

# **“We Got Next”: The Struggle to Make the WNBA**

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*As supervisor for the candidature upon which this thesis is based, I can confirm that the authorship attribution statements above are correct.*

Thomas J. Adams, October 29, 2021

*This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.*

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## **Abstract**

2021 marks the 25th season of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), making it easily the longest running women's professional league in the United States and defying the predictions of those who doubted that a women's basketball league could succeed. Though the WNBA constantly faces the pessimistic voices of those who view it as on the brink of collapse, it has matured into a stable, growing league, and the players' prominent role within social justice movements has sparked a new wave of optimism about the WNBA's future. Despite this, the WNBA still faces questions about how best to grow the league, and perhaps more broadly, what it means for women to play basketball in the professional yet beleaguered WNBA. This thesis examines the way in which WNBA players perceive themselves and the league, and consequently how their demands for change and respect have grown. It draws upon my ethnographic research with a WNBA team—pseudonymously called the Ravens—as well as my examination of a variety of sources, including news articles, advertising and commercials, and most prominently, the players own construction of their mediated self, particularly through the use of sporting autobiographies and other autobiographical texts. I examine the intersecting forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion to demonstrate the way in which the WNBA's initial marketing emphasis on heterosexual, respectable femininity was gradually challenged over time by players, who instead pushed for alternative models of female athleticism. I argue that these gendered discourses have constructed a way of playing basketball “like a girl,” which can serve to limit players' embodied possibilities. Furthermore, I explore what it means to play in a professional league that lacks the resources of other, male sports leagues, and the way in which WNBA players have pushed higher pay and better conditions. Through this examination of WNBA players' experiences, I argue that it is players' dedication and commitment to ensuring a sustainable league that has enabled the WNBA to survive in spite of an American sporting landscape hostile to women.

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## Introduction

Lisa Leslie had a fast break opportunity. It was 21 June 1997, the inaugural game of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Her team, the Los Angeles Sparks, were playing against the New York Liberty in front of a sold-out crowd on national television. As Leslie dribbled up the court she was 'contemplating, "Do I do it? Do I not do it?"'<sup>1</sup> At the last minute, Leslie decided that instead of attempting a simple layup, she was going to try to dunk the ball. She knew that it would be big for the fledgling league if she pulled it off, providing a direct challenge to those who questioned whether women's professional basketball could succeed. Though Leslie knew she could dunk, she was tired after the excitement of the game; she had, as she put it, 'no legs.'<sup>2</sup> The ball clanged off the front of the ring.

The missed dunk became emblematic of the struggles the WNBA would face in establishing itself as a respected, professional league, providing fodder to those who questioned whether women could play basketball at a high level. A *New York Times* reporter lamented that 'when she stubbed the ball on the rim, it was just what the women did not need - more stereotyping.' A writer from the *New York Daily News* was even more condescending, 'history was being made, if not baskets.'<sup>3</sup> It became the biggest story of the night, and Leslie had the egregious misfortune to be mocked on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.<sup>4</sup> Leslie would not attempt another dunk until 2002 when she became the first woman to successfully dunk in a WNBA game.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Storm. 'One of These Days, Guys, That Dunk's Going In,' *The Orlando Sentinel*, 27 June 1997, accessed 10 March 2021, <<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1997-06-27-9706261089-story.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Ramona Shelburne. 'Why Slam Brittney Griner For Dunking,' *ESPN.com*, 29 March 2012, accessed 10 March 2021, <[https://www.espn.com/espnw/news-commentary/story/\\_/id/7746360/women-final-four-2012-why-slam-baylor-lady-bears-brittney-griner-dunking](https://www.espn.com/espnw/news-commentary/story/_/id/7746360/women-final-four-2012-why-slam-baylor-lady-bears-brittney-griner-dunking)>

<sup>3</sup> Storm, 'One of These Days, Guys, That Dunk's Going In.'

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Weiner. 'How Viral Dunkers Can Revolutionize Women's Basketball,' *Bleacher Report*, 30 September 2017, accessed 10 March 2021, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2735856-how-viral-dunkers-can-revolutionize-womens-basketball>>

While the story of Lisa Leslie's missed dunk could be dismissed as a simple botched play, followed by some somewhat inevitable misogynist responses, it reveals something much more complicated. The importance that both Leslie and commentators placed on the failed dunk provides a telling illustration of the precarious and difficult position the WNBA was in as it tried to become the first successful women's professional league in the United States. The previous attempt at a women's professional basketball league, the Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL), had collapsed after three seasons in 1981.<sup>5</sup> While women had played basketball since its inception, basketball had long been perceived as a male sport. Title IX had gone into effect in 1972 as part of the Education Amendments to the 1963 Equal Pay Act. It prevented gender discrimination or exclusion from education programs in federally funded schools and universities, including in sport.<sup>6</sup> This dramatically expanded the opportunities for female athletes, and by the 1990s the effects of this were beginning to bear fruit. The prominence of women at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics meant that the games became known as the "Summer of Women," and the US Women's Basketball Team were a key part of this, with a "Dream Team" of players who easily claimed gold.<sup>7</sup> To Commissioner David Stern and the other decision makers of the National Basketball Association (NBA), this seemed like a perfect time to launch an associated women's league. The NBA would be the only one of the big four American sports—football, basketball, baseball, and ice hockey—to have a corresponding women's league, a distinction that lasts to this day.

1996 may have been the Summer of Women, but once it had passed, with the Olympics over the WNBA still had to contend with a media landscape that assumed women's basketball was inferior and that the women who played were masculine or unattractive. Enter Lisa Leslie. As one of the faces of the league, both the WNBA and Leslie herself worked to portray an image of femininity and heterosexuality, a woman that could be a

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<sup>5</sup> Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford. *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*. (New York: The New Press, 2005), p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Newberry. 'Summer of Women: Females Stole the Show at 1996 Olympics,' *The Washington Post*, 14 August 2020, accessed 10 March 2021, <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/summer-of-women-females-stole-the-show-at-1996-olympics/2020/08/13/83cbcc80-dd9e-11ea-b4f1-25b762cddb4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/summer-of-women-females-stole-the-show-at-1996-olympics/2020/08/13/83cbcc80-dd9e-11ea-b4f1-25b762cddb4_story.html)>

role model for young (presumably heterosexual) girls. A physical player like Leslie, who could dunk—and despite the memorable miss in 1997, Leslie could dunk—challenged traditional conceptions of womanhood, and the league worked overtime to ensure that this challenge only went so far. Furthermore, the missed dunk highlighted an important question: what did it mean to play basketball like a woman? It seemed a given for commentators at the time that women would not dunk or display the same athleticism as men, but where this assumption came from, and whether it even mattered, remained unexamined.

The discussions surrounding the dunk obscured an important fact. A professional women's basketball league had been launched, and 14,284 fans had been in attendance to watch it happen, while many more watched the nationally televised game.<sup>8</sup> The game was played at the Los Angeles Great Western Forum, the home of the NBA's Lakers, and the stadium was draped with banners of Sparks players.<sup>9</sup> The WNBA was a professional league, and at least in the beginning, this entailed all the trappings of an American sporting contest. Of course, though they may have played in the same arena as their male counterparts, WNBA players' salaries were considerably lower, with the maximum salaries for a player like Leslie just \$50,000.<sup>10</sup> The same year, NBA star Michael Jordan made \$33.1 million.<sup>11</sup> As this brief look demonstrates, the story of Lisa Leslie, and the WNBA as a whole, is more complicated than a straightforward missed dunk. But it was an early microcosm of the many issues that would face the WNBA in its journey to become the longest running U.S women's professional sporting league.

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<sup>8</sup> Mechelle Voepel. 'Twenty Seasons Later, a Look Back at the WNBA's First Game,' *ESPN.com*, 17 June 2016, accessed 10 March 2021, <[https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/\\_/id/16256278/twenty-years-later-look-back-wnba-first-game](https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/_/id/16256278/twenty-years-later-look-back-wnba-first-game)>

<sup>9</sup> Voepel, 'Twenty Seasons Later, a Look Back at the WNBA's First Game.'

