



## ***Growing Pains***

***An account and analysis of three critical periods in the WNBA's young history***

**Charlie Harless**

**April 28, 2008**

**Senior Honors Project**

‘We Got Next.’ This playground slang used to indicate which group of basketball players had claimed the next open court space to play also signified, through television advertisements and newspaper headlines, the arrival of the most historically successful professional women’s sports league in the United States. The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) marketing machine put an initial \$15 million, as well an investment of management genius, talented players, and corporate resources, behind the ‘We Got Next’ mantra to usher in a new era in professional sports. The successful launch and sustained operation of over eleven years and counting puts the WNBA in rarefied air for success. The league has fully realized its mission of establishing an outlet for the top women’s American basketball players to continue playing professionally at home while also securing the resources to position women’s professional basketball to possibly become an attractive commercial enterprise and business investment in the future.

The WNBA has a history that is truly unique in comparison to the well-established “Big Four” of men’s professional sports leagues in that its events and actions have been recorded and evaluated as they happen from day one. The ubiquity of press outlets and researchers dedicated to the study of sports in this country is so much more prevalent and focused than anything the National Basketball Association, National Football League, National Hockey League, or Major League Baseball ever confronted in their organization’s infancy. The as-it-happens analysis and preservation of the WNBA’s first decade of existence will be critically important as we understand the shifting roles gender politics, sports governance, and economic concerns will have played in both the development of women’s professional basketball and the perception of the league’s place in the larger context of sport and society.

There has been a great deal written about how the WNBA is the embodiment of the Title IX dream, giving a showcase for females to display their athletic prowess and instilling belief that if women can play games and be compensated just as the men do, then the gender equity gap is indeed quickly closing. Both published researchers and the mainstream press have written about the positive role the WNBA has played in our society and have on many occasion extolled the commercial achievements and benchmarks of a league that just a decade ago would have seemed unfathomable. For the sake of full disclosure, I have closely followed and supported the league on a fan level since the league's inception, frequenting card and hobby shops to collect all of the first WNBA cards that were produced and pressing my family to travel over 300 miles in June of 1997 so I could be a personal witness to history at one of the league's first regular season games.

As my maturity into adulthood has coincided with the league's development over a decade of play, I have developed a keener observation and business acumen regarding how certain events and actions by the league have molded the WNBA into its current state of existence. When in my youth, I only read or sought out news that confirmed the growing success of the new league, and much of my research for this paper today indicated a similar period of admiration from the mainstream press. Years of following the contests and players have allowed me to develop an acute familiarity with the league's major storylines and cast of characters. Yet upon moving past the nostalgia of the league's early years I began seeing a different plot emerge through the media and academic accounts of the WNBA's history.

While a sense of the athletic accomplishments, gender equity achievements, and success stories are important in understanding the league's place in history, I contend that a full appreciation of the league's legacy can only be attained by evaluating the league's missteps and

Both leagues made geographic considerations when trying to connect with fans in particular markets. The ABL made strategic moves like moving their Richmond franchise to Philadelphia to capitalize on Olympian Dawn Staley's local popularity and assigning University of Connecticut players like Kara Wolters and Jen Rizzotti to the New England Blizzard franchise in Hartford. The WNBA employed a similar strategy, assigning USC graduate Lisa Leslie to the Los Angeles Sparks, Texas Tech alum Sheryl Swoopes to the Houston Comets, and Vicky Bullett and Andrea Stinson, two former stars of the Atlantic Coast Conference in college, to the Charlotte Sting to capitalize on their local name recognition. Additionally, both leagues had modest profitability projections, as the ABL sought to be in the black by the third season while the WNBA sought to break even by the fourth year of operation (Lefton, 1997).

The similarities between the two leagues seemingly ended there, as the differing governance and fiscal approaches gave each enterprise a unique identity. Gary Cavalli, the commissioner of the ABL, compared his league to a "Silicon Valley start-up," with its headquarters based in Palo Alto, California and beginning with a fraction of the resources and clout that the WNBA maintains with its NBA backing (Bhonslay, 1998). The structure and financing of the two leagues had created a very real "David vs. Goliath" scenario, where the Goliath WNBA clearly held the upper hand in creating buzz for the league via marketing dollars and television contracts and in funding the league via blue chip sponsorships. The ABL spent about \$6 million on salaries and only \$1.5 million on marketing, whereas the WNBA spent about \$3 million on player compensation but a colossal \$15 million on marketing efforts (Wulf, 1997). The breadth of the cultural impact the league would make was clearly rooted in the success of their marketing campaign. "We're not embarrassed to say we're trying to create something that has economic viability and we're trying to create household names out of our players," said Rick

with two competing leagues, issues immediately arose concerning the structuring, financing, sustainability, and possibility for coexistence.

The WNBA began play in the summer to avoid direct competition with more established and sponsored sports like professional football, hockey, college football and basketball, and the NBA, all of which played in the fall, winter and spring seasons. Thus, the WNBA had a relatively clean slate to carve its niche into the professional scene during the dog days of the baseball season from June through mid-August (Sandomir, 1997). The WNBA filled vacant NBA arenas and were based in cities where NBA franchises had already established a general basketball fan-base. The ABL opted for the more traditional winter season of October through February and based their teams in established college markets where there was already clear support of women's basketball. The ABL rented out college gymnasiums and smaller arena venues in the areas rather than utilizing the larger NBA arenas the WNBA called home (Sandomir, 1997).

There were some notable similarities between the two leagues. Both leagues operated under a centrally owned model, where the league absorbed the player salaries and bulk of the marketing costs. The franchise owners, or more appropriately operators, primarily bankrolled the operational budget of the team (Sandomir, 1997). Franchise owners of WNBA teams could generate revenues in the summer that previously were not being created in empty arenas since seven of the eight owners also owned the arenas they played in. WNBA teams hired much of the staffs from the companion NBA team in the same city, a move that afforded the owner a reduction in overhead costs saved by not having to tend to two separate staffs. The summer games of the WNBA also could be used as a means to promote the upcoming season of the NBA franchise as well (Lefton, 1997).

dilemmas that emerged during three critical moments in the WNBA's early years. An account and analysis of the league's battles to outlast a rival women's basketball league, the identifying and management of the sport's latent homosexual presence, and the tribulations and desperation to find a transcending marketable figure are all critical to assessing how the 'growing pains' of a league are rooted in recurring issues in women's sport and are essential to evaluating the relative successes and failures of the WNBA in the early chapters of its history.

### **The Early Years (1997 – 1999)**

#### **The Battle with the American Basketball League for Sole Market Dominance**

Young girls shooting at hoops in schoolyards and gyms across the country now can realistically fulfill dreams of playing professionally if they develop the talent necessary to be part of the WNBA. If the league is able to sustain over the long run, very few will remember that six other women's professional leagues came before the WNBA and the most successful of these failed enterprises lasted no more than three seasons (Robinson, 1997). The WNBA could have very realistically met an early demise as well due to a formidable challenge provided the American Basketball League (ABL). In the short time frame of one year in 1996-1997, the United States went from having no professional leagues to having two competing leagues, drawing respectable attendance numbers and showcasing their games on five television networks (Lefton, 1997).

"Duopolies" have generally not survived in sports history, as evidenced through the upstart ABA's inability to overtake the more established NBA and the doomed efforts of the United States Football and XFL leagues when pitted against the NFL (Robinson, 1997). Thus

Welts, NBA executive vice president and chief marketing officer (Lopez, 1997). Players like Rebecca Lobo, Sheryl Swoopes and Lisa Leslie made countless promotional appearances at halftimes of NBA regular seasons games, conducted hundreds of interviews with media outlets, and were featured in the “We Got Next” campaign that was played so relentlessly that Welts suggested the “promotion of the WNBA on NBC during the playoffs was like giving a new TV show the slot after Seinfeld,” (Lopez, 1997).

The WNBA also benefited from corporate sponsors like General Motors, Sears, Coca-Cola, Anheuser-Busch, and Nike, whereas the ABL had trouble securing major endorsements from any of the top companies (Robinson, 1997). These companies initially signed up for standard three year, \$10 million dollar investments while being promised that players could not market with any of their direct competitors, thus giving these sponsors a clear exclusivity with the league. The initial television contract of the WNBA called for three games a week to be televised during the 10 week season of play. The Lifetime weeknight broadcast was meant to specifically reach the female audience, the Tuesday night ESPN broadcast would target the male demographic, and the Saturday NBC telecast was meant to be the big ratings draw and attract a wide range of viewers (Lopez, 1997). The ABL’s first season telecasts shown on SportsChannel America and Black Entertainment Television (BET) could reach at most 57 million homes, whereas the WNBA television contract put games on networks that reached over 222 million households (Lefton, 1997). Additionally, several of the league’s initial slate of 33 televised games were carried in over 150 nations, thus expanding the WNBA brand internationally in a way the ABL could not (Sandomir, 1997). The NBA name, large television contract and corporate money put the WNBA in seemingly prime position for better long-term health than the ABL (Robinson, 1997). On the importance of television contracts and commitments from

corporate sponsors, league president Val Ackerman surmised that “You cannot run a successful league in the 1990s without them,” (Lopez, 1997).

One area where the ABL could boast a distinct advantage over the WNBA was in the league’s ability to sign a stronger talent pool of players and thus promote a higher overall level of play. The ABL began play in October 1996 with nine of the twelve members of that year’s U.S. Senior Women’s National Team who won the gold medal in Atlanta. Additionally, the league scored a big coup in the signing of the top collegiate stars after their first season of play and before the WNBA’s inaugural season debuted, including the consensus players of the year in Connecticut’s Kara Wolters and Stanford’s Kate Starbird (Bhonslay, 1998). The ABL was clearly in a position to boast it had the superior talent pool compared to the WNBA, which counted just Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo and Sheryl Swoopes as its 1996 U.S. Olympians and Tina Thompson as the only entering college talent of note.

The ABL was able to attract top players through a business plan that was more fiscally attractive to players. The bulk of the WNBA players earned only between \$15,000 – 50,000 for the 28 game season, figures that were dwarfed by the \$75,000 average, \$40,000 minimum and \$125,000 maximum salaries the ABL offered its top stars during its 40 game slate (Lopez, 1997). The ABL offered their players a greater say in the structure of the league, seeking input from the players on basic operational details like the size of the basketball and length of shot clock as well as the overall mission of the league. Additionally, ABL players literally had ownership of their league as the commissioner offered players stock options and attractive 401(k) plans to build loyalty (Crawford, 1997). By season’s end, the ABL had outdrawn its initial attendance projections, averaging 3,500 fans a game and had set the stage for some of the country’s top basketball players to play in front of an American audience for the first time since their collegiate

careers. The bar had also been clearly set for the WNBA to match what success the ABL was able to achieve.

