



e-Zine July 2006
Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

The WNBA season is hitting its midpoint and a double-highlight will occur at the same moment this month when the all-star game is held in Madison Square Garden in New York City and the recently-announced all-decade team is honored.

To put those all-decade names, here, for a brief discussion, the voting was drawn from three groups -- media, teams and coaches, and fans.

The Houston Comets dominated with four players and why not, considering the franchise also claimed the first four WNBA titles. The picks from the Lone Star State were founding WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes, Tina Thompson, former star Cynthia Cooper, who all played on those championships, and Dawn Staley, who became a Comet late last season in a trade with the Charlotte Sting and will be retiring after the current one expires.

Another WNBA original in Los Angeles Sparks center Lisa Leslie was also picked. Staley's pro career in the United States originated in the former American Basketball League as did similar careers of selectees Katie Smith with the Detroit Shock, and Yolanda Griffith with the defending champion Sacramento Monarchs,

The Seattle Storm placed two former overall No. 1 picks as well as current Olympians in Sue Bird and Australia's Lauren Jackson. Tamika Catchings, the former Tennessee star with the Indiana Fever, was also named.

Honorable mention's named were Sacramento's Ticha Penicheiro and former star Ruthie Bolton, Los Angeles' Chamique Holdsclaw, who had played most of her career with the Washington Mystics before last season, former New York Liberty star Teresa Weatherspoon, and the Phoenix Mercury's Diana Taurasi, a former University of Connecticut star who has only been in the league since 2004.

In New England, there has been some discussion that if at least honorable mention status was going to be accorded, another former UConn star, Nykesha Sales, instead of Taurasi, should have been cited because of the number of seasons in competition.

Holdsclaw drew a lot of votes on statistics, yet her absences for major parts of several seasons due to injuries probably held her back from making the decade squad.

SCORING RISE

Meanwhile, the change in league rules with a reduced shot clock to 24 seconds from the previous time of 30 seconds is helping to pump up offenses and point production as never before.

Going into the month, five players -- Taurasi, Washington's Alana Beard, Minnesota's Seimone Augustus, Phoenix's Cappie Pondexter, and Los Angeles' Leslie were averaging 20 or more points, while a sixth -- Seattle's Jackson was just off that plateau at 19.6.

Only two players at most had those kind of averages in any of the previous nine WNBA seasons.

And as a symbol of the takeover by younger stars, Augustus out of LSU was the No. 1 overall pick in April's draft, Pondexter out of Rutgers was No. 2. Taurasi and former Duke star Beard were the 1-2 overall picks of the 2004 draft.

Speaking of transition, another ABL original has gone to retirement in former Tennessee star Nikki McCray, who had been with the expansion Chicago Sky. Her WNBA career, after jumping from the ABL, began with the then-expansion Washington Mystics.

CHECK POINT

As far as the races go, in the East, four teams have separated themselves from the other three although there is a logjam fight for first among two-time defending champion Connecticut, Indiana, Detroit, and Washington.

The Mystics had shown major improvement from a year ago but an MCL injury to the left knee of all-star DeLisha Milton-Jones, who is currently sidelined six-to-eight weeks, has hampered Washington's progress.

In the West, San Antonio has already matched last season's win total, but is still slightly behind fourth-place Seattle. The leader is Los Angeles, followed by Houston, which is trying to send Staley out with a championship ring, and then overall defending champion Sacramento, ahead of Seattle.

Phoenix got off to a slow start learning new coach Paul Westhead's high-octane attack, but the Mercury have improved in recent weeks and are also near playoff contention.

New York, which went to a youth movement, is suffering its worst season at 4-11, which is 3 ½ games behind Washington.

When it was recently noted to Liberty general manager Carol Blazejowski that freshman will struggle, the former high-scoring star of Montclair State in the late 1970s quipped, "Yeah, but I'm used to playing with seniors."

SUMMER SCHOOL HISTORY CLASS

On the college front, to no one's surprise, the NCAA tournament committee followed the men's committee's action by saying there would be no expansion of the 64-team field.

However, still to be determined is if any procedures involving selection and seeding were altered after the ruckus over last season's field when Tennessee, Rutgers, Purdue, and North Carolina landed in the same regional final in Cleveland.

At the time, NCAA officials said that's the way the ball rebounded when following procedures and principles in filling the bracket, but the pecking order could always be changed when the committee held its summer meeting.

This past week, a rarity occurred when Alcorn State was barred from this season's tournament for committing major NCAA rules violations. Ironically, coach Shirley Walker, who was named in the particulars, was a member of the original NCAA women's tournament committee in 1981.

Short of potential, if any, as a champion of the Southwestern Athletic Conference to access the Big Dance with an automatic bid, Alcorn's chances would be minimal otherwise.

But the move does bring to mind the first whipping girl the NCAA put on display to show it meant business in the women's game when then-Northeastern Louisiana, which had been to the 1985 Final Four, was barred halfway through 1986 season.

The action created an interesting dynamic at the time involving voting in the weekly Associated Press women's poll.

NLU originally appealed its penalty prior to the start of the season and, as well as it should have been at the time, found a place in the top five going into early January.

Then right before the NCAA was going to hear the appeal at its convention, the school withdrew the action and accepted the punishment.

This created an interesting quandary. Coaches at the time were voting in the AP poll, but there was no agreement with the WBCA about banning teams in the poll from being ranked if they were ineligible for the tournament.

AP philosophy on the men's side was everyone must be considered. However, no one is under orders to vote a certain way. Thus, the first weekend following the penalty, most of the board dropped NLU, but ten coaches kept the school in its high placement.

Overall, however, as a result of the snub, the team dropped to 19th. The next week, the ten voters joined the crowd and NLU was gone.

What did the poll situation illustrated, is that when team media representatives refer to the ranking order among the also-rans in their press releases, that list is rarely a true representation of support, especially beyond the first couple of schools.

When NL dropped from the top five to 19th, many more teams had better voter support but couldn't crack the list that week because of the high value the ten voters appropriately gave to NLU.

And with that note of old history, we'll move on the lazy days of summer.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS
By Mel Greenberg