<sup>10</sup> Harvey Araton. 'As W.N.B.A. Opens Its 20<sup>th</sup> Season, Key Figures Recall the First Game,' *The New York Times*, 13 May 2016, accessed 10 March 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/sports/basketball/wnba-opens-its-20th-season-recall-los-angeles-sparks.html>>

<sup>11</sup> K.C. Johnson. 'How Michael Jordan's Salary Surpassed the NBA Salary Cap in Consecutive Seasons,' *NBC Sports*, 21 April 2020, accessed 10 March 2021, <<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/bulls/how-michael-jordans-salary-surpassed-nba-salary-cap-consecutive-seasons>>



The WNBA started with eight teams: the Los Angeles Sparks, Phoenix Mercury, Sacramento Monarchs, Utah Starzz, Charlotte Sting, Cleveland Rockers, Houston Comets, and New York Liberty. The teams and the league were owned by the NBA, and the NBA used its clout to promote the fledgling league, securing television deals with NBC, ESPN, and Lifetime to televise the games.<sup>12</sup> The WNBA quickly moved to expand, adding eight additional teams between 1998 and 2000.<sup>13</sup> Though the league started on a wave of optimism—and high attendance—once the novelty wore off, the WNBA was forced to reckon with its financial sustainability and consequently, questions surrounding the gendered promotion of the game became even more pressing. In 2002 the WNBA moved to an ownership model that mirrored the NBA, with the NBA selling teams to individual ownership groups. The majority of these groups were associated with NBA teams—for example, the New York Liberty was bought by the New York Knicks—however, the Connecticut Sun became the first team bought by an independent group when the Mohegan Indian Tribe bought the Orlando Miracle and relocated them to Connecticut.<sup>14</sup> This process resulted in two of the expansion teams folding, the Miami Sol and Portland Fire, as a deal could not be made with new owners.<sup>15</sup> The Cleveland Rockers became the first original team to fold in 2003, when owner Gordon Gund announced that it was no longer financially viable to own the team, and the WNBA could not find a new owner.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Stanley T. Wearden and Pamela J. Creedon. "'We Got Next': Images of Women in Television Commercials During the Inaugural WNBA Season.' *Culture, Sport, Society* 5, no. 3 (2002), p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> David Berri. 'The Relative Success Story of the WNBA.' In *Routledge Handbook of the Business of Women's Sport*, edited by Nancy Lough and Andrea N. Geurin, (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 192.

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Goodman. 'A Casino Finds Its Place in the Sun,' *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2003, accessed 8 July 2021, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/2003/06/13/a-casino-finds-its-place-in-the-sun/9b8f8d80-71e7-4868-9e05-c7c13ef6bf45/>>

<sup>15</sup> Darren Rovell. 'Stern Insists Women's League Will Go On,' *ESPN.com*, 27 October 2003, accessed 8 July 2021, <<http://www.espn.com/wnba/news/2003/1027/1648314.html>>

Kerry Eggers. 'Blazers Put Out the Fire; Local Bidder Dismayed,' *Portland Tribune*, 30 January 2003, accessed 8 July 2021, <<https://pamplinmedia.com/pt/12-sports/118295-blazers-put-out-the-fire-local-bidder-dismayed>>

<sup>16</sup> Rovell, 'Stern Insists Women's League Will Go On.'

This was a period of expansion and contraction, with new teams added in Chicago, Seattle and Atlanta, while the collapse of the Charlotte Sting sparked worry about the sustainability of the league.<sup>17</sup> In 2008 the WNBA suffered its biggest blow yet with the collapse of its first dynasty, the Houston Comets.<sup>18</sup> The trio of Cynthia Cooper, Sheryl Swoopes, and Tina Thompson, had led the Comets to win the first four WNBA championships, an achievement that has not been repeated, and they became the first female championship team to be invited to visit the White House.<sup>19</sup> However, by 2008 Tina Thompson was the only star left and attendance had halved from nearly 14,000 in 1998 to just 6,585 a game. The collapse of the team led *Houston Chronicle* writer Jerome Solomon to wonder ‘what is in store for the rest of the league if a franchise with the Comets’ history — in a huge market that has displayed as much interest in women’s basketball as Houston did that long ago — can’t survive.’<sup>20</sup> The folding of the Sacramento Monarchs the following year seemed to reinforce this pessimistic outlook. However, despite some close calls, including the near collapse of the Los Angeles Sparks in 2014, and some teams moving, the WNBA has survived.<sup>21</sup> Currently, there are twelve WNBA teams: the Los Angeles Sparks, New York Liberty, Phoenix Mercury, Seattle Storm, Connecticut Sun, Chicago Sky, Indiana Fever, Dallas Wings, Atlanta Dream, Las Vegas Aces, Minnesota Lynx, and Washington Mystics.

On 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, members of the Atlanta Dream entered the arena in Bradenton, Florida wearing T-shirts that all said the same thing: Vote Warnock. The Dream’s co-

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<sup>17</sup> Jon Lewis. ‘Sting Stung, WNBA Dying,’ *Sports Media Watch*, January 2007, accessed 16 March 2021, <<https://www.sportsmediawatch.com/2007/01/sting-stung-wnba-dying/>>

<sup>18</sup> Rhiannon Walker. ‘Houston Comets, The Rise and Fall of the WNBA’s First Dynasty,’ *The Undefeated*, 18 October 2016, accessed 16 March 2021, <<https://theundefeated.com/features/houstons-comets-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-wnbas-first-dynasty/>>

<sup>19</sup> Walker, ‘Houston Comets, The Rise and Fall of the WNBA’s First Dynasty.’

<sup>20</sup> Jerome Solomon. ‘Solomon: Memories All That’s Left of Comets,’ *Houston Chronicle*, 5 December 2008, accessed 16 March 2021, <<https://www.chron.com/sports/article/Solomon-Memories-all-that-s-left-of-Comets-1752341.php>>

<sup>21</sup> Joseph D’Hippolito. ‘Magic Johnson Steps In To Rescue Los Angeles Sparks,’ *The New York Times*, 5 February 2014, accessed 16 March 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/06/sports/basketball/magic-johnson-steps-in-to-rescue-los-angeles-sparks.html>>

owner, and Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler, had been critical of the Black Lives Matter movement and condemned racial justice protests by players on her own team. Faced with a barrage of attention surrounding Loeffler, WNBA players decided to change the emphasis of the conversation, meticulously planning a protest that announced their support for Loeffler's opponent, Reverend Raphael Warnock. Warnock said the actions were a 'turning point' in his successful campaign, and WNBA players began to receive some much overdue credit for their long-time leadership in the fight for racial justice among sportspeople. WNBA stars Sue Bird and Nneka Ogumike argue that the WNBA is inherently political, 'because, by simply existing in spaces that weren't built for us, women athletes are doing something revolutionary.'<sup>22</sup> Certainly, WNBA players have consistently fought to carve out a place in the American professional sporting landscape. However, the current mode of activism by WNBA players is a significant departure from the early days of the league, when simply ensuring the WNBA's survival was paramount and players were largely unwilling to challenge norms of femininity lest they jeopardise the league's success.