The WNBA tipped-off its inaugural season with a contest between the New York Liberty and Los Angeles Sparks on June 21, 1997, a game that was watched by over four million people on the NBC telecast (Wulf, 1997). The WNBA had resounding success on opening weekend, filling NBA arenas to near capacity in eight cities across the country and garnering impressive television numbers on all three networks that beat out ratings for other, more established sporting events on the air (Lopez, 1997). The attendance and viewing audience were clear mandates to the league that their preseason hype machine and relentless marketing had at the very least created a significant enough curiosity factor for people to give the WNBA a shot. Initially, the WNBA had planned to drape off large blocks of seating at the arenas so that capacity would be no greater than 10,647 in the largest arena and would better accommodate their projected average of 4,000 fans a game (Sandomir, 1997). The league would finish with an average attendance of 9,669 spectators a game and its championship contest where the Houston Comets beat the New York Liberty 65-51 was seen by nearly three million people in the United States (Lefton, 1997).

In spite of understated attendance estimates and modest television audience projections, the WNBA had no intentions of struggling to survive. The WNBA did not start up with the intention of merely breaking even, but rather the goal of the league was to thrive and be the NBA's counterpart, offering the affordable entertainment and personable athletes that were lacking in the NBA (Robinson, 1997). The WNBA staked its reputation on affordability, where a family of four could purchase a "Valupak" to see a Charlotte Sting game and receive four tickets, four hot dogs, four sodas and popcorn all for just \$25 dollars (Wulf, 1997). Players

stayed long after games were over to sign autographs and the league got players to visit local schools and community groups to drum up family support. When asked what she saw as the ultimate goal of the league, WNBA President Val Ackerman responded with “our dream is to become the fifth major league,” (Wulf, 1997).

In order to achieve the status as the fifth major professional sports league, the ABL clearly stood in the way of the WNBA’s long-term plans and the same was true of the WNBA for the ABL. Before the WNBA got the first season underway, the leaders of both leagues publicly put a positive spin on the likelihood that both leagues could coexist. Gary Cavalli of the ABL said “In print they (WNBA) say they want both leagues to succeed and I’ll take that at face value. I don’t want them to bomb. If they do, people will say that even with the NBA’s support, women’s basketball can’t succeed,” (Sandomir, 1997). WNBA President Val Ackerman felt that exposure generated by the ABL could only benefit the league, saying that “the fact that women’s basketball has been in the news for most of the last ten months is only good for us,” (Sandomir, 1997).

After both leagues had one year of play under their belts, Cavalli sounded cautiously optimistic at the prospect of maintaining two separate leagues. “In the short term, I think we can coexist quite nicely. We’re playing at different times and in different markets and it’s working well. But if both leagues continue to expand and the talent gets diluted, who knows what will happen in five or ten years,” (Cavanaugh, 1998). Relations between the leagues, both privately and publicly, would soon become more contentious. One ABL official, Jim Day, likened the WNBA to a sideshow and proclaimed their winter season model to be the more authentic and traditional basketball league. “They (WNBA) say it’s not a sideshow, but it’s a 28 game season during the summer when the boys aren’t using the gym. So you tell me,” (Crawford, 1997).

Privately, according to a Time magazine article, the WNBA maintained a different position on the ABL than they released publicly, where according to one anonymous WNBA official, “there is a lot of pressure to beat the ABL. ‘We gotta beat ’em, we gotta beat ’em’ is the mentality that comes down from headquarters,” (Wulf, 1997). The league was also not very subtle when it came to trying to rewrite the history books, as WNBA distributed press releases and official materials that detailed the history of women’s basketball in the United States did not include any mention of or the inclusion of the ABL in the timeline (Lopez, 1997).

Despite both leagues largely keeping mum on their disdain for each other and doing their part to put a positive public spin on the coexistence of two women’s leagues, experts at the time put a less than positive outlook on the situation. Dr. Susan Hofacre of the Sport Administration Department at Robert Morris College, said “The chance of both leagues surviving are slim and none. It’s just too tough to have two leagues competing for the same pie as far as players, sponsors and TV deals to expect they’ll both survive,” (Crawford, 1997). Other industry experts suggested that conventional wisdom dictated that there would have to be a merger at some point, and if that was the case, the WNBA would be in position to absorb the ABL due to the greater financial backing and security of the NBA behind it. Dr. Mel Helitzer, professor at Ohio University, believed that “the WNBA has got far superior marketing talent and that – not the players – is more than 50 percent of pro sports. The ABL has better players, but they don’t know how to market them. The good players will eventually gravitate to the WNBA in a few years, and the leagues will merge at that point like the American Basketball Association did into the NBA. They’ll keep a few of the ABL cities and distribute the remainder of the players throughout the WNBA,” (Crawford, 1997).

Neither league seemed to welcome the prospect of a merger that the experts predicted would happen sooner rather than later. Gary Cavalli responded to media inquiries about a merger by stating that “There is no master plan or long term strategy for the ABL to merge with the WNBA. It’s not a part of our business plan and it’s not a part of theirs. They plan to expand into NBA markets and play in the summer. We play an entire season in the winter.” Cavalli did leave the door open for a merger by adding that “Do you rule it out forever? The answer is no,” (Cavanaugh, 1998). Val Ackerman left less to the imagination, when she said “We don’t even think about a merger. We didn’t give any thought to operating in the winter. I’d much rather go up against a summer sports schedule.” The WNBA had more than doubled its projections regarding attendance numbers and was ahead of schedule in pushing to expand the league with two more franchises in Detroit and Washington, DC by the second season, a move that quieted the merger talk for awhile (Lefton, 1997).

With no plans of merging in the works, both leagues went about evaluating their first seasons of play and strategizing their next moves. After the first season, the ABL reported losses of about \$4 million and the WNBA, although exact figures were not disclosed, were expected to lose a few more million than the ABL (Bhonslay, 1998). The costs to maintaining the ABL were expected to be around \$24 million in the second season, meaning the league had to generate \$28 million in revenues via sponsorship, broadcast and licensing deals just to break even and cover the losses of the first season (Bhonslay, 1998). Stepping up their efforts in face of the WNBA and this economic reality, the ABL began its second season by doubling its marketing budget to about \$3 million, increasing top player salaries, landing a more extensive cable television package, and securing several million dollars from newfound investors in the league (Crawford, 1997). Rebook signed a seven figure deal with the league to become the exclusive outfitter of

the nine-team league (Cavanaugh, 1998). Fox Sports Net (FSN) and Black Entertainment Television (BET) made commitments to televise ABL games and the league struck a deal with CBS to televise two of their championship series games, marking the first time the league would be on network television (Crawford, 1997). By the time of their mid-season All-Star game in Orlando, league attendance had increased 21 percent from the first season average, suggesting their efforts were not for naught (Cavanaugh, 1998). As ABL Chief Spokesman Dean Jutilla described the league's latest push for survival, he advised that "We're certainly not going to just shrivel up and go away," (Crawford, 1997).

The ABL sought to gain attention for their league and press back against the WNBA through a series of promotional stunts during its second season All-Star game, such as featuring a dunk contest in which a blindfolded Sylvia Crowley offered highlight material and the commissioner Gary Cavalli publicly challenged rival league president Val Ackerman to sanction a interleague All-Star game between the two leagues ("Plucky Proposition," 1998). Cavalli stated that the game "would be good for fans and for professional women's basketball." Ackerman's press release response stated that the "WNBA is currently not in a position to devote the time or resources that would be required for us to participate in a WNBA/ABL All-Star event in the near team." When continued to be pressed on the matter, Ackerman issued a terse response, saying that the ABL plan was "a one-time publicity stunt that in the end isn't good for women's basketball ("Plucky Proposition," 1998). Observers of the league suggested that the WNBA would have a hard time keeping up with the superior quickness of the ABL's top players and that a loss would be devastating to the league's marketability and long-term viability. The ABL's commissioner suggested this claim as well when publicly stating that "We believe we have the better players and I think this game would support that," ("Plucky Proposition," 1998).

However, any success the ABL enjoyed during the second season and advantages they felt they held in player talent were quickly vanquished by the off-season player personnel moves of the WNBA. The WNBA was able to lure away Nikki McCray from the ABL in what observers thought would be the first of many defections between the two leagues. McCray, the ABL's Most Valuable Player and a member of the champion Columbus Quest franchise, switched over to the WNBA for more endorsement and marketing opportunities (Crawford, 1997). Before jumping to the WNBA, Nikki McCray voiced her reason for playing in the ABL was based upon a preference in "playing a longer schedule in the traditional winter season," (Lopez, 1997). However, on the heels of leading her team to the ABL title, McCray and her agent Lon Babby reportedly sought to increase her ABL salary from \$150,000 to \$450,000. Gary Cavalli noted that McCray's demands were "unrealistic, excessive, and unfair to the other top players in the league (Litsky, 1997). Although McCray would come nowhere close to making those salary demands in base salary with the WNBA, the potential to work with top corporate sponsors and become the face of the new expansion franchise in Washington was enough to force McCray's hand. Cavalli insisted at the time that although they had lost McCray, "a number of WNBA players have contacted us about moving after the coming season and we will talk to them," (Litsky, 1997). There is no record of a player making the jump from the WNBA to the ABL, and each league prevented their players from playing in the other league during the off-season through signing contracts that bound their services to their league exclusively.

The tide would soon turn on the ABL's claim that they had the best young talent, as prior to the WNBA's second season, the WNBA signed seven of the eight senior collegiate All-Americans for the draft ("WNBA Wins Star Wars," 1998). Additionally, the league wooed top

unsigned international talent like the 7'2" center Malgorzata (Margo) Dydek from Poland to the league, where she wound up becoming the top overall pick in the 1998 draft. The league was able to get commitments from college seniors that they were unable to secure before the first year of play after players got a chance to see the superior attendance and promotional opportunities the WNBA offered in comparison to the ABL ("WNBA Wins Star Wars," 1998).

The ABL felt the draft losses particularly hard, as they missed out on the top two seniors of the 1998 class, Kristin Fokl of Stanford and Nykesha Sales of Connecticut. The Naismith and Associated Press Players of the Year would have been top draws when playing at or for the league's San Jose and Hartford franchises ("WNBA Wins Star Wars, 1998). Prior to the third season of play, the league folded its San Jose franchise, imposed 10 percent pay cuts in the front office and saw core player and Olympian Dawn Staley defect to the WNBA ("ABL Takes Center Stage," 1998). Columnists based in the cities of the ABL franchises began predicting the worst for the league. Wendy Parker of the Atlanta Journal Constitution wrote just before the season's first game that the league was hoping to "hang on," but that "speculation is greater than ever that its short life nearly at an end," ("ABL Takes Center Stage," 1998).

