equal pay.”¹⁰⁹ With their options seemingly limited—barred from playing for the NBA and compelled to play overseas in the off-season—will WNBA players be the next professional women athletes to seek legal remedies for their low wages?

Sixteen-year soccer veteran Hope Solo says that her team’s fight for equal wages is not an isolated incident, offering, “We’ve been brainwashed as women to not stand up for equal pay with men. It’s not just in sports; it’s in every workforce for all women.”¹¹⁰ With the world looking on as the USWNT’s case unfolds, the relationship between men’s and women’s professional sports will continue to exemplify the extensive reach and effects of pay inequity, and will provide for new ways of understanding reasons for the gender gap in wages and its social and cultural implications.

¹⁰⁸ WNBA “History,” WNBA.com, n.d. wnba.com/history (accessed Feb. 20, 2016).

¹⁰⁹ Allison Glock, “The Conversation with USWNT players Alex Morgan, Becky Sauerbrunn, Carli Lloyd and Hope Solo,” *espnW.com*, Apr. 1, 2016, <http://espn.go.com/espnw/voices/article/15100708/the-conversation-uswnt-players-alex-morgan-becky-sauerbrunn-carli-lloyd-hope-solo>, (accessed Apr. 15, 2016).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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