The 2021 season is the WNBA's 25th season, making it easily the longest running U.S. women's professional league of any team sport. Yet to some, the image of the WNBA is a league on the precipice of collapse, with subpar play and dismal ratings. As recently as 2015, NBA commissioner Adam Silver questioned the WNBA's success, saying 'we thought we would have broken through by now...we thought ratings and attendance would be higher.'<sup>23</sup> Certainly, attendance has never again reached the heights it did during the league's second season. Yet in the place of this unsustainable beginning, is a stable, growing league, and in the time since Silver's comments, there has been a new wave of optimism as to where the WNBA could go from here, particularly as its players are increasingly recognised as leaders in a variety of social justice movements. Though questions still circulate about the best way to grow the league, no longer is the WNBA as

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<sup>22</sup> Nneka Ogumike and Sue Bird. 'WNBA Players Nneka Ogumike and Sue Bird: This Moment is So Much Bigger Than Sports. We Need Your Support,' *Phenomenal Media*, 27 July 2020, accessed 3 August 2020,

<<https://www.phenomenalmedia.org/articles/wnba-op-ed>>

<sup>23</sup> Mechelle Voepel. 'An Open Letter to NBA Commissioner Adam Silver,' *ESPN.com*, 19 September 2015, accessed 16 March 2021,

<[http://espn.go.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/13687490/an-open-letter-nba-commissioner-adam-silver](http://espn.go.com/wnba/story/_/id/13687490/an-open-letter-nba-commissioner-adam-silver)>

tightly wedded to the promotion of traditional conceptions of femininity. Furthermore, its players have worked diligently to ensure that the WNBA is a highly professional league worthy of their talents. How did the WNBA go from a league that believed it needed to promote its players as feminine role models, to a leader for progressive causes whose players have garnered significant attention as champions of racial justice? How has the way the players perceive themselves changed and consequently how have their demands for change and respect grown? In sum, what does it mean for women to play basketball in the professional yet beleaguered WNBA?

In this thesis, I argue that most of this positive change in the WNBA is a direct result of the players' refusal to just be grateful that a women's league exists, and their consequent demands for the league to improve. When the league first started, players may have been willing to endure substandard conditions and wages while playing up their femininity for marketing purposes to ensure the league's survival. However, the longevity of the WNBA means that today's players have grown up in an environment where the WNBA has always existed, and they are no longer willing to accept a league that is just happy to be here. Instead, they demand better conditions, higher wages, and authentic marketing—in short, they demand the investment in the league necessary for it to thrive.

### **Field Work**

To gain an understanding of the WNBA experience, I decided to conduct ethnographic research with a WNBA team. Ethnographic research, which includes participant observation and interviews, is valuable in providing an insight into the social dynamics of the team and finding what cultural values that team members attribute to their situation and the WNBA as a whole.<sup>24</sup> I approached a variety of teams, as well as the WNBA head office and the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA), about spending time with them to conduct ethnographic research. Ethnographies of

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<sup>24</sup> Becky Beal. 'Feminist Ethnographies in Sport and Leisure.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 229.

sporting organisations and teams are relatively rare, as gaining access is notoriously difficult.<sup>25</sup> This difficulty is magnified for professional teams, as the financial risks make them resistant to 'exposing themselves to any investigation that runs even a slight risk of damaging purely instrumental organizational goals.'<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the nature of a sporting team makes them insular and secretive, unwilling to sacrifice any competitive advantage, hence outsiders are mistrusted and access is hard to gain.<sup>27</sup> This certainly reflected my own experience in trying to gain access, as my overtures were largely ignored. This is a common theme for the WNBA, who despite needing media attention, seems resistant to providing access to media or others outside of major corporations.

Though my independent requests were ignored, as a member of the Australian Gliders wheelchair basketball team, I was able to use my contacts at Basketball Australia to give me some access. They were willing to vouch for me and stress my own status as an elite athlete who would have some understanding of the dynamics of a team. I managed to get a contact within one WNBA team, who after some deliberation agreed for me to conduct ethnographic research with them. I will pseudonymously be calling this team the Ravens. So, in 2019 I embarked on a research trip to the home of the Ravens. I attended games, practices, and film sessions with the team, and had conversations with players and coaches about their experiences in the WNBA. I attended both home games, that is, in their home arena, and away games in Dallas, Texas, where they played against the Dallas Wings. Additionally, I attended the 2019 All-Star Game in Las Vegas, where the best players in the league, including members of the Ravens, played in an exhibition game designed to celebrate the WNBA.

Although I had very fruitful discussions with players and coaches, it is worth noting that the team remained cautious about giving me full access, and some activities, such as pre-game meetings, were kept team-only, further highlighting the difficulties in

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<sup>25</sup> Carrie Dunn and John Hughson. 'Ethnography in Sport-Related Research: Influences, Continuities, Possibilities.' In *Ethnographies in Sport and Exercise Research*, edited by Gyozo Molnar and Laura G. Purdy, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Dunn and Hughson, 'Ethnography in Sport-Related Research: Influences, Continuities, Possibilities,' p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> John Harris. 'The Marginal Place of Ethnographic Research in Sport Management.' In *Ethnographies in Sport and Exercise Research*, edited by Gyozo Molnar and Laura G. Purdy, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 204.

conducting ethnographic research among sports teams. Sporting ethnographies are often conducted by researchers joining a particular team and participating in the sport, thus gaining a deeper level of access.<sup>28</sup> However, this is made much more difficult in professional sports, as most researchers do not have the physical capability to participate; certainly, even without my disability, I would be unable to keep up with WNBA players. The only option in this circumstance is to embody an observer role. Moreover, professional teams such as the Ravens do not actually spend that much time together as a team, with the somewhat limited commitments of training and games, which perhaps distinguishes this ethnography from others in terms of time spent actually with the team; Susan Brownwell's ethnography of a Chinese track team, for example, involved attending a two-and-a-half month long training camp, in which every day was scheduled with activities that the whole team attended.<sup>29</sup> It is worth pointing out that while there have been significant ethnographic studies of women's sporting teams, including professional teams, the WNBA is the longest-running, most highly funded, and most strongly backed women's professional sporting league in the United States, with the highest aspirations for what it means to succeed. Consequently, the stakes of allowing an independent researcher into the team environment are perceived as higher by the team.

The compressed nature of the WNBA season, which takes place over just a few months, as well as the difficulty in gaining access, made this a relatively short ethnography, which, Jeffrey and Troman argue, makes this a 'portrayal of a snapshot in time of a particular site or event.'<sup>30</sup> As Pink and Morgan argue, however, this is not necessarily a negative born simply from necessity, but rather an 'alternative way of knowing,' in which I, as the ethnographer, had to engage with and ask questions of the players almost immediately, implicating myself 'at the centre of the action.'<sup>31</sup> This ethnography

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<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Giardina and Michele K. Donnelly. 'Introduction: Physical Culture, Ethnography, and the Body.' In *Physical Culture, Ethnography and the Body: Theory, Method and Praxis*, edited by Michael D. Giardina and Michele K. Donnelly, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Brownell. 'Sport Ethnography: A Personal Account.' In *The Sage Handbook of Fieldwork*, edited by Dick Hobbs and Richard Wright, (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 249.

<sup>30</sup> Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman. 'Time for Ethnography.' *British Educational Research Journal* 30, no. 4 (2004), pp. 539-540.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan. 'Short-Term Ethnography: Intense Routes to Knowing.'

thus provides a useful 'snapshot' of a WNBA team in the 2019 season, as well as Ravens players' feelings at that time.

However, I do not rely entirely on my ethnographic research in this thesis, instead engaging with a variety of sources, including news articles, advertising and commercials, and most prominently, the players own construction of their mediated self, particularly through the use of sporting autobiographies and other autobiographical texts. Sporting autobiographies are one of the most dominant forms of literature on sport in popular culture, however, they have largely not been taken seriously by academic researchers.<sup>32</sup> While the study of autobiographies has blossomed in other disciplines, this has not been the case in sports studies, and particularly not in regards to women's autobiographical work.<sup>33</sup> Denigrated as "jockographies," they have been criticised as being overly commercial, driven by self-promotion, formulaic, and often ghost-written.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the popularity of these autobiographies by athletes suggests that they are an important mechanism through which sportspeople construct and shape their image, and are useful in analysing the meaning that athletes ascribe to their own experiences.<sup>35</sup> While they should certainly not be viewed as an unmediated reality, they are a social product where 'the kind of "truth" revealed in autobiographies about experiences is an enacted truth. It is a sketch viewed through a window that is well worth looking at for what we can learn from it.'<sup>36</sup> Additionally, while many "jockographies" are ghost-written, or co-written, the athlete in question 'assumes responsibility and symbolic control' of the text, and hence the autobiography remains a

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*Symbolic Interaction* 36, no. 3 (2013), p. 359, 355.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew C. Sparks and Carly Stewart. 'Taking Sporting Autobiographies Seriously as an Analytical and Pedagogical Resource in Sport, Exercise and Health.' *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 8, no. 2 (2016), p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Carly Stewart. 'Utilizing Sporting Autobiographies for Feminist Research: The Case of Cyclist Nicole Cooke.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 294.