On December 22, 1998, three days before Christmas, the ABL suspended operations and filed for chapter 11 protection of the federal bankruptcy code ("ABL Suspends Operations, 1998). The following press release from Gary Cavalli indicates the reasons for the league shutting down:

*"This is a sad day for our fans, employees, players, coaches and for women's basketball in general. We are proud of what we accomplished as a pioneer in women's professional athletics. We put a great product on the floor. We gave America's best women athletes an opportunity to play professionally in this country during basketball season. We gave*

*it our best shot; we fought the good fight, and we had a good run. But we were unable to obtain the television exposure and sponsorship support needed to make the league viable long-term. At this point the league is out of money. While this was an extremely painful decision, we had no choice but to shut down.*

*TV exposure is critical to sponsor, licensees, and investors. This year we offered millions of dollar to the TV networks for air time, but could not obtain adequate coverage.*

*During the NBA lockout, the ABL still has been unable to buy TV time. It became clear that, although we had the best product, we could not find enough people willing to confront the NBA and give us the major sponsorships and TV contracts we needed.*

*We tried to do things the right way. We paid our players well, gave them a piece of their own league, and a voice in setting league policy.*

*I want to thank the people who believe in the ABL – our fans, players, coaches, sponsors and investors. I especially want to thank the employees of the league, who have sacrificed so much and given so much of their lives to this endeavor. Their dedication, perseverance and commitment have been an inspiration.”*

*- Gary Cavalli Press Release*

After filing for bankruptcy and contemplating what could have been, ABL officials became angry and sought to place a significant amount of blame for their failure on the NBA. The ABL issued a subpoena to the NBA in the spring of 1999 to investigate whether the NBA

unfairly and illegally used its economic monopoly of top businesses to prevent the ABL from securing the necessary deals to survive. The ABL's attorney suggested there was evidence that supported the issuing of the subpoena, including the claim that the NBA threatened companies with nonrenewal of their sponsorship deals with the league if they also sponsored the ABL (Williams, 1999). The Connecticut State Court system eventually found no evidence of tampering by the league and thoughts of a lawsuit were quickly dismissed.

The dissolving of the ABL came at a time when the players of the WNBA began to form their first union and negotiate the first collective bargaining agreement. The folding of the ABL probably hurt the player's causes in primary negotiations with the league, because the players no longer had the leverage of threatening to jump leagues if their demands were not met. The Women's National Basketball Player's Association (WNBPA) wanted to restrict the number of former ABL players who could join each team to two players, so as to protect the jobs of the majority of the players currently in the league. However, WNBA officials wanted no such restrictions and ultimately that is what happened when the first collective bargaining agreement was ratified and the ABL players were made available in the 1999 draft alongside the top collegians and all undrafted ABL players could attend tryouts for any of the 12 WNBA franchises (Killion, 1999). With the ABL gone, the quality of the WNBA product increased dramatically overnight, as now there was one women's professional league that unquestionably held all of the best talent in the world.

The battle for survival with the ABL was a pivotal time period in the WNBA's history, one that helped the league establish its identity and harness a competitive spirit to deliver the best product it could create. The influx of ABL talent not only increased the level of play, but brought with it a group of players who sought to make the WNBA act as responsively to the

financial needs of the players as their former league had done. In 2003, when the players threatened a strike and demanded better salaries, benefits, and protection from the league, many of the former ABL players were vocal representatives on the WNBPA and helped to forge a new collective bargaining agreement that better served the interests of the league and its players for the long term (Roberts, 2003).

By the third season of play, the league had already been tested with so many battles from the ABL that they were better prepared to handle the challenges that would lie ahead. The league's survival in the face of contraction of three of its franchises and relocation of two others spoke volumes to the league's better understanding of its own sustainability and how to maximize the resources the league possessed. The ABL spurned the faster maturity of a league that in a decade's time had achieved attendance numbers their older brother, the NBA, had taken 35 years to reach (Organ, 2008). The ABL forced the league to reckon with growing pains very publicly as outsiders constantly observed the comparative shortcomings of the two and tried to predict the demise of one or the other, or often times both leagues. That the WNBA was able to outlast the ABL offered a clear verdict as to which league had the most sound and viable economic, marketing, and governance models. The WNBA had the financial and personnel resources in place to not only overcome a fierce competitor, but to battle the looming marketing and human resource dilemma it would soon face.

## **The Establishment Years (2000 – 2007)**

### **Defining 'Lesbian' and the Role Homosexuality Played into the Sport's Past and Present Marketing and Cultural Identification**

The success of any professional league is largely determinant upon the success of identifying, establishing and expanding a consumer base. Women's sports have had a particularly challenging time cementing a substantive base due to social and moral questions that persist regarding the presence of lesbian women in sport. The WNBA has been an excellent case study into how women's sports have both correctly and incorrectly handled the issues concerning homosexuality in the game and how its presence affects the marketing, individual player welfare, and image of the league as a whole.

Historically speaking, society has tended to view female participation in athletics as an experience that encourages masculine tendencies in women, especially at the higher levels of competition. Sports tend to involve actions highlighting masculine virility, power, and toughness, or characteristics closely identified as masculine by most societies (Bryson, 1987). Sociologist Paul Willis adds, "instead of confirming her identity, (sports) success can threaten her with a foreign male identity... The female athlete lives through a severe contradiction. To succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because she has, in certain profound symbolic ways, become a man," (1982). Female athletes have continually challenged what it means to be feminine and the boundaries of society's gender identification and inferior label. Sports sociologist D. Stanley Eitzen writes, "traditional conception of femininity as passive and helpless is challenged today by the fit, athletic, and even muscular appearance of women athletes," (2006). This idea of femininity is further contested when considering the historical slander on

their sexual identity as related to their participation in sports. Gail Whitaker notes that “slander against female athletes usually takes the form of describing them as mannish, butch, muscle-bound, unpretty, unnatural, and otherwise unfeminine,” (1982). Identified in this context, the sexuality of female athletes is often questioned and many are labeled as lesbians (Whitaker, 1982).

Other professional sport leagues that came before the WNBA first dealt with how having players perceived as lesbians affects the overall image and management of the sport. The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) has continually been confronted with loud whispers and assumptions regarding the amount of lesbians in its sports, and most sports analysts suppose that these prevailing stereotypes have hurt the league in terms of fan support and media coverage (Eitzen, 2006). Openly gay athletes of professional sports face an even tougher uphill battle in terms of financial support and cultural acceptance, as seen in the dearth of sponsorship opportunities for lesbian athletes. Tennis legends Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova were believed to have lost a great deal of marketing endorsements due to the fact that companies thought that an openly lesbian spokeswoman would create a negative company image (Messner, 1994). Thus, there becomes a pressure to construct and maintain a “socially acceptable image” because society wants lesbians to suppress their sexual identity in favor of a more traditionally conceived ideal of femininity (Clark and Wright, 1999).

The WNBA launched its marketing efforts around three women in 1997 who conformed to that “socially acceptable image” the league wished to portray. Rebecca Lobo, replete with braided hair and a wholesome “girl-next-door” image, had been a college star at the University of Connecticut where as a senior she led her team to an undefeated year and a national

championship while garnering press coverage previously unseen for a female athlete. Lisa Leslie had just led the United States women's team to Olympic Gold at the 1996 Games in Atlanta, while also landing modeling deals with several companies to showcase her slender, 6'5" physique and gorgeous looks. Finally, the last of the Big Three, Sheryl Swoopes, a star whose talents were brighter than almost any player in the world, would become pregnant shortly before the league was set to tip-off.

Despite sitting out most of the first season, the league promoted her heavily in publicity campaigns that highlighted her impending motherhood. Swoopes projected the image of heterosexual femininity of the 1990s to the maximum, balancing her life as a professional with that as a mother and wife as well. She missed most of the inaugural season due to the highly publicized birth of her son Jordan in June, but returned to play and contribute to the first championship game for the Houston Comets. *Sports Illustrated for Women* put a picture of a very pregnant Swoopes on the cover of one of its issues and once the league got underway, the league's first year broadcasts poured a lot attention in promoting the human interest story about Swoopes comeback from pregnancy to compete again and how she and her husband were managing the tricky waters of new parenthood (Stockwell, 2005). During the Comet's late season and championship game appearances, observers of the league noted that cameras took many opportunities to show Swoopes' husband and baby son in the stands as a way of not so conspicuously pushing the heterosexual nature of its players (Kort, 1997). The birth of Swoopes' son set the precedent for the league to market future stories, such as the marriage of fan favorite Suzie McConnell-Serio and the pregnancy of Olympia Scott Richardson, to further push the family image of the league (Banet-Wiser, 1999).

Eight years after the much hyped birth and return to play of their star player, the WNBA had to confront firsthand the challenge of maintaining an image of a family-friendly league when the homosexual issue got a very public face. Swoopes, now with three Olympic Gold Medals and four WNBA Championships to her credit, became the most high profile team sport athlete ever to publicly announce her homosexuality while still actively playing in October of 2005. It was hard for many to believe that Swoopes, the girly-girl who had frequently professed how much she loved to shop, the doting mom, and do-it-all woman would become the face of homosexuality in sport and put her league in a tenuous position of dealing with the lesbian issue (Granderson, 2005).

Yet critics of women's sports were not as surprised, instead chalking up the announcement as affirmation to their perceptions that the WNBA was indeed overrun with lesbian players. Swoopes adamantly defended the league against homophobic claims, stating in an ESPN interview that "the talk about the WNBA being full of lesbians is not true. There are as many straight women in the league as there are gay. Sexuality and gender don't change anyone's performance on the court," (Swoopes, 2005).

Swoopes' notion that the league is not filled with lesbians was challenged when other women around the league stepped out of the closet and confirmed their homosexuality while no active player in the NBA has ever publicly admitted his homosexuality. Swoopes was not the first WNBA player to reveal her homosexuality, as both former New York Liberty player Sue Wicks and former Minnesota Lynx player Michelle Van Gorp confirmed in interviews with regional media outlets that they were in fact gay (Granderson, 2005). However, both players were retired from the league at the time of their announcements and neither carried the name

recognition of a Sheryl Swoopes. Additionally, while there is little doubt that there has been a homosexual presence in the sport of women's basketball, the question has always been how great of a presence is there?

The very question of a gay presence and the stereotypes associated with lesbian women have caused all women involved with the sport, regardless of sexual orientation, to deal with counteracting or overtly trying to hide from the 'gay question.' Pam Parson, a former women's basketball coach at the University of South Carolina, sued Sports Illustrated for being outed in one of the magazine's articles in 1982. During the trial, she lied about her activity at a gay club and was found guilty of perjury, resulting in a few months of jail time and the end of her coaching career (Voepel, 2005). This very public confirmation of lesbian involvement in the sport made it tougher for women's players and coaches in the years to follow to dodge the lesbian question.

