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by Mel Greenberg

## **INSIDE SCOOP™ ... WNBA Draft to coincide with Final Four; Writers' Block; College Comebacks; and the REAL RPIs.**

The WNBA had a special way of celebrating National Girls & Women in Sports Day this week.

The women's pro basketball league that will launch its 10th season this summer announced it will conduct its pre-draft camp and the draft itself in Boston at the NCAA Women's Final Four.

The camp, which will consist of about 40 players, will be a one-day affair held between the national semifinals and the finals.

The draft itself will be held on Wednesday, April 5, less than 24 hours after the national championship is decided.

When asked if the quickness in turnaround time might impinge upon the celebration of the completion of the collegiate season, let alone the team that wins it all, WNBA president **Donna Orender** said the draft event would "add to the celebration."

If it all works, and Orender conceded the jury would be out until the results of the move are

analyzed, the WNBA plan is to follow the Final Four and conduct the draft in the site city in ensuing years.

**Beth Bass**, executive director of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association whose annual convention is held in conjunction with the Final Four, welcomed the move. Many WNBA coaches, incidentally, belong to the WBCA.

"You wouldn't see this in the men's game," Bass said. "You have three organizations working together to grow and promote the sport."

American University athletic director **Joni Comstock**, the current chair of the NCAA women's tournament committee, called the move "exciting" but also noted the focus of the week is "still on the games themselves and surrounding events."

In recent years, the camp has been held within a week of the Final Four in Chicago or suburban New York. Within a week of the tryouts, the draft has been conducted in the New York metropolitan area most

times from the NBA Entertainment Studios in Secaucus, N.J., near the Lincoln Tunnel.

When Tennessee star **Chamique Holdsclaw** was made the No. 1 pick, the same year players from the then-recently collapsed ABL were chosen, the site was in a Manhattan hotel.

Through the move, the WNBA hopes to increase media coverage of the draft since more organizations cover the women's collegiate finals than the draft itself, not counting, of course, the cities that actually have WNBA teams.

And so we move to a new perception of the sport if this all works out.

In the men's game, the NBA and NCAA are two different worlds, including the beat writers who cover the two competitions.

Indeed, some NBA officials were surprised how enthusiastic the NCAA was about the new venture considering its amateur-pro distancing stance of the past.

Comstock's note of caution is a worthy statement.

When it comes to cost-savings, the big winner happens to be ESPN, the network of women's basketball. With the graying of lines, which includes the unknown for how extensive the broadcast partner will promote the next day's draft rather than the actual game itself, the NCAA title game may be eclipsed some what.

In recent years, college coaches have broadcast WNBA games and pro players have become involved working the collegiate games.

### **Writers' Block**

And there is another issue, although it concerns the media who cover both the pro and collegiate women's game as opposed to separate writing staffs that cover the men's NCAA and NBA.

No question, for the casual fans, this all may add to the excitement which is truly needed to build a national fan base for the WNBA.

For the writers who actually report from the Final Four, there will be some mental agony that previously was avoided when there was a two-day window from the title game.

Why?

Because of the late start for TV purposes, many writers, especially those on the East Coast, are writing play-by-play stories for one deadline and then rapidly filing one with quotes afterwards. The entire night races past their eyes like a speeding freight train.

The next day, however, writers get the opportunity to follow the previous night's excitement by putting a finishing touch to the season.

Now, unless papers assign additional staff, writers will have to quickly switch gears at the same time to get into a pro-mentality while also trying to wrap up the college season.

Ok, **REAL SPORTS** pioneered this type of consistent and combined coverage by doing both here in our monthly updates. But remember, WNBA news is at a minimum during the collegiate season, and vice versa in the summer.

We like Orender's style to push for change that improves the game. We hope the media will respond with greater and not simply replacement coverage.

Having been around since 1997, we remember back in time when the WNBA and ABL's onset actually added spice to coverage of the finals because of the new topics.

But, those were notebook and feature items, the challenge will be to ensure that writers aren't competing against themselves on deadlines.

### The year of the comeback

**North Carolina's** move to No. 1 for the first time after beating **Duke**, which beat **Tennessee**, is giving a new look to the high end of the weekly rankings, even if the Vols and **Connecticut** are in the Top five.

For now, it's a five-way race for the four No. 1 NCAA seeds among UNC, Duke, Tennessee, **LSU**, and Connecticut. The challenger group, which has yet to place a dent (**Kentucky's** shocker of Tennessee notwithstanding) into that quintet, is **Maryland**, **Ohio State**, **Rutgers**, perhaps defending champion **Baylor**, and dark horse **Oklahoma**. **Purdue** has made its way into the Top 10 but we'll see how the Boilermakers finish out the regular season.

Meanwhile, has anybody noticed names of yesterday such as **Long Beach State** leading the Big West, and **Indiana State** is in front in the Missouri Valley Conference. How about the revival of **California** under new coach **Joanne Boyle**, formerly with **Richmond**, and previously to that, a Duke assistant.

**St. John's** ended a 22-year drought from the AP rankings. **Mississippi** under **Carol Ross** and Kentucky under former Tennessee assistant **Mickie DeMoss**, who were both hired after the 2003 season, have also crashed the list this season, as did **Missouri** for a week after a long absence.

## The Real RPIs

The NCAA is making the official Ratings Percentage Index formula available publicly for the first time on a weekly basis every Wednesday. That will help guide forecasts on a team's chance to get to the Big Dance if it doesn't get an automatic bid as a conference champion.

This week was the first public listing, so it will take a few days to analyze how close the simulations are at places on the internet such as CollegeRPI.com.

When we return at the end of the month, the postseason picture should be much clearer, and maybe not, as conference tournaments get under way.

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