<sup>34</sup> Sparks and Stewart, 'Taking Sporting Autobiographies Seriously as an Analytical and Pedagogical Resource in Sport, Exercise and Health,' p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Sparks and Stewart, 'Taking Sporting Autobiographies Seriously as an Analytical and Pedagogical Resource in Sport, Exercise and Health,' p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Sparks and Stewart, 'Taking Sporting Autobiographies Seriously as an Analytical and Pedagogical Resource in Sport, Exercise and Health,' p. 120.

salient ground for the work of self-construction, as well as shaping the readers' understanding of the cultural framework of sport.<sup>37</sup>

The recent promotion of sporting autobiographies as an analytical resource by scholars such as Sparks, Stewart, Watson, and Taylor, has resulted in an increase in this type of analysis, however this has largely not extended to female athletes.<sup>38</sup> This is disappointing, as autobiographies are a method through which female athletes can represent their own experience and construct their own version of womanhood, bypassing a sports media that has consistently minimised women's sporting participation.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, feminist work has often relied on autobiography and women's life writing as 'dynamic sites for the performance of identities that become constitutive of subjectivity,'<sup>40</sup> and extending this analysis to sport provides interesting opportunities to examine how women renegotiate or conform to existing gender and racial discourses.<sup>41</sup> By examining the autobiographical work of WNBA players, I show how they use the literary form to construct their subjectivity and grapple with their position on the outside of the dominant sporting culture. Supporting Smith and Watson's notion that autobiography can take many forms, I include not only published autobiographical books, but also first-person Internet pieces on websites such as *The Players' Tribune*.<sup>42</sup> Founded by former baseball star Derek Jeter, *The Players' Tribune* was designed to provide 'athletes with a platform to connect directly with their fans, in their own words.'<sup>43</sup> The opportunity websites such as *The Players' Tribune* offer to enable athletes to communicate directly to fans without mediation through journalists

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew Taylor. 'From Source to Subject: Sport, History, and Autobiography.' *Journal of Sport History* 35, no. 3 (2008), p. 478.

<sup>38</sup> Stewart, 'Utilizing Sporting Autobiographies for Feminist Research: The Case of Cyclist Nicole Cooke,' p. 294.

<sup>39</sup> Dawn Heinecken. 'Gender and Jockography: Post-Feminism and Resistance in Female Sports Autobiographies.' *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016), p. 236.

<sup>40</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2010), quoted in Stewart, 'Utilizing Sporting Autobiographies for Feminist Research: The Case of Cyclist Nicole Cooke,' p. 294

<sup>41</sup> Heinecken, 'Gender and Jockography: Post-Feminism and Resistance in Female Sports Autobiographies,' p. 326.

<sup>42</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> The Players' Tribune. 'About,' *The Players' Tribune*, 19 March 2018, accessed 9 September 2021, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/about>>



is beneficial for female athletes, as the barriers to publishing are lower without needing to convince a publishing house of the book's viability. Indeed, before *The Players' Tribune*, both Chamique Holdsclaw and Shannon Bobbitt resorted to self-publishing their autobiographies.<sup>44</sup> In addition, these Internet works have the same features as a traditional autobiography in terms of allowing an athlete to construct and mediate their own identity.<sup>45</sup>

When doing any research, and particularly when doing ethnography, it is essential to recognise that the researcher brings their own experiences and history into the field, which becomes entangled within the research assemblage, affecting the interactions between researcher and subjects.<sup>46</sup> The researcher is always on some level speaking for others, mediating and interpreting their subject, thus it is important to think reflexively about our own subjectivity, interrogating our own speaking location and how that may impact our research.<sup>47</sup> As a white, Australian woman coming into a team with a majority of Black players, from a variety of different national backgrounds, it was important for me to continually interrogate my own standpoint and how that may impact my research. I was particularly aware that players may not feel comfortable talking to me about certain issues. This was another reason as to why I felt that including the players own voices and autobiographic writing was imperative, as it provided an opportunity to bring players own voices to light, without the mediating power of my questions. Hargreaves argues for the value of this form of academic sports feminism, as 'if individuals and groups of women can tell their stories, bring to light problems and constraints, get their voices heard, then there is a chance, however small, for change.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chamique Holdsclaw. *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*. (Atlanta: Chamique Holdsclaw LLC, 2012).

Shannon Bobbitt. *Bobbitt: 5'2" Giant Handling the Odds*. (Middletown: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> David Schwartz and Travis Vogan. 'The Players' Tribune: Self-Branding and Boundary Work in Digital Sports Media.' *Journal of Sports Media* 12, no. 1 (2017), p. 47.

<sup>46</sup> Brownell, 'Sport Ethnography: A Personal Account,' p. 244.

<sup>47</sup> Linda Alcoff. 'The Problem of Speaking For Others.' *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991-92).

Beal, 'Feminist Ethnographies in Sport and Leisure,' p. 236.

<sup>48</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves. 'Hidden Identities and Personal Stories: International Research about Women in Sport.' In *The Sage Handbook of Fieldwork*, edited by Dick Hobbs and Richard Wright, (London: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 257.

It is also worth noting that although a researcher can be in a position of power, particularly if other privileges are involved, as professional athletes with a relatively high level of sway within their team, WNBA players had a significant amount of power that reshuffled the more traditional researcher-subject power dynamic. Moreover, while my positionality as an athlete gave me access, as a disabled athlete with an invisible disability, players were largely unfamiliar with wheelchair basketball as an elite sport, thus perhaps did not relate to me on the level of an athlete. As Olive argues 'subjectivities are already always in relation with other subjectivities, spaces and cultures,'<sup>49</sup> and this includes both the researcher and the subject. Having said all this, I work to deliberately foreground the players' voices and perspectives throughout this thesis, ensuring that the players' essential role in the development of the WNBA is clear.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter One analyses the various theorists and debates in the development of sports feminism, offering a theoretical underpinning for my work. It traces the history of scholarly work on women's sport, demonstrating the way in which it has moved from an analysis of male hegemony in sport, to considering the importance of embodiment, corporeality, intersectionality, and the possibilities for female empowerment in the sporting space. I argue for the value of sports feminism as a conceptual approach that considers a variety of feminist perspectives.

Chapter Two provides a brief history of women's basketball in the United States, revealing how women came to play basketball, the adapted rules that were put in place for women, and the way that the game varied across race and geographic location. It examines how basketball went from a sport largely considered a women's game, though an adapted version, to a sport firmly coded as male. It tracks how female physical educators eventually lost control of women's basketball to men, and how this has impacted the game today. This chapter works to historicise the discourses of gender,

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<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Olive. 'Un/Intentional Pedagogies: Impacts of Feminist Ethics and Methods in Practice.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 344.

race, and sexuality that structure the WNBA, as well as provide a historical underpinning for the processes of embodiment within women's basketball. These first two chapters serve as a conceptual framework for the rest of the thesis and my analysis of the WNBA.