Swoopes acknowledged the worry she felt regarding how her announcement could impact the image of the league and her fellow players. "I hope my coming out doesn't have a negative effect on the WNBA... What really irritates me is that when people talk about football, baseball and the NBA, you don't hear all this talk about the gay guys playing. But when you talk about the WNBA, then it becomes an issue," (2005). The WNBA will have to continue dealing with the issue as there are observers now keenly watching how the league will promote an openly homosexual player in the future. At the time of her announcement, there were questions swirling about on how such an announcement would affect the marketability of the league's reigning Most Valuable Player and her popularity among fans. Shortly after coming out of the closet, Swoopes signed a six-figure deal to become the spokeswoman for gay-friendly travel and

cruise line agency Olivia (Voepel, 2005). Swoopes also remains an endorser of several athletic products, most notably as part of the Nike team (Stockwell, 2005).

With one of its players outed as a lesbian and a few former players who had additionally identified themselves in a similar manner, the league had a golden opportunity to have women who could actively court and market directly to the lesbian market. Several sources have conducted studies that estimate that lesbians makes up about 25-35 percent of the WNBA's overall fan base (Berkow, 2002). One could surmise that the league had a golden opportunity from the very onset of the league's inception to capitalize on this fan-base and target its marketing efforts to the gay community in ways no other major professional sport league had done before.

Despite opportunity to reach out to the community, the league and individual franchises purposely ignored marketing opportunities to and in many cases denied the very presence of the lesbian fan base. WNBA officials seemed to believe many experts that felt marketing to lesbians could be a risk due to the possibility of alienating the family and male demographic, a trend that had historically played out when targeting the homosexual audience (Hruby, 2001). While steadfastly ignoring the lesbian market, the league had to deal with several tumultuous incidents regarding its relations with the gay community during first few years of existence.

When the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center paid \$16,000 to sponsor the L.A. Sparks franchise, management gave the business the cold shoulder and forced the withdrawal of the offer after the team's management would not allow the phrase 'gay and lesbian families' to be displayed on an arena billboard (Bower, 2001). The Sacramento Monarchs refused to put the name of the Davis Dykes, a regional lesbian sports club, on the arena's promotional boards

because management deemed the name was offensive. The owner of the team quickly made amends for the situation by issuing an apology and inviting the Davis Dykes to the final regular season and first playoff game that year. The Washington Mystics team officials, in contrast to the Monarchs initial decision, went ahead and displayed the name of a local lesbian social group, the Lesbian Avengers, who had bought a group of block tickets for a contest. Some fans voiced complaints in the local media about the overwhelming gay presence in the stands, causing the franchise to issue a public policy. However, after the controversy had subsided the team decided to continue on with its practices of promoting gay organizations who actively supported the team (Weir, 2001).

The WNBA in general has not been openly forthcoming when it comes to disclosing how the league and individual franchises acknowledge or market the lesbian fan base. The league's first director of communications, Alice McGillon, stated that the league targeted three specific groups during its inaugural season: the female fan; kids from ages seven to seventeen; and the diehard basketball fans (Kort, 1997). Additionally, the WNBA has never publicly indicated that they are seeking out or have conducted surveys to identify just how many lesbian fans and ticket holders the league maintains. WNBA President Val Ackerman and the league have maintained a firm position that their league welcomes any person, regardless of gender, age, race, or orientation, to be fans of the league and sport of women's basketball. Ackerman has stated that the WNBA "has a broad support of fans... to the extent that members of the lesbian community are indicating their support, I think that's terrific," (Weir, 2001).

WNBA executives faced a major dilemma when it became clear that they should at the very least consider how to best appease and grow the fan-base. Should their teams have actively

courted the lesbian fan-base which made up such a large portion of their consumers, or should they have generally ignored or very quietly supported this group so that the other 70 percent of their fans were not made to feel uncomfortable or disenchanted by an open association with a particular sexual orientation? League officials factored in these statistics when trying to find the delicate balance in their marketing to attract any fan who might be interested while also not turning off fans that would oppose niche marketing or outreach to specific groups (Muller, 2007). The New York Liberty franchise tried to walk this tightrope and employ the strategy of generally ignoring the lesbian presence at the games. The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” strategy of the Liberty would spark headlines for the actions taken by the growingly disenchanted lesbian supporters of the team and cause the league to rethink its position on the homosexual issue.

On August 2, 2002, the Lesbians for Liberty staged a kiss-in during every timeout of a nationally televised game against the Miami Sol. In addition to drawing attention through their public affection, fans held banners proclaiming themselves to be ‘lesbian fans’ or that the players should “dunk for the dykes,” and some fans were even bolder in dressing in all black and moving about the concourse and aisles with a single sign on their back that read ‘invisible fan’ (McDonald, 2007). This event came to fruition as a response to a series of e-mail frustrations regarding the denial and lack of consideration of lesbian fans in the Liberty’s marketing and event management efforts. The lesbian fan-base was upset at being marginalized in spite of the fact it was widely known that a significant portion of the team’s regular attendees were indeed homosexual (Berkow, 2002). Lesbians for Liberty wanted management to promote gay pride days, more publicly display sponsorship materials from homosexual focused groups and have a more visible gay presence in events such as the singing of the National Anthem (Berkow, 2002). Furthermore, the group stated on their web page that they felt that the organization’s silence only

served to tolerate homophobia and discrimination against lesbian, gay and transgendered people (McDonald, 2007)

The Lesbians for Liberty felt that not only their protest actions, but also their checkbooks, would be powerful in pushing the Liberty management to recognize the lesbian audience. One fan and member of the Lesbians for Liberty stated that “They couldn’t live without us, so they shouldn’t take us for granted (Berkow, 2002). These actions all spoke to an underlying theme of lesbian fans seeking validation and acknowledgement that they do exist in a heterosexual family environment that has been created and one could say manipulated at WNBA games. The requests of this protest group to have lesbian families included on the ‘fan cam’ jumbo-screen during timeouts speaks to the feelings of underrepresentation and lack of visibility for a league they feel they helped create (McDonald, 2007). Pat Griffin, a noted professor of gender issues in sports at the University of Massachusetts, supported this feeling when stating that “women’s sports have been built on the backs of the hard work of lesbians at every level. Lesbians have always been a vital part of women’s sports. It’s long overdue to acknowledge that,” (Weir, 2001).

Noted women’s sports sociologist Mariah Burton Nelson provided sharp criticism regarding how effective the WNBA has been in targeting the large homosexual base after the league’s first four years of existence. “The WNBA is a business, so like all businesses they face a dilemma at this point in history, which is how can they reach out and profit from gay people without alienating homophobic, straight people? The WNBA has not done very well on this so far, in my opinion. In fact, they have bent over backwards to portray a family environment and family atmosphere, and family is always a codeword for straight,” (Weir, 2001). Nelson

continued on to say it was a risky business proposition for the WNBA to continue to “play this game of ‘We’re not gay, we’re not gay.’ It does anger lesbian fans. (Weir, 2001).

Large groups of women, many homosexual, dominate the season ticket holders and make up the regular faces of a crowd at a WNBA game, yet if a fan were to watch a televised game, this is not the picture that would be seen. Instead, critics of the WNBA and the networks broadcasting the games charge that there is a concerted effort to scan the crowd to show images of cheering kids with their moms and dads rather than to highlight the clearly visible lesbian support (Kort, 1997). Many experts believe that this blatant snub of showing lesbians affirms a cultural view that lesbians are in many ways the antithesis of the nuclear family (McDonald, 2007). Regardless of whether the league held this viewpoint, the WNBA disassociated itself from the lesbian community when marketing itself as a “family friendly” or rather “straight” enterprise (Muller, 2007)

Even in the early years as its prime competitor, the ABL, was tapping into this resource and choosing to associate with lesbian consumers, the hesitancy of the WNBA to target this crowd spoke to continued concerns with targeting the gay community. The ABL advertised in periodicals in the team’s home markets and regional gay publications while also setting up booths at gay pride festivals to drum up interest from the lesbian crowd. An executive with the ABL’s Colorado franchise stated that “we know that gay men and lesbians are part of our community, and we need to market to them,” (Kort, 1997). While the ABL was open and generally successful in their gay marketing efforts, the WNBA was clearly unmoved by the ABL’s strategy. A lesbian employee of a WNBA franchise noted that “The ABL needed to

market to the lesbian community, whereas I don't think the WNBA needed to do that. This is a business. Do lesbians sell?" (Kort, 1997)

During several of the early years of the WNBA's existence, the WNBA stood by the policy of gladly accepting the support and money of the gay community, but actively courting the soccer moms and dads and basketball lovers instead. This policy clearly was clearly an image based decision, but the clear analysis today shows that this was a poor financial decision. In the first four years of existence, the WNBA attendance peaked in the second season and steadily declined each year after, a trend that has continued on to the present season (WNBA.com). The aforementioned troubles with the collective bargaining agreements and burdensome financial woes also underscore the fact that the WNBA was not reaching a large enough audience. Sports marketing agencies have noted that the gay demographic is continually growing and has a reputation for generally having a significant level of disposable income (Hruby, 2001).

With this knowledge in hand, it would seem foolish for the league to turn their back on such a potentially profitable consumer sector. Yet by-and-large the league did just that for many seasons, instead focusing on a family based image strategy. In 2000, the league's media relations office issued a press release of a list of players whom were recently married and included the names of their male counterparts (Hruby, 2001). The list of twenty eight players was offensive to some lesbian groups, who saw the list as another way of not so subtly pushing forth a heterosexual image and trying to bury the perception that much of the league's players and fans were indeed lesbian (Weir, 2001). Timeout entertainment at women's games have a decided familial feel to them, in stark contrast to the sexually charged and skimpily attired

performers at major men's games. The performers are dressed in cartoonish costumes, there are kiss cams and screen shots that all show pictures of happy heterosexual couples and families, and the overall environment is clearly kid friendly (Muller, 2007).

Critics of the WNBA have argued that the league has been overly assertive in their efforts to disassociate themselves from a homosexual image not only by creating a family image, but by also promoting their players in ways that are more traditionally feminine or even sexual. The league has been accused of highlighting players on their official Web site and other press materials that conform to the most fashionable, beautiful, or motherly images (Banet-Wiser, 1999). The WNBA launched the "This is Who I Am" Campaign in 2003, where players appeared in commercials and web content in their finest dresses and with dolled up hair and makeup. There was not any mention of a basketball or images of the players competing or sweating. Instead, the campaign shows players like Sue Bird in a dress with a revealing cleavage line, Lisa Harrison outfitted in full princess regalia complete with tiara, and Ticha Penicheiro slinking around a sports car in tight leather (WNBA.com). The WNBA even promoted behind-the-scenes galleries and quotes on the web site from the players involved in the shoot, and even they seemed to play up the clear heterosexual focus of this campaign. When asked about her thoughts on the shoot, Detroit Shock player Swin Cash reasoned that "I think the hardest part is when they're asking you to go from sexy to sad to pouty. But it's just working your personality, and I think the camera lets your personality come out," (WNBA.com).

If the WNBA does carry the criticism that it has been short-sighted or absent in aggressively marketing and developing the lesbian fan base, why do lesbians continue to come to games and support the league? After the league's initial miscues in aggressively pushing family

and overtly feminine images of their players in the heterosexual mold, the league made a noticeable shift in how it targeted lesbians. Beginning with the revised “This Is Who I Am” campaign in 2004, one could dissect the league’s new marketing efforts as a form of what is known in the industry as “gay window advertising.” This is the practice of using images and subjects that can somehow “seduce” or “captivate” homosexuals while being discreet enough that they go largely unnoticed by heterosexual consumers (McDonald, 2007). By using advertising materials where the players are depicted or described as ‘big,’ ‘physical,’ ‘sweaty,’ or ‘aggressive’ are images that may appeal to a lesbian audience without being blatantly obvious in the mission of the piece (Banet-Wiser, 1999).

One year after the WNBA’s initial “This Is Who I Am” campaign featured the players in sexy clothing off the court and playing into deep-rooted heterosexual images, the revised campaign of 2004 focused much more attention to the type of players these women were on the court. The television advertisements focused on extolling the competitive and athletic traits of these women by showing them jumping, shooting and sweating on the court. Additionally, the advertisements depicted the women in a less traditionally feminine light, by showing players like Shannon Johnson sparring with the boxing dummy, Becky Hammon lifting weights and many of the athletes giving tough stares into the camera in place of the friendly smiles seen in the 2003 campaign. While both campaigns do dress the women in mid-drift revealing shirts or short shorts complete with feminine hair and makeup, there is an undeniable shift in seeing the athletes move from playing princess to playing sports. The 2004 advertisements project women that both conform to traditional ideologies of femininity while also ever so inconspicuously depicting women who are ‘big,’ ‘physical,’ ‘sweaty,’ and ‘aggressive,” (WNBA.com).

Around this point in the league's history, many of the individual franchises became more open and willing to cater and develop the homosexual consumer base. After the team's previous blunder with the Davis Dykes, Sacramento Monarch's management worked with the group to develop and promote the first of their annual Gay Pride games, where the entertainment acts and pregame festivities would all be clearly marketed to lesbian crowds. A spokesperson for the Davis Dykes, noted that "Our (lesbian) money is the same as the traditional family money. It's not that we need to be acknowledged, but the WNBA needs the money, and their marketing efforts are brilliant if they target the lesbians (Weir, 2001). Before the franchise folded due to contraction spurred on by a new ownership model, the Miami Sol were identified as one of the most gay-friendly clubs in the league, sanctioning players to appear in rallies and lesbian bars in the region (Hruby, 2001).

The Los Angeles Sparks reached out to the gay community through a meet-and-great event with Girl Bar, the country's largest lesbian dance club, consisting of 12,000 active members based out of the Los Angeles metro region. The franchise also continued to reach out to the gay market by arranging players to attend a party for Girl Bar season ticket holders and promoted a "Gay Pride" day during one of their games (Bower, 2001). The CFO of the Los Angeles Sparks, Joseph McCormack, was quoted on an ESPN special that "as we're (Sparks) entering our fifth year, you know, we maybe have gotten a little smarter about how to reach out and identify who our basketball fans are. Whether they are a youth basketball team in the inner city, or a family organization out in the suburbs. Or, you know, or a lesbian social group," (Transcript, 2001).

Girl Bar founder Sandy Sachs had tried to get the club interested in marketing events in the Sparks first few seasons, but was unsuccessful. “I had a friend who was actually working with the organization and I approached her and said, you know, hey, think we could do, I don't know, some sort of cross promoting. You know, I think it would be good. I'm sure a lot of our customers would attend the games, so on and so forth. And she told me, she said, don't even bother. There is no way; there is no way that is going to happen. They just, you know, they wouldn't consider tapping into the lesbian community as such,” (Transcript, 2001)

This clear transition in terms of how the league markets towards the gay community was evidenced throughout the league. By 2004 at least nine of the franchises had acknowledged they had begun some form of direct marketing to gay fans, via setting up booths at gay pride events or promoting their product in alternative lifestyle magazines (Stockwell, 2005). Some franchises marketed towards lesbian groups no differently than any of their other niche demographic groups, such as religious or large community based organizations. In an interview with ESPN, Carol Moran, founder of Kicks Sports Bar, a popular Miami lesbian hangout, said that “we’ve just had two promotions in the last couple of months with the Sol players here. The team realized, you know what, gays and lesbians have got dollars. They enjoy the sport; why not go after them and market them and get their dollars?” (Transcript, 2001).

As evidenced in the WNBA’s checkered history with the lesbian community, it took some time and evolution in strategy to bring the league to its more gay-friendly approach of today. Yet the league still has not moved away from trying to promote a wholesome family image as well, thus placing the league’s future in doubt as to how it will court a significant number of future fans to the league. Can the WNBA break waves as a welcoming scene for the

gay community while also providing an outlet for families to enjoy a night of fun together and watch elite athletes at the fraction of the cost of the NBA? The jury is still out as to the solution to these problems, but as the league navigates and tackles difficult issues like these in the future, observers believe the league will sink or float based on the efforts of the league's savior, the WNBA's version of the answer, a rookie with the name, looks and skills to become the face of the league in dire need of a clear identity.

## **The Candace Parker Years (2008 – Future)**

### **The Search for a Transcending Superstar and How Past Failures Have Intensified the Hopes for a New Player to Ascend the League to Meteoric Heights**

The sport of women's basketball has never been short on stars, whether it be Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo, Sheryl Swoopes, Chamique Holdsclaw, or Sue Bird. Yet each player could never transcend their sport and sustain that certain level of superstardom necessary to become a commercial icon and sell more than just college or WNBA jerseys. If the WNBA is to find the first true face of the league, most observers believe that time to be now in a period the WNBA will look back in its history as the "Candace Parker era."

Candace Parker was labeled the "next big thing" as far back as her middle school playing days, when she graced the front pages of her hometown newspaper in a *Chicago Sun Times* spread detailing how Parker was about to take over the Chicago high school hoops scene (Patrick, 2008). Candace began playing as a point guard, allowing her to develop guard skills and a good outside shot before reaching her current height of 6'5" in high school and adding a dominant inside game to her repertoire. Her father Larry, a former college player, and one of her two older brothers, current NBA player Anthony Parker, helped to challenge Candace in the backyard and honed both her skills and competitive desire (Patrick, 2008).

After having made her decision to attend the University of Tennessee live on ESPN, she entered college with even higher expectations and notoriety after she beat five boys to win the 2004 McDonald's All-American Game dunk contest. Just two years later, her dunking skills became headlines and the stuff of YouTube highlight reels again when she became the first

women to dunk in an NCAA Tournament game, accomplishing the feat twice in a first round game against Army. Current WNBA star Cheryl Ford added that “There are not a lot of girls in our league who can dunk and fans want to see that. Everybody who has seen her play knows she can ball. I’d say she’s a female Michael Jordan, so to speak. She makes it look so easy,” (Organ, 2008).

Parker continued to add to the lore of her legend by separating her shoulder twice in a regional semifinal game but continuing on to play injured and with basically one arm during her Tennessee team’s repeat National Championship performance in 2008 (Litel, 2008). Parker really developed her talent and was put in a media spotlight immediately while playing under the legendary coach Pat Summitt and playing for a Tennessee program that has won more collegiate women’s basketball titles than any other school. In spite of all the built-in expectations and pressure that comes from playing at Tennessee, Summitt offered perhaps the highest compliment when suggesting that Parker “could go down as the best player in the history of the game,” (Starks, 2007).

“Since arriving in Tennessee from Naperville, Illinois in 2004, Parker has blossomed into somewhat of an icon,” one women’s basketball writer wrote. “She has an undeniable crossover appeal that has landed her on the cover of Sports Illustrated, inside the pages of Time magazine and among People magazine’s 100 Most Beautiful People,” (Starks, 2007). The laundry list of accolades in Parker’s name could go on and on, but to summarize, here is a quick run-down of her notable achievements: two NCAA Championships and Final Four Most Value Player awards; Wade Trophy and Associated Press National Player of the Year awards; three-time All-American honors; seven recorded dunks in college contests; and a 2007 World Championship Gold Medal and likely spot on the 2008 Olympic Team (Allen, 2008).

Candace Parker is unquestionably the current face of women's basketball in 2008, one that the league will look to market and prominently feature after she was drafted to the Los Angeles Sparks with the first overall pick. "I think she will go in and have an immediate impact in the WNBA," Coach Pat Summitt said. "I see her being a very popular player in that league, as far as having an impact on the attendance and giving good exposure to the WNBA," (Organ, 2008).

Yet Parker is not the first star the league has anointed to be the "next big thing" or potential "face of the league." The league has had a rocky history of cultivating a crossover star that could bring fans outside of the sport's niche audience to the games. When the league first began its marketing efforts prior to 1997, the advertising and promotions were built upon the reputations and image of the three Olympians who did not sign with the ABL. Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo, and Sheryl Swoopes were all used by the NBA Marketing machine and their commissioner David Stern to help get the league off the ground, grooming images that were to be embraced by the general public.

During the inaugural season, Robyn Marks of Sport magazine summed up the image the league was trying to sell to the masses via these three women:

*"In Lobo, Swoopes and Leslie, the WNBA has a formidable threesome that captures every possible combination of woman in America. Want glamour and beauty? See Leslie. She's all Hollywood, photo spreads and magazine covers – a female Shaq, if you will. Want the All-American girl next door? Former Connecticut star Lobo fits the bill. Or if you want down-home, ethereal everywoman, look no further than Swoopes, a Lubbock, Texas native who will begin the inaugural season on the Houston Comets' injured reserve list; she's expecting her first child in June. Somehow behind our backs, David*

*Stern, who helped resurrect the NBA in the early 1980s, began a campaign that aimed to give women's basketball a household name. And it's working. Swoopes is featured on Discover Card commercials and Leslie does it all. Lobo is getting her feet wet in off-season broadcasting for ESPN too, and all three women are becoming more and more recognizable." (1997)*

Val Ackerman felt that "for women's basketball to get to the next level, it has to be heavily advertised, marketed and promoted," (Marks, 1997). Yet, for many reasons, this initial power trio could not extend their brand further than their promising start indicated. Lobo would tear her left anterior cruciate ligament in the third season of play and never fully recovered, playing off and on before retiring in 2003 to focus on a broadcasting career. Swoopes had much success in the league but never fully captured audiences and became a controversial figure and more of a spokesperson for the gay and lesbian community when she publicly outed herself in 2005.