Chapter Three examines the early years of the WNBA, from its inception in 1997 until 2013. In this chapter, I argue that the WNBA made the decision right from the beginning to market the players as feminine, respectable, heterosexual women, who provided a limited challenge to the male dominance of sport, with little recognition that the players were majority Black. Drawing on players' own perspectives, as well as marketing material from the time, I examine the intersecting forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion to demonstrate the complicated way that WNBA players engaged with the gendered discourses that structured the league, both arguing for the promotion of femininity and recognising the difficult dynamics at play. This chapter contends that this emphasis on femininity only increased as the stability of the league was drawn into question. However, at the same time, players ambivalence towards this became more prominent.

Chapter Four starts from what I argue is a turning point in the WNBA's history: the 2013 draft, which included the "3 to See," Brittney Griner, Elena Delle Donne, and Skylar Diggins-Smith. Griner, in particular, forced the WNBA to become more willing to embrace LGBT players and fans, as well as move away from its focus on traditionally feminine players. This chapter tracks the rocky process of the WNBA as it moved towards embracing alternative conceptions of female athleticism and became more willing to confront racial issues. They have reframed what it means to be feminine, destabilising the link between femininity and heterosexuality, while simultaneously providing space for female masculinity. I argue that the progress the WNBA has made on these issues is a result of the players' willingness to continue to push the league to better reflect the positionality of its playing group.

Chapter Five examines what it means to play basketball "like a woman." Though it is commonly accepted, both by the general public and WNBA players, that women basketball players have a different form of embodiment and way of playing the game

compared to men, WNBA players have a complicated and contradictory relationship with this notion. Drawing on the work of Iris Marion Young, I argue that WNBA players, despite being at the pinnacle of their craft, continue to be constrained by gendered discourses that limit their embodied possibilities. This chapter utilises both the practice and discourse of the dunk to argue for the continued relevance of Young's work and the continued restrictions put in place that prevent women from engaging in certain embodied practices.

Chapter Six questions what it means that the WNBA is a professional league, yet one that does not operate with the same resources as equivalent male leagues. WNBA players operate with a professional mindset that is often quite a shock to rookie players. However, though the WNBA has tried to mirror the professionalism of the NBA, it often falls significantly short, particularly in terms of the quality of training and facilities, accommodation, and travel, thus resulting in a situation with some of the trappings of professionalism, but limited benefits. I argue that WNBA players now expect a certain level of professionalism that the WNBA often does not live up to, and they have continually pushed the league to ensure that they are up to a standard appropriate for the best players in the world. Furthermore, this chapter contends that to make a living, players often need to play overseas in the off-season, as the inability of the WNBA to provide a year-round, sufficient income, means players need to subject themselves to unpredictable conditions, that can often have knock-on effects for the WNBA.

Chapter Seven highlights the role of the labour movement and the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) in securing a transformative new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) in 2020. I argue that the WNBPA cleverly positioned themselves to receive a big pay rise by arguing that the league needed to 'Bet on Women,' as WNBA players refused to go along with the narrative that they deserved low pay and that they should be grateful to even have a league. I contend that while there is an enormous amount of labour that players must undertake to grow the league, they are determined to grow the WNBA for the future. This chapter concludes by examining some of the misogynistic responses to the WNBA that may provide a barrier to its growth, arguing that these responses are part of a larger mobilisation of misogyny

that includes a lack of investment in women's sport and the difficulty in landing on a marketing strategy, which has been explored throughout this thesis.

My thesis concludes by examining where the league has gone in the time since my ethnography, particularly looking at the 2020 Covid-19 affected season, in which WNBA players finally began to receive some credit for their activist work and their support for Black Lives Matter. I argue that it is possible that this offers a new future for the WNBA, where its success is not solely dependent on traditional factors like revenue and attendance, but how the players are affecting society at large, which in turn will help improve those traditional factors. I contend that the renewed optimism surrounding the WNBA is largely a result of the continuing demands by the players for better—better facilities, better pay, better marketing, a better, more professional league. It is the players that have made the WNBA the league it is today.

A note on style: All members of the Ravens will be referred to by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All other players that have made public comments, appeared in advertising and public games, or published autobiographical work will be referred to by name. The first time each player is named, their years playing in the league follow in parenthesis to ensure clarity of the timeline.

## **Chapter One: Sports Feminism**

The theoretical underpinning of my examination of the WNBA draws on a long tradition of sports feminists who worked to ensure the role of women in sport was not overlooked, developing a feminist understanding of the marginalisation of women in the sporting field. This chapter examines the work of sports feminists since the 1970s, outlining the changes over time and building towards a coherent conception of sports feminism that I will utilise in this thesis. Beginning in the 1960s, scholarly interest in sport within the humanities has opened up new avenues for research, establishing the important implications of sport for broader society.<sup>1</sup> However, initial studies of sport focused almost exclusively on men, and female athletes were not considered.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, many feminists ignored sport, viewing it as a male activity without scholarly value.<sup>3</sup> Sports feminism began to develop in the 1970s, as scholars such as Jan Felshin, Susan Greendorfer, and Marie Hart began to research women in the sporting field, criticising the “malestream” of traditional sports sociology.<sup>4</sup> In the decades since, sports feminism—or as Jayne Caudwell argues it should be labelled “sports feminisms”—has established itself as an important area of study within critical sports studies, challenging the male dominance of sport from an explicitly feminist lens.<sup>5</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Theberge. ‘Reflections on the Body in the Sociology of Sport.’ *Quest* 43, no. 2 (1991), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> M. Ann Hall. *Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice*. (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Lois Bryson. ‘Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony.’ In *Women, Sport and Culture*, edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole. (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Pirkko Markula. ‘Introduction.’ In *Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experience of Joy and Pain*, edited by Pirkko Markula, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 3.

Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff. ‘Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport.’ In *A Companion to Sport*, edited by David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), p. 96.

Jan Felshin. ‘The Triple Option...For Women in Sport.’ *Quest* 21, no. 1 (1974).

Susan L. Greendorfer. ‘Role of Socializing Agents in Female Sport Involvement.’ *Research Quarterly. American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Recreation* 48, no. 2 (1977).

M. Marie Hart, ed. *Sport in the Socio-Cultural Process*. (Dubuque: W.C. Brown Co., 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Jayne Caudwell. ‘Sport Feminism(s): Narratives of Linearity?’ *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 35, no. 2 (2011), p. 111.

feminist sports studies encompasses many sub-disciplines, including literature, history, psychology, physical education, and sociology, it is within the fields of sports history and sports sociology that the most sophisticated analysis of the position of women in sport has emerged.<sup>6</sup> Within these fields, sports feminism has become increasingly varied and complex, drawing from different conceptual frameworks and borrowing from various theoretical approaches.<sup>7</sup>

Early feminist inquiries into sport largely lacked theoretical grounding, focusing mostly on distributive research, or employing a psychological focus on role conflict. As early researcher M. Ann Hall argues, 'any understanding that sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined to serve the interests and needs of powerful groups in society was clearly missing.'<sup>8</sup> Early activism was decidedly liberal in nature, pushing for equality between men and women, and disregarding a deeper analysis of the patriarchal nature of sport.<sup>9</sup> It was not until the mid-1980s that feminist theory began to be applied to sport in a rigorous manner, recognising the significance of sport in the construction and re-creation of gendered power relations.<sup>10</sup> Much of the early work was historical, as authors such as Susan Cahn, Helen Lenskyj, Adrienne Blue, and Patricia Vertinsky tracked the way in which gender and sexuality were constructed in sport throughout the twentieth-century.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, sports sociologists such as Susan Birrell, Nancy Theberge, and Jennifer Hargreaves theorised about the hegemonic power relations that persist in sport.<sup>12</sup> There was

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<sup>6</sup> Markula, 'Introduction,' p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves. 'Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?' In *Sport and Modern Social Theorists*, edited by Richard Giulianotti, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Markula, 'Introduction,' p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Susan K. Cahn. *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*. (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

Helen Lenskyj. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986).

Adrienne Blue. *Grace Under Pressure: The Emergence of Women in Sport*. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987).