Leslie enjoyed the most commercial success of the three, taking her on court success and grabbing commercial spots with several of the league's top sponsors. However, Leslie was never able to establish a great rapport with fans of the league, a fact that is puzzling to many league insiders. "Why haven't the fans embraced her? That's a good question," said Nancy Lieberman, a former player, coach and general manager in the WNBA. "In the All-Star balloting, she is not the top vote-getter. But she and Sheryl have the most talent. I look at Lisa and it's mind-boggling to me that fans haven't embraced her the way they should," (Williams, 2003). After Leslie was named the Most Valuable Player of the 2002 All-Star game, many of the fans in attendance booed and heckled Leslie. Leslie clearly is a huge star in the eyes of many, with her purple replica jersey long holding the title of the WNBA's best selling apparel, but the image of her as

surly and self-absorbed is one that has prevented her from reaching the heights of popularity the league desperately sought when she began play in 1997 (Williams, 2003).

While Leslie, Lobo, and Swoopes were the stars that got the league off the ground in 1997, the first true superstar of the league, whose amateur hype reached astronomical levels before she even adorned a WNBA jersey, did not arrive until the league's third season.

Chamique Holdsclaw, a three-time National Champion at Tennessee and the exclusive Naismith Player of the Century, was drafted number one to the Washington Mystics franchise on a wave of hype that had not even come close to being equaled until Candace Parker's subsequent arrival nine years later. In draft day articles in publications across the country, writers pontificated that Holdsclaw would soon be the first WNBA player to earn over \$1 million a year in shoe, apparel, and outside promotional deals. "She is the player of the present and the player of the future for our league," league president Ackerman stated. "She is going to give an instant lift to Washington and she brings a big boost to the league as well," (Knight, 1999).

Even before she was drafted coming out of her senior season at Tennessee, there was pressure and speculation that Holdsclaw would become the first female basketball player to leave school early and jump into the league after her junior year. "I suspected last spring that Holdsclaw would come to the conclusion to forgo her senior season, after three national titles, and with Stern's women's league ready to offer Madison Square Garden in her native New York," wrote the New York Times' Harvey Araton. "Holdsclaw could have pocketed at least a couple of hundred grand and been back in Knoxville by now, finishing her degree. Somehow, against such impeccable logic, Pat Summit lured back her star, which gives you an idea of her persuasive powers, and what the rest of the women's game is typically up against," (1998).

The timing of Holdsclaw's decision also proved to be a moment of the stars aligning for the league. By waiting until she completed her degree, Holdsclaw missed the chance to start a potential bidding war between the ABL and WNBA for her services. Instead, the ABL folded by December of Holdsclaw's senior season, thus leaving Holdsclaw no choice but to take the team assignment and money the WNBA had to offer. Jere Longman of the New York Times wrote that "Holdsclaw, with her fluid moves under the basket and a silky pull-up jumper, is a star in the galaxy of Cheryl Miller... The kind of player whose talent could ignite the Big Bang of bidding wars and leave the losing league drifting into a black hole of irrelevancy," (1997).

Once the WNBA had locked Holdsclaw up, the league waited for the all-everything player to take the league by storm and lead the Washington Mystics to championships and draw attention to the WNBA with her unmatched level of play. With her recognition as one of the all-time college greats, Holdsclaw was expected to be a savior of sorts for the WNBA and advance the league to new heights into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Turner, 2005). Yet, the dominant and champion Chamique Holdsclaw never came to be in the WNBA. Holdsclaw had a solid nine year WNBA career, averaging 17.7 points per game, 8.5 rebounds per game and being selected to four league All-Star games (WNBA.com). Yet Holdsclaw never won a Championship or even led her team to the title game, and disappointed a league ready to market the star qualities of a player.

Holdsclaw never seemingly grasped the elevated position she held in the fans eyes and how disappointing her mediocrity in the WNBA was to fans and supporters of the league (Voepel, 2007). She often bickered with management in Washington and quit the team with seven games to go in the 2004 season. Holdsclaw would later reveal that one of her reasons for leaving the team was rooted in a deep-seated depression that caused her to lose interest in basketball. Before the full extent of depression was known, ESPN columnist Mechelle Voepel

wrote at the time of Holdsclaw's departure from the Mystics that "her on-court demeanor for some time now has suggested an amazingly gifted athlete who has been going through the motions. She has been playing basketball as if it's simply a chore she excels at, not a passion she embraces. In fact, it has even seemed a burden," (2004). After a stint of playing basketball overseas in Spain, Holdsclaw came back to the WNBA in 2005 and was traded to the Los Angeles Sparks, before abruptly retiring from the league for good just a few games into the 2007 season.

"Some will say it's a private matter and she doesn't owe anyone a public explanation," concluded Voepel when writing again at the end of Holdsclaw's career. "However, when you're one of the best players in the history of your sport and you walk away while still in your prime years, you obviously leave a lot of questions. In women's hoops there has never been more of a sure thing who turned into such an enigma," (Voepel, 2007).

The disappointing career of Holdsclaw left the league devoid of a star whom they could promote and market their outstanding basketball skills and athleticism. In turn, the league increasingly turned to a "sex sells" approach in the marketing of their next hope for a superstar in Sue Bird. Drafted number one overall as a two-time NCAA champion out of the University of Connecticut, Bird came to the Seattle Storm as the poster child for the All-American girl and floor leader. WNBA President Ackerman once referred to Sue Bird as "a new breed of point guard who represents an important evolutionary step in the women's game," (Anderson, 2002). Kelli Anderson, a writer for Sports Illustrated, stated that "Bird is a marketer's dream. The Seattle team store had to reorder Bird jerseys and T-Shirts after just one preseason game. Bird could become the most popular female team sport athlete ever, blowing by soccer star Mia

Hamm,” (2002). Others noted that her skill set and natural instincts were a combination that was hard to find in one player in the NBA (Anderson, 2002).

Yet despite her natural talents, the league soon looked to capitalize on Bird through her looks and image, to disastrous results. Bird first came under fire during her rookie year when images of her in the media were created with clear sexual intentions. In a 2003 league commercial, Sue Bird looks into the camera, done up in makeup and a revealing, spaghetti strapped top, and seductively states that “I’m not as sweet as you think I am,” (Levesque, 2003). Bird also teased readers of Dime magazine when she appeared in a spread wearing nothing more than an Allen Iverson jersey and high heels. The article subheading read that “Sue Bird is possibly the perfect woman... and the best reason we’ve seen for us to pay attention to women’s basketball,” (Levesque, 2003). Bird responded to potential criticisms by saying in the piece that “It is no lie that sex sells, but, like I said, whatever draws fans is a good thing. We have some beautiful women in the league... There’s no reason to hide it,” (Levesque, 2003).

Bird endured the sharpest criticism from league observers after a promotional appearance on Seattle morning talk show led to an infamous bet and black eye for the league’s image. During her second season in Seattle, Bird tried to drum up support from the local male demographic by making a wager with KRJ talk radio host Mitch Levy. In the bet, if Bird finished with a two-to-one assist-to-turnover ratio or better, Levy would have to buy a Seattle Storm season ticket for the following season and attend the games. If Bird did not finish with this ratio, Levy would win the bet and have permission to spank Bird on air while she cried out a racy saying (Gillespie, 2003). The Seattle community was soon up in arms, causing Bird to rescind on the bet and apologize for her actions. State Senator from Seattle, Jeanne Kohl-Welles, offered pointed commentary on the situation, when saying “it helps feed into the images of

violence against women and stereotyping. I don't condemn her. I appreciate that she doesn't have the experience in life that other women have had. But this could be very hurtful. Not just to the WNBA, but to other women and girls," (Associated Press, 2003). In response, Bird stated that "As genuine as my intentions were, I realize the negative effect that this bet has had and would like to apologize," (Gillespie, 2003).

The danger in selling sex is that the league's image and mission to begin with, to promote women's basketball, becomes lost in continually searching for the next pinup or pretty face. Bird's manager James Gould set lofty aspirations for his client, when stating that he believed Bird could pull down seven figure earnings off the court for a variety of endorsements and that he believed the public would "fall in love with Sue," (Anderson, 2002). In the first few seasons of Sue Bird's career, she has not been able to achieve the great marketing heights once predicted for her. Bird does not lack playing credentials, having won a WNBA championship and being named to multiple All-Star teams, but the WNBA's strategy to promote her looks over her game never resonated with those outside the WNBA's core audience.

After observing the failures of the league's efforts to market other stars, how confident can the league be that this time, Candace Parker will be the real deal? The league, through statements from those associated with the WNBA and the media, seems to believe that the WNBA can take the lessons learned from the past and has the best of both worlds in being able to market both Parker's superior level of play with an equally charismatic personality and stunning looks. When the league began its marketing efforts with Rebecca Lobo and company, Lobo stated that "People in the past said that if you're a female athlete you can't be attractive or feminine," says Rebecca Lobo. "We're saying don't be afraid to be both," (Marks, 1997). Parker is the embodiment of this statement, and Parker will be guided by NBA power agent

Aaron Goodwin, who earned his reputation as an expert marketer by signing clients like LeBron James, Kevin Durant, and Dwight Howard to record setting shoe and apparel deals. Not only will Goodwin look to capitalize and develop a signature shoe-line for Parker, but the agent will also look to secure non-athletic deals for Parker in areas like high fashion and cosmetics (Rovell, 2008). On Parker, Goodwin has stated that “Candace is an unbelievable talent. She embodies the spirit of teamwork and will bring a fresh presence to the business of professional sports,” (Rovell, 2008).

“There is a general consensus around the world that Candace represents a special level of player,” current WNBA President Donna Orender went on record saying. “I can tell you that the league certainly has received many inquiries as to when she was going to go pro, and what kind of interest did we think that she would have in working with companies,” (Organ, 2008).

Sports writers across the country have not been shy about exulting “Greatest Ever” labels and ratcheting up the hyperbole on a player who has yet to play a WNBA game. In Jeff Lipman’s article “Parker Transcending Greatness,” the author relates Parker to “like a God, Parker isn’t simply coming into her own as a player, she is becoming, becoming something far greater than the next WNBA All-Star.” Lippman continued by saying “The WNBA is not a worthy stage for her greatness. No, the world will be her playground. The kingdom of women’s basketball has needed a monarch, and Candace Parker is ready to reign over her subjects like the greatest rulers in history,” (2005)

In addition to league sources and sports writers, marketing industry experts also feel that Parker could be primed for superstardom. “She’s one of the most intriguing female athletes to come on the marketing scene in some time,” said Don Hichney, vice president at the Bonham Group, a sports and entertainment marketing firm in Denver. “She’s attractive, stylish, she has a

championship pedigree,” (Organ, 2008). Paul Swangard, director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center in Eugene, Oregon, predicted a successful future for Parker as well. “She absolutely has the opportunity to create a buzz more so because she represents an athlete who can transcend her sport. At the end of the day, her combination of athleticism, personality and charisma is marketable. Having her in a market like L.A. provides a wonderful opportunity for the league to gain relevancy outside those who follow just the WNBA. She could be seen on Entertainment Tonight, or followed by non-traditional media. That will absolutely amplify and bring attention to the WNBA at a time when it’s hard to break through to the other audience,” (Patrick, 2008).

There is clearly a great deal of attention and hype placed on the shoulders of Parker, and some argue that if Candace Parker were hypothetically a man, she would hands-down be the single most hyped collegiate star coming into the professional ranks of all-time (Allen, 2008). In spite of all the attention, the league’s collective bargaining agreement prevents the league from coming anywhere close to satisfying the financial demands that would be required of an NBA rookie in similar shoes. Parker will earn a base salary of \$44,604, less than many police officers in the state of her college (Organ, 2008). From there, Parker is locked into a four year contract which will pay her at most \$56,182 by her last year. Only after the four years will she be relieved of that contract and be able to seek out the top salaries in the league, which by that time will cross over the \$100,000 threshold for the first time with a maximum \$103,500 salary (Patrick, 2008).

When most players have to play overseas or seek other employment during the winter months to supplement their income, Candace Parker could find herself in elite company by being in a position to have commercial endorsements pay her large salaries (Organ, 2008). “Parker

going to L.A. is really good for the league,” said LSU and former Houston Comet coach Van Chancellor. “She will get every commercial out there. She articulates well, she’s everything that you would want to market a league,” (Organ, 2008). Although league officials would never publicly state this opinion, observers of the league believe Candace Parker is also primed to be a marketing star because she is good looking and engaged to NBA star Sheldon Williams, thus confirming her heterosexual credentials (Rovell, 2008). Marketers feel the league needs a clearly identifiable heterosexual woman like Parker to expand the WNBA core base beyond lesbians and diehard women’s basketball fans and appeal to the masses to get moms and dads to buy shoes and apparel inked with Parker’s image (Rovell, 2008).

Parker’s transition into the WNBA also comes as good news for the league in helping to reach the young male demographic the league has struggled to captivate. Lisa Leslie stated that “Guys, they’re into our game, following our sport, but to follow the draft and to follow the NCAA tournament and to really be abreast of what’s going on now that we have the number one player in Parker, that is great for our sport. This is great for women’s basketball,” (Arritt, 2008). Lisa Leslie is returning from maternity leave to resume her career as the league’s all-time leading scorer and rebounder. Despite Leslie’s storied place in the league’s history, the two-time WNBA champion offered more high praise for her new teammate, saying “At her age, she’s way better than me. I see nothing but great things happening with both of us on the court,” (Arritt, 2008). Los Angeles Sparks Coach Michael Cooper, a former NBA star on three of the champion Lakers teams in the 1980s, joined his veteran all-star in offering praise and likened Parker’s game to that of some of his former teammates. “We knew this player was equivalent to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson. It’s ‘Showtime’ all over again,” (Litsky, 2008).

Still, despite the buzz and impression Parker has created through her play and personality, there are still some doubts as to how successful Parker can be for the league. Even as men possess greater awareness of Parker due to her dunking feats and good looks, there are questions about how effective she can be in marketing to the coveted young male demographic. While men still control a majority of the decisions in the business industry regarding what's going to be on television, Parker will have a tougher time finding a platform to showcase herself. According to Dr. William Sutton of the DeVos Sports Business Program at the University of Central Florida, "No matter how good you are or what sport you're in, it's all about the platform. Candace Parker, right now, has a presence, but no platform," (Allen, 2008).

Parker's dunking abilities have no doubt increased her celebrity in the sport and name recognition among casual sports fans, yet some experts feel the league would be misguided in promoting the dunk as part of Candace's package. To be sure, Parker's dunks garner nowhere near the level of authority or athleticism the top collegiate and professional male players routinely exhibit. Some feel that dunking is the weakest part of Parker's game and it would not make sense for the league to try and compare her dunks to the men when she is in a class of her own with the rest of her skill-set amongst the women (Whitlock, 2005). Candace Parker and players of her class have grown up, developing their games with knowledge that a WNBA existed at the end of the road. Thus as a result, Parker has been part of an evolution of players who are more talented and driven to excel at basketball than the past generation's women's basketball players (Patrick, 2008). So while the dunk is very much a part of Parker's arsenal, it would be foolish to focus on just one aspect of a player who is so much more skilled across the board than her previous star predecessors.

The jury will remain out on whether or not Parker can “save” league, at least until she wins a few games and signs a few major sponsorship deals. Los Angeles Sparks co-owner Kathy Goodman feels that Parker does not have to save the league, because the league does not need saving in her estimation. “She’s going to help grow the league and be a key part of it,” (Patrick, 2008).

Whether savior or simply the next evolution of the women’s game, the career of Parker will be scrutinized in years to come much in the same respect we can analyze the league’s initial growing pains after a decade of play. Professional women’s basketball in the United States has never lasted as long or prospered as well as the WNBA has managed to do in its first eleven years of existence. The early wars with the ABL, the handling of the homosexual element, and the search for the marketable face of the league are all introductory chapters to the story the league hopes to write as it now strives for sustained prosperity and longevity. The league’s up-and-down history gives no indication as to whether this story will have a happy ending, instead only giving reasonable assurance that even as the league changes, there will be new characters and plot twists equally worthy of analysis in the years to come.

## References

- A plucky proposition. (1998, February 16) *Sports Illustrated*, p. 28-29, (no author).
- ABL suspends operations, will file chapter 11. (1998, December 22). ABL.com, Retrieved online March 10, 2008 at [http://www.finchhaven.com/pages/sea\\_reign/abl/914357963.html](http://www.finchhaven.com/pages/sea_reign/abl/914357963.html), (archived press release).
- ABL takes center stage: The state of the union in the WNBA. (1998, November 4) *Street & Smith's SportsBusiness Daily*, Retrieved online March 11, 2008 from member archives, (no author).
- Allen, P. (2008, April 10) Candace Parker is better than what NBA is offering. *The Seattle Times*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 from member archives.
- Anderson, K. (2002, July 1) Sky's the limit: WNBA rookie Sue Bird has the game and charm to Become the most popular female team-sport athlete ever. *Sports Illustrated*, p. 48-53.
- Araton, H. (1998, March 28) Broadway awaits its star. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 from member archives.
- Arritt, D. (2008, April 12) Spark's Parker meets with Leslie, LA media. *Los Angeles Times*, D1.
- Associated Press (2003, July 23) Bird apologizes to fans for making wager. ESPN, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 at <http://espn.go.com/wnba/news/2003/0721/1583418.html>
- Banet-Wiser, S. (1999) Hoop dreams: Professional basketball and the politics of race and gender, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 34, p. 403-420.
- Berkow, I. (2002, August 5) A lesbian group protests too much: Lesbians for Liberty being ignored by New York Liberty of WNBA. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online March 11, 2008 from member archives.

- Bhonslay, M. (1998, March) Jump ball: With first seasons under their belt, both the ABL and the WNBA are holding on strong. *Women's Sports and Fitness*, p. 40-44.
- Bower, A. (2001, May 21) LA Sparks come up with a bright idea. *Time*, p.22.
- Bryson, L. (1987) In D.S. Eitzen, *Fair and foul: Beyond the myths and paradoxes of sport* (p. 102). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Cavanaugh, J. (1998, January 16) Second time around is sweeter for ABL. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online March 10, 2008 from member archives.
- Clark, G. and Wright, J. (1999) In D.L. Andrews and S.J. Jackson (Eds.), *Sport, culture, and advertising: Identities, commodities and the politics of representation* (p.125). New York: Taylor & Francis Inc.
- Crawford, D. (1997, November 14) Women's basketball leagues to slug it out. *The Business Journal*, p.20.
- Eitzen, D.S. (2006) *Fair and foul: Beyond the myths and paradoxes of sport*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gillespie, E. (2003, July 22) No spansks: Sue Bird cancels bet with radio host. *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 from member archives.
- Granderson, LZ (2005) 'Three-time MVP tired of having to hide my feelings.' Retrieved March 28, 2007, from <http://sports.espn.go.com/wnba/news/story?id=2203853>
- Hruby, P. (2001, August 20) Coming out: Once hesitant to court gay fans, the WNBA now openly welcomes lesbians courtside. *Insight*, p. 32.
- Killion, A. (1999, April 12) Stupidity of the highest order. *The Sporting News*, p.5-6.
- Knight, A. (1999, May 5) Mystics select Holdsclaw with No. 1 pick. *The Washington Post*, p. D1.

- Kort, M. (1997, December 9) The girls in the bleachers: Phantom fans. *The Advocate*, p. 50 – 52.
- Kort, M. (2001, October 1) Hoops and kisses. *The Advocate*, p. 15-16.
- Lefton, T. (1997, October) Leagues of their own: For now, the WNBA and ABL have no plans to merge. *Sport*, p.38.
- Levesque, J. (2003, May 28) WNBA needs post-ups, not pinups. *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 from member archives.
- Litell, S. (2008, April 10) Just in time for the Candace Parker era. SLAM Online, Retrieved April 11, 2008 at <http://slamonline.com/2008/04/introducing-our-new-wnba-columnist/era.html>.
- Litsky, F. (1997, September 17) WNBA takes top ABL star. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online March 10, 2008 from member archives.
- Lisky, F. (2008, April 10) With visions of showtime, Sparks take Tennessee's Parker first. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online April 11 from member archives.
- Longman, J. (1997, November 23) A star's choice: Dollars or diploma? *The New York Times*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 from member archives.
- Lopez, S. (1997, June 30) They got next. *Sports Illustrated*, p. 44-48.
- Marks, R. (1997, July) Supermodels: WNBA is counting on Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo and Sheryl Swoopes for leadership and draw. *Sport*, p.46-50.
- McDonald, M. (2007) Rethinking resistance: The queer play of the Women's National Basketball Association, visibility politics and late capitalism. *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 27.1, p. 77-93.
- Messner, M. (1994) AIDS, homophobia and sport. In M. Messner and D. Sabo (Eds.), *Sex,*