Patricia A. Vertinsky. 'Gender Relations, Women's History and Sport History: A Decade of Changing Enquiry, 1983-1993.' *Journal of Sport History* 21, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>12</sup> Markula, 'Introduction,' p. 3.

certainly some overlap between these fields, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of sports feminism, and the importance of historical analysis in providing the basis for the current conception of women in sport.

Early sociological studies of women in sport focused on how male hegemony was constructed and reaffirmed by sport and how female athletes responded to perceived threats to their femininity. In 1972, Title IX was put into effect, a law that prevented gender discrimination or exclusion from education programs in federally funded schools and universities. As a result, there was a massive increase in the number of women able to participate in sport. For instance, the ratio of boys to girls in high school sports shrunk from 3,666,917 to 294,015 in 1971, to 3,921,069 to 2,784,154 in 2000-01.<sup>13</sup> While sport continues to remain a masculine space, the massive entrance of women into the sporting field destabilised this and the female athlete is now 'contested ideological terrain.'<sup>14</sup> As sociologist Nancy Theberge contends, 'the contemporary era is marked by ambiguities and contradictions in the cultural meanings and implications of women's athleticism.'<sup>15</sup> However, men's sport, and in particular the "centre of sport," is still a place of men's dominance, albeit no longer unquestioned.<sup>16</sup> This centre—in the United States comprising the "Big Four" sports—includes those sports characterised by being the 'most highly celebrated, rewarded and institutionalised bodily practices that are defined largely by physical power, aggression and violence.'<sup>17</sup> It is when women encroach on the male sporting space that the backlash is most aggressive. Conversely, the female sports that become most popular are those in which femininity is emphasised, particularly individual sports that white, upper-class women have traditionally dominated, such as gymnastics, swimming, ice-skating, and tennis. However, these sports are often simultaneously sexualised and infantilised, decried as not being "real sports" and not gaining the respect of the sporting culture.<sup>18</sup> By denigrating these sports, male sporting fans act to reify the ideology of male sporting

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<sup>13</sup> Michael A. Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Theberge. 'Gender and Sport.' In *Handbook of Sports Studies*, edited by Jay Coakley and Eric Dunning. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), p. 226.

<sup>16</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. xviii.

<sup>17</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. xvii.

<sup>18</sup> Bryson, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony,' p. 49.



superiority; women are better at sports such as gymnastics and long-distance swimming, but by ignoring these sports in favour of contact sports such as football, they reaffirm the “performance gap” between male and female athletes and reassert male hegemony.<sup>19</sup> This propagation of the performance gap is significant as it constructs the differences between men and women as being “natural” and immutable, a position that is becoming less tenable in other areas of life;<sup>20</sup> as Reynaud suggests, ‘the ABC of any patriarchal ideology is precisely to present that division [between the sexes] as being of biological, natural, or divine essence.’<sup>21</sup> The qualities of force and domination continue to be constructed as masculine, and the supremacy of men retains its ideological underpinning.

Women who play sports that challenge the masculine terrain are either classed as physically inferior to men or as masculinised by sport.<sup>22</sup> To combat this fear of masculinisation, women often attempt to reaffirm their femininity. Creedon argued ‘if she wishes to be accepted in contemporary American culture, a strong, self-sufficient, even muscular Artemis archetype must make offerings to the beauty myth.’<sup>23</sup> Jan Felshin first noticed the trend, labelling it “apologetic behaviour.”<sup>24</sup> Although the concept of the female apologetic has been challenged as lacking nuance by scholars such as Broad,<sup>25</sup> women who play sport often continue to display what Connell labels “emphasised femininity,”<sup>26</sup> or what modern scholars might term ‘doing gender in hyper-

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<sup>19</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> Sohaila Shakib and Michele D. Dunbar. ‘The Social Construction of Female and Male High School Basketball Participation: Reproducing the Gender Order through a Two-Tiered Sporting Institution.’ *Sociological Perspectives* 45, no. 4 (2002), p. 355.

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Reynaud, *Holy Virility: The Social Construction of Masculinity* (1983) quoted in Michael A. Messner, ‘Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain.’ In *Women, Sport and Culture*, edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, 65-80. (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), p. 67

<sup>22</sup> Mary Jo Festle. *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women’s Sports*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 265.

<sup>23</sup> Pamela J. Creedon, ‘From the Feminine Mystique to the Female Physique: Uncovering the Archetype of Artemis in Sport.’ In *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, edited by Pamela J. Creedon, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 1994), p. 280.

<sup>24</sup> Felshin, ‘The Triple Option...For Women in Sport,’ p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> K. L. Broad. ‘The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Resistance in Women’s Sport.’ *Sociology of Sport Journal* 18, no. 2 (2001), p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. 17.

feminine ways.<sup>27</sup> While displaying feminine behaviour may allow for greater acceptance of female athletes, it defuses the transgressive act of sport and reaffirms male dominance.<sup>28</sup> However, despite this resistance, Dworkin and Messner argue:

By fighting for access to participation in sport and fitness, women have created an empowering arena where the meaning of gender is being contested and renegotiated, and where active rejections of dominant notions of femininity may be forged.<sup>29</sup>

As Pat Griffin has argued, this focus on femininity in sport is really a code word for heterosexuality.<sup>30</sup> By the 1930s, the association between lesbianism and female sport was ingrained within broader American culture, and this was only exacerbated by the conservatism of the 1950s, as women moved away from competitive sport towards more acceptable feminine activities such as cheerleading.<sup>31</sup> From the beginning of the sports feminist movement, lesbian feminists played a prominent role in recognising the significance of sexuality in the construction of the female athlete.<sup>32</sup> Pat Griffin, in particular, influentially argued that:

As long as women's sports are associated with lesbians and lesbians are stigmatized as sexual and social deviants, the lesbian label serves an important social-control function in sport, ensuring that only men have access to benefits

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<sup>27</sup> Shona M. Thompson. 'A Collection of Fortuitous Encounters.' In *Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experience of Joy and Pain*, edited by Pirkko Markula (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves. *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Shari L. Dworkin and Michael A. Messner. 'Just Do...What? Sport, Bodies, Gender.' In *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, edited by Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Pat Griffin. 'Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport.' In *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, edited by Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 194.

<sup>31</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, p. 202.

<sup>32</sup> Hargreaves, 'Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?' p. 188.

of sport participation and the physical and psychological empowerment available in sport.<sup>33</sup>

Drawing on Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality, lesbian feminists argued that women in sport have repeatedly stressed their heterosexuality and femininity whilst marginalising lesbian athletes.<sup>34</sup> Athletes' use of the "heterosexy" image not only deflects accusations of masculinisation, but also lesbianism.<sup>35</sup> However, as Susan Cahn suggests, despite the cultural pressure of heterosexuality, sport offered lesbian communities an outlet to explore their identities and meet other lesbian athletes. Despite attempts by female athletes to prove otherwise, the notion that sport is a place that attracts lesbians is not a myth.<sup>36</sup> Yet lesbian athletes could only gain access to this world on the condition that they did not flaunt their personal life, and this pact of silence served to reinforce traditional gender norms and the importance of heterosexuality.<sup>37</sup>

While Title IX resulted in a massive increase in female athletic participation, the reverse was true for women's control of college sports. While in 1972 female administrators headed over 90 percent of women's programs, this dropped to 17.4 percent by 2000.<sup>38</sup> This decline has sparked a debate within sports feminism that mirrors the historical battles between physical educators and male promoters that will be discussed further in Chapter Two. Liberal feminists take a reform perspective, arguing that sport is fundamentally positive and that equality within this framework is something that women should strive to achieve.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, radical feminist scholars, such as Jennifer Hargreaves, Pamela Creedon and Susan Birrell, argue for the transformation of sport as an institution.<sup>40</sup> They argue for an explicitly woman-centred vision of sport, which

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<sup>33</sup> Pat Griffin. *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*. (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' p. 98.

<sup>35</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, p. 199.

<sup>37</sup> Griffin, 'Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport,' p. 203.

<sup>38</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> Creedon, 'From the Feminine Mystique to the Female Physique: Uncovering the Archetype of Artemis in Sport,' p. 290.

rejects aggression, competition, commercialism, exploitation, and violence. While they largely label themselves as radical feminists, this approach is aligned with a cultural feminist perspective, articulating a distinctive, “feminine” version of sport, based on seemingly intrinsic qualities such as care, cooperation, and teamwork. Creedon, for example, offers an alternative, asking:

Measures of competitiveness and quality of play assume a male norm, so why not use alternative measures such as fun and enjoyment on the part of the athletes?<sup>41</sup>

Susan Birrell and Diane Richter’s study of local women’s softball leagues offers an oft-cited example of how this might occur, suggesting that feminist teams in the league did not strive for competitiveness and rejected the outsized value place on winning.<sup>42</sup> However, Birrell and Richter’s study ignores women that play sport at a high amateur or professional level and assumes that all women subscribe to this anti-competitive view. What Birrell, Richter, and Creedon all ignore is that for many women competition is valuable, and to discount these women risks limiting the effectiveness of their feminism. As Odgen and Rosen argue:

In spite of the ongoing rhetoric to the contrary, female athletes have long shown themselves to be fiercely competitive, wholly committed, and seeking fame if not fortune by the same drive to excel as exemplified by their fathers and brothers who too sweated and bled and left pieces of themselves scattered on playing fields from which they hailed.<sup>43</sup>

Nancy Theberge remarked on the difficulties this critique of sport has given her as a feminist researcher, wondering whether if she ‘betrayed my attraction for the physical element of [ice hockey],’ she would ‘become a target of concern and on occasion

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<sup>41</sup> Pamela J. Creedon, ‘Women, Media and Sport: Creating and Reflecting Gender Values.’ In *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, edited by Pamela J. Creedon, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 1994), p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Birrell and Diana M. Richter. ‘Is a Diamond Forever? Feminist Transformations of Sport.’ In *Women, Sport and Culture*, edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole. (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), p. 231

<sup>43</sup> David C. Ogden and Joel Nathan Rosen. ‘Introduction: Engaging Contested Terrain.’ In *A Locker Room of Her Own: Celebrity, Sexuality, and Female Athletes*, edited by David C. Ogden and Joel Nathan Rosen, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), p. xx.

criticism.<sup>44</sup> This approach to women in sport is essentialist and risks reifying traditional notions of femininity, tying them to biology.<sup>45</sup> It suggests that aggression, force, and physical domination are intrinsically male, whilst putting the burden to transform sport solely on women.<sup>46</sup>

Of course, in reality the divide between explicitly feminist teams that espoused non-hierarchical, fun environments and teams whose goal was mainly winning was not so stark. Enke highlights how women's teams such as the Soul Sisters and the Avantis effected political change simply by their push to occupy athletic space, despite not having an explicitly feminist agenda.<sup>47</sup> In turn, they influenced explicitly feminist softball teams such as the Wilder Ones, who initially espoused an anti-coach, "we play to have fun" mentality—though even they quickly recognised it was more fun to win.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, radical feminist conceptions of femininity propound on white norms of womanhood; the sports they are most likely to criticise, that is, sports that men play, are also sports that Black and working-class women are more likely to participate in, including, and perhaps especially basketball.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, those that wish to reform women's sports often ignore the voices of actual female athletes. Studies of female ice-hockey players, for example, have found that physicality is one of the more pleasurable aspects of the game.<sup>50</sup> What space, then, does this brand of radical feminism leave for physical sports such as basketball? This question was one that intersectional, poststructuralist, and third-wave feminists attempted to answer, or at least complicate, as sports feminism developed further.

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<sup>44</sup> Nancy Theberge. 'Doing Feminist Ethnography: A Report from the Rink.' In *Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experience of Joy and Pain*, edited by Pirkko Markula, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff. 'Sports Feminism: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Our Understandings of Gender and Sport.' In *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, edited by Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 34.

<sup>46</sup> Dworkin and Messner, 'Just Do...What? Sport, Bodies, Gender,' p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> A. Finn Enke. *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 106, 154

<sup>48</sup> Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>49</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Sports Feminism: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Our Understandings of Gender and Sport,' p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Mariah Burton Nelson, 'Stronger Women.' In *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader*, edited by Jean O'Reilly and Susan K. Cahn, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007), p. 164.

As liberal and cultural feminism grew in prominence it began to be challenged by Black feminists, who recognised the neglect of Black women by the feminist movement, and the need to consider the intersection of different experiences of oppression and how they impact the experience of womanhood.<sup>51</sup> Similarly in sports feminism, scholars have falsely universalised the experiences of white, middle-class, and able-bodied women.<sup>52</sup> In two articles published respectively in 1989 and 1990, Susan Birrell called for greater attention to be given to the experiences of women of colour in sport, contending that most of the previous research was either distributive or categoric, and highlighting the dearth of any nuanced, critical analysis.<sup>53</sup> While other authors, including Alison Dewar, Cheryl Cole, Yevonne Smith, and Michael Messner, supported these calls for greater intersectionality in sports feminism, there has been a modest amount of subsequent work that addresses the experiences of women of colour in sport.<sup>54</sup> As Vertinsky and Captain suggest, this work requires a rethink of the way scholars consider women in sport, as ‘the unique experiences of African American women lack the neat category of theoretical feminist paradigms developed to capture white women's experiences.’<sup>55</sup> Black women’s experiences cannot be examined by considering them as ‘white women

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<sup>51</sup> Gloria T Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1982).

Angela Davis. *Women, Race and Class*, (New York: Random House, 1981).

<sup>52</sup> Alison Dewar. ‘Would All the Generic Women in Sport Please Stand Up? Challenges Facing Feminist Sport Sociology.’ *Quest* 45, no. 2 (1993), p. 212.

<sup>53</sup> Susan Birrell. ‘Racial Relations Theories and Sport: Suggestions for a More Critical Analysis.’ *Sociology of Sport Journal* 6, no. 3 (1989).

Susan Birrell. ‘Women of Color, Critical Autobiography, and Sport.’ In *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order*, edited by Michael A. Messner and Don F. Sabo, (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> Dewar, ‘Would All the Generic Women in Sport Please Stand Up? Challenges Facing Feminist Sport Sociology.’

Cheryl L. Cole. ‘The Politics of Cultural Representation: Visions of Fields/ Fields of Visions.’ *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 26, no. 1 (1991), p. 42.

Michael A. Messner. ‘Men Studying Masculinity: Some Epistemological Issues in Sport Sociology.’ *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7, no. 2 (1990), pp. 145- 146.

Yevonne Smith. ‘Women of Color in Society and Sport.’ *Quest* 44, no. 2 (1992).

Scraton and Flintoff, ‘Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,’ p. 101.

<sup>55</sup> Patricia Vertinsky and Gwendolyn Captain. ‘More Myth Than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black Female's Athletic Ability.’ *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 3 (1998), p. 534.

with colour.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, while some work has been done considering the intersection of race and sport, this has largely focused on sportsmen, and thus women of colour are again neglected.<sup>57</sup>

Much of the research on Black women in sport is historical in nature, an attempt to explore how diverse and long-standing barriers and cultural norms have influenced how Black women experience sport.<sup>58</sup> Black women rarely subscribed to the same restrictive notions of white, middle-class femininity, and embraced a pro-competition attitude.<sup>59</sup> While a white, middle-class “cult of domesticity” had allowed the myth of female frailty to flourish, Black women rarely had the luxury of not working, and hence strength was seen as a positive attribute.<sup>60</sup> As such, scholars such as Marie Hart have argued that Black women never had the same “apologetic” as white women.<sup>61</sup> However, while Black women did embrace competitive sport, particularly basketball and track and field, even throughout the 1930s when white women had retreated to “play days,” they were still influenced by white ideals of femininity. Many Black athletes, particularly college students, conformed to “ladylike” dress and behaviour in order to deflect white America’s accusations of the “mannish” Black woman.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, a positive female sporting tradition did emerge among Black athletes. This often differed depending on

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (1988) quoted in Hargreaves. ‘Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?’ p. 197.