- violence, and power in sports (pp. 120-126). Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Muller, T. (2007) 'Lesbian community' in Women's National Basketball Association spaces. *Social and Cultural Geography*, Vol. 8.1, p. 9-28.
- Organ, M. and Patton, M. (2008, April 10) UT's Parker bears hope for women's game. *The Tennessean*, p. D1-D2.
- Patrick, D. (2008, March 20) Tennessee's Parker at forefront of evolving game. *USA Today*, p. C1-C2.
- Roberts, S. (2003, April 21) It's Stern's world, for better or worse. *The New York Times*, retrieved online March 10, 2008 from member archives.
- Robinson, E. (1997, June 23) A league or two of their own: Now or never for women's basketball. *Fortune*, p.32.
- Rovell, D. (2008, April 15) Candace Parker: Will she be the WNBA's marketing star? CNBC, Retrieved online April 15, 2008 at <http://www.cnbc.com/id/24126206.htm>
- Sandomir, R. (1997, June 19) Sounds of summer: WNBA to take center court. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online March 10, 2008 from member archives.
- Starks, J. (2007, December 28) A class of her own: Candace Parker has the talent to forever alter the face of women's hoops. *Contra Costa Times*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 at <http://www.nationalpost.com/story-printer.html?id=201819>
- Stockwell, A. (2005, November 22) She is our champion. *The Advocate*, p. 46-58.
- Swoopes, S. (2005) Outside the arc. From *ESPN the Magazine*, Retrieved March 28, 2007 from <http://sports.espn.go.com/wnba/news/story?id=2204322>
- Transcript (2001, June 3) Outside the lines: The gay dilemma. ESPN Page 2, Retrieved March 10, 2008 at <http://espn.go.com/page2/tvlistings/show62transcript.html>

- Voepel, M. (2004, September 21) Hold the Holdsclaw Criticism. ESPN, Retrieved April 11, 2008 at <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/print?id=1885649>
- Voepel, M. (2005, October 25) Swoopes could open door for others to follow. ESPN, Retrieved online March 11, 2008 at <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/print?id=2203893>
- Voepel, M. (2007, June 11) Mique's exit leave LA in lurch – and full of sadness. ESPN, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 at <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/print?id=2901339>
- Weir, T. (2001, July 24) WNBA explores lesbian fan base. USA Today, Retrieved online March 10, 2008 at <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketba/wnba/stories/2001-07-23-lesbian-fans.htm>.
- Whitaker, G. (1982) In D.S. Eitzen, *Fair and foul: Beyond the myths and paradoxes of sport* (p. 102). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Whitlock, J. (2005, March 22) Women shouldn't be dunking. ESPN, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 at <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=whitlock/060323/dunk.html>
- Williams, L. (1999, January 12) NBA subpoenaed in ABL probe. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online March 10, 2008 from member archives.
- Williams, L. (2003, July 11) Leslie's appeal not universal. *The New York Times*, Retrieved online April 11, 2008 from member archives.
- Willis, P. (1982) Women in sport ideology. In J. Hargreaves (Ed.) *Sport, culture, and ideology* (p. 121). London: Routledge.
- WNBA wins star wars. (1998, May 11) *Sports Illustrated*, p. 22-24, (no author).
- Wulf, S. (1997, August 4) The NBA's sister act. *Time*, Retrieved online March 11, 2008 at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,986788,00.html>

**Appendix A - Photographs of People Featured Prominently in Research**



**Rebecca Lobo**



**Lisa Leslie**



**Nikki McCray**



**Candace Parker**



**Sheryl Swoopes**



**Dawn Staley**



**Chamique Holdsclaw**



**Sue Bird**



**Val Ackerman**

WNBA President 1997-2005



**Gary Cavalli**

ABL CEO/Founder, 1996-1999



**Donna Orender**

WNBA President, 2005-Present

## Appendix B – History of WNBA Franchises

### Original WNBA Franchises (1997)

#### Charlotte Sting



10 Seasons  
Folded in 2006  
149-192

#### Cleveland Rockers



7 Seasons  
Folded in 2003  
114-121

#### Houston Comets



11 Seasons  
Still Active  
244-146  
Current Owner:  
Hilton Koch  
4 WNBA Titles  
(1997,1998,1999,2000)

#### Los Angeles Sparks



11 Seasons  
Still Active  
252-145  
Current Owners:  
Carla Christofferson &  
Kathy Goodman  
2 WNBA Titles (2001,2002)

#### New York Liberty



11 Seasons  
Still Active  
209-186  
Current Owner:  
Cablevision, Inc.

#### Phoenix Mercury



11 Seasons,  
Still Active  
186-188  
Current Owner:  
Anne Mariucci &  
Kathy Munro  
1 WNBA Title (2007)

#### Sacramento Monarchs



11 Seasons  
Still Active  
217-179  
Current Owner:  
The Maloof Family  
1 WNBA Title (2005)

#### Utah Starzz



6 Seasons  
Relocated in 2003  
152-216

### Expansion WNBA Franchises (1998-Present)

#### Atlanta Dream



0 Seasons (2008)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
0-0  
Current Owner:  
Ronald Terwilliger

#### Chicago Sky



2 Seasons (2006)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
19-49  
Current Owner:  
Michael Alter

#### Connecticut Sun



5 Seasons (2003)  
Moved from Orlando  
Still Active  
120-64  
Current Owner:  
Mohegan Sun, Inc.

#### Detroit Shock



10 Seasons (1998)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
197-173  
Current Owner:  
William Davidson  
2 WNBA Titles (2003,2006)

**Indiana Fever**

8 Seasons (2000)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
135-148  
Current Owner:  
The Simon Family

**Miami Sol**

3 Seasons (2000)  
Expansion Franchise  
Folded in 2002  
49-50

**Minnesota Lynx**

9 Seasons (1999)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
123-180  
Current Owner:  
Glen Taylor

**Orlando Miracle**

4 Seasons (1999)  
Expansion Franchise  
Relocated in 2002  
61-70

**Portland Fire**

3 Seasons (2000)  
Expansion Franchise  
Folded in 2002  
37-59

**San Antonio Silver Stars**

5 Seasons (2003)  
Moved From Utah  
Still Active  
63-112  
Current Owner:  
Peter Holt

**Seattle Storm**

8 Seasons (2000)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
132-150  
Current Owner:  
Force 10 Hoops, Inc.  
1 WNBA Title (2004)

**Washington Mystics**

10 Seasons (1998)  
Expansion Franchise  
Still Active  
136-204  
Current Owner:  
Lincoln Holdings, LLC

**Appendix C – WNBA Player Salaries Under New Collective Bargaining Agreement (2008)**

- **Maximum Veteran Salary in 2008: \$95,000, Increasing \$2,000 Each Subsequent Season**
- **Minimum Veteran Salary in 2008: \$50,000, Increasing \$1,000 Each Subsequent Season**
- **Rookie Guaranteed Pay Scale (Contracts Cannot Deviate From Scale)**

| Picks | 1 <sup>st</sup> Year | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year | 4 <sup>th</sup> Year of Contract |
|-------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1-4   | \$44,064             | \$44,945             | \$49,440             | \$56,182                         |
| 5-8   | \$40,759             | \$41,574             | \$45,732             | \$51,968                         |
| 9-14  | \$36,353             | \$37,080             | \$40,788             | \$46,350                         |
| 15-28 | \$35,000             | \$35,700             | \$39,270             | \$44,625                         |
| 29-42 | \$34,500             | \$35,190             | \$36,950             | \$42,229                         |

**APPENDIX D - WNBA TEAM AND LEAGUE ATTENDANCE AVERAGES**

| TEAM                     |                                                                                     | 1997  | 1998  | 1999  | 2000  | 2001  | 2002  | 2003  | 2004  | 2005  | 2006 | 2007 | AVERAGE |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|---------|
| Charlotte Sting          |    | 8307  | 8651  | 7081  | 5685  | 6595  | 6667  | 7062  | 6846  | 5678  | 5941 |      | 6851    |
| Chicago Sky              |    |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       | 3390 | 3915 | 3653    |
| Cleveland Rockers        |    | 7971  | 10350 | 9350  | 8596  | 9211  | 9318  | 7400  |       |       |      |      | 8885    |
| Connecticut Sun          |    |       |       |       |       |       |       | 6023  | 6707  | 7173  | 7417 | 7970 | 7058    |
| Detroit Shock            |    |       | 10229 | 8485  | 6716  | 6834  | 5886  | 7862  | 9642  | 9374  | 9380 | 9749 | 8416    |
| Houston Comets           |    | 9703  | 12602 | 11906 | 12255 | 11320 | 10866 | 8835  | 8086  | 7099  | 7682 | 8166 | 9865    |
| Indiana Fever            |    |       |       |       | 11267 | 8683  | 8434  | 8340  | 7588  | 8382  | 7222 | 7032 | 8369    |
| Los Angeles Sparks       |    | 8931  | 7653  | 7625  | 6563  | 9278  | 11651 | 9290  | 10428 | 8854  | 8311 | 8695 | 8844    |
| Miami Sol                |    |       |       |       | 7983  | 8857  | 8828  |       |       |       |      |      | 8556    |
| Minnesota Lynx           |    |       |       | 10494 | 7290  | 7538  | 7819  | 7074  | 7359  | 6673  | 6552 | 7119 | 7546    |
| New York Liberty         |    | 13270 | 14935 | 14047 | 14498 | 15660 | 14670 | 12123 | 9886  | 10140 | 9120 | 8698 | 12459   |
| Orlando Miracle          |    |       |       | 9801  | 7363  | 7430  | 7115  |       |       |       |      |      | 7927    |
| Phoenix Mercury          |  | 13703 | 13765 | 12219 | 10130 | 8561  | 8737  | 8501  | 8017  | 7303  | 7459 | 7737 | 9648    |
| Portland Fire            |  |       |       |       | 8317  | 8604  | 8041  |       |       |       |      |      | 8321    |
| Sacramento Monarchs      |  | 7858  | 6578  | 8626  | 7928  | 8350  | 9011  | 9152  | 8679  | 8542  | 8691 | 8387 | 8346    |
| San Antonio Silver Stars |  |       |       |       |       |       |       | 10384 | 8395  | 7944  | 7397 | 7569 | 8338    |
| Seattle Storm            |  |       |       |       | 8912  | 5954  | 6986  | 7109  | 7899  | 8891  | 8568 | 7974 | 7787    |
| Utah Starzz              |  | 7611  | 8104  | 7544  | 6417  | 6907  | 7420  |       |       |       |      |      | 7334    |
| Washington Mystics       |  |       | 15910 | 15306 | 15258 | 15417 | 16202 | 14042 | 12615 | 10088 | 7839 | 7788 | 13047   |
| WNBA AVERAGES            |  | 9669  | 10878 | 10207 | 9074  | 9075  | 9228  | 8800  | 8627  | 8165  | 7498 | 7754 | 9442    |

**Appendix E – Pictures from WNBA “This Is Who I Am” Campaigns As Described In Paper**

**“This Is Who I Am” 2003 – Photos From WNBA.com**



**Lisa Leslie & Swin Cash**

**Lisa Harrison**

**Sue Bird**

**Ticha Penicheiro**

**“This Is Who I Am” 2004 – Photos from WNBA.com**



**Shannon Johnson**

**Lisa Leslie**

**Becky Hammon**

**Cheryl Ford**