<sup>57</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, ‘Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,’ p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> Vertinsky and Captain, ‘More Myth Than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black Female’s Athletic Ability,’ p. 539.

<sup>59</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport*, p. 118.

<sup>60</sup> Jennifer H. Lansbury. *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014), p. 24.

Barbara Welter. ‘The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.’ *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966).

<sup>61</sup> Messner, ‘Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain,’ p. 71.

Linda D. Williams. ‘Sportswomen in Black and White: Sports History from an Afro-American Perspective.’ In *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, edited by Pamela J. Creedon. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 1994), p. 45.

<sup>62</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 34. Vertinsky and Captain, ‘More Myth Than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black Female’s Athletic Ability,’ p. 545.

class, as working-class women, both Black and white, were less constrained by feminine ideals of weakness.<sup>63</sup>

Work on race, gender and sport has continued to develop within sports feminism, particularly with respect to Muslim women,<sup>64</sup> Indigenous people in Canada,<sup>65</sup> the construction of whiteness,<sup>66</sup> and women's football in the UK.<sup>67</sup> However, as Scraton and Flintoff maintain, 'there is little work that could be defined as offering a Black feminist perspective on sport.'<sup>68</sup> There has been some work regarding the treatment of Black female athletic icons, particularly Venus and Serena Williams.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the concerns of Black feminists in the sporting world must be developed further for sports

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<sup>63</sup> Joan S. Hult. 'Introduction to Part I.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 10.

Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Tansin Benn, Gertrud Pfister and Haifaa Jawad, eds. *Muslim Women and Sport*. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Tess Kay. 'Daughters of Islam: Family Influences on Muslim Young Women's Participation in Sport.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41, no. 3-4 (2006).

Sharon Wray. 'Connecting Ethnicity, Gender and Physicality: Muslim Pakistani Women, Physical Activity and Health.' In *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, edited by Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Victoria Paraschak. 'Variations in Race Relations: Sporting Events for Native Peoples in Canada.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 14, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>66</sup> Caroline Fusco. 'Cultural Landscapes of Purification: Sports Spaces and Discourses of Whiteness.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 22, no. 3 (2005).

Mary G. McDonald. 'Dialogues on Whiteness, Leisure and (Anti)Racism.' *Journal of Leisure Research* 41, no. 1 (2009).

Laura Azzarito. 'The Panopticon of Physical Education: Pretty, Active and Ideally White.' *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 14, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>67</sup> Aarti Ratna. 'A "Fair Game"? British-Asian Females' Experiences of Racism in Women's Football.' In *Women, Football and Europe: Histories, Equity and Experience*, edited by Sheila Scraton, Jonathan Magee, Jayne Caudwell and Katie Liston, (Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport, 2007).

Sheila Scraton, Jayne Caudwell, and Samantha Holland. "'Bend It Like Patel": Centring "Race," Ethnicity and Gender in Feminist Analysis of Women's Football in England.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 40, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>68</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' p. 101.

<sup>69</sup> Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe. 'Venus and Serena Are "Doing It" for Themselves: Theorizing Sporting Celebrity, Class and Black Feminism for the Hip-Hop Generation.' In *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, edited by Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald, (New York: Routledge, 2009).



feminism to remain relevant and inclusive, and to better understand the experiences of women in sport.<sup>70</sup>

In 1993, Cheryl L. Cole recognised a “crisis” within sports studies, namely that the category of sport itself was not a stable ‘object of knowledge,’ but rather ‘a discursive construct that organises multiple practices...that intersect with and produce multiple bodies embedded in normalising technologies.’<sup>71</sup> Cole, along with David Andrews, Nancy Theberge, Genevieve Rail, and Jean Harvey, were among the first to argue for the utility of a post-structuralist approach to the study of sport, which challenged the binary delineation between masculinity and femininity, and focused instead on subjectivities and the contested female sporting body.<sup>72</sup> They recognised the importance of the body as an ideologically powerful force, as its link to the biological suggested a naturalness that erases the labour necessary to construct bodily performance.<sup>73</sup> They thus examined how bodies are interpreted and constructed by gendered discourses and practices in sport. Additionally, there was a push for exercise to be included within sports studies.<sup>74</sup>

In particular, scholars drew on the works of Michel Foucault to explain how power operates within sporting cultures. Foucault critiqued the common perception of power as being visible, top-down, and repressive, instead arguing that power is invisible and

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<sup>70</sup> Kevin Hylton. *"Race" and Sport: Critical Race Theory*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Cheryl L. Cole. ‘Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and the Technologies of the Body.’ *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 17, no. 2 (1993), p. 78.

<sup>72</sup> C.L. Cole, Michael D. Giardina, and David L. Andrews. ‘Michel Foucault: Studies of Power and Sport.’ In *Sport and Modern Social Theorists*, edited by Richard Giulianotti, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 207-208.

David L. Andrews. ‘Desperately Seeking Michel: Foucault’s Genealogy, the Body, and Critical Sport Sociology.’ *Sociology of Sport Journal* 10, no. 2 (1993).

Theberge, ‘Reflections on the Body in the Sociology of Sport.’

Geneviève Rail and Jean Harvey. ‘Body at Work: Michel Foucault and the Sociology of Sport.’ *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 2 (1995).

Sheila Scraton, Kari Fasting, Gertrud Pfister, and Ana Bunuel. ‘It’s Still a Man’s Game?: The Experiences of Top Level European Women Footballers.’ *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 34, no. 2 (1999), p. 100.

<sup>73</sup> Cole, ‘Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and the Technologies of the Body,’ p. 86.

Theberge, ‘Reflections on the Body in the Sociology of Sport,’ p. 125.

<sup>74</sup> Pirkko Markula. ‘Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Sport and Exercise.’ *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 40, no. 4-5 (2015), p. 537.

dispersed among individuals.<sup>75</sup> While Foucault's work did not focus on women's experiences, it has been adapted by scholars such as Susan Bordo and Judith Butler. His work on discipline has been particularly influential within sports feminism in examining how female self-surveillance is implemented through diet and exercise, creating the "docile body."<sup>76</sup> "Technologies of femininity," the strategies and practices that create the feminine body, constantly need to be reinforced through body management.<sup>77</sup> Female athletes conform to Judith Butler's notion of gender as a set of repeated performances that produce a seemingly natural presentation of femininity.<sup>78</sup> Sport is an important locus for this, as a site that has been characterised by legitimated surveillance, whether through drug testing, gender testing, or weight management tests such as skin folds.<sup>79</sup> Pirrko Markula's work on women's experience in aerobics is representative of post-structuralist sports feminism.<sup>80</sup> Markula analysed the competing desires of female aerobicisers, who felt pressure to achieve a toned but not overly muscular body, a body that gives them strength, yet continues to tie them to regulations of beauty. Markula utilises the Foucauldian notion of panoptic power to explain the pressures women feel, in which the power source remains invisible, as the threat of the panoptic gaze forces women to police themselves.<sup>81</sup> However, she argues that this power is not overwhelming, as women question the ridiculousness of these desires, and thus aerobics is not only an oppressive vehicle.<sup>82</sup> Hence, Markula contends that 'instead of classifying women's practices exclusively into resistance or oppression, it is more

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<sup>75</sup> Cole, Giardina, and Andrews. 'Michel Foucault: Studies of Power and Sport,' p. 210.

<sup>76</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' p. 102.

Susan Bordo. *Unbearable Weight*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter*. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>77</sup> Cole, 'Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and the Technologies of the Body,' p. 87.

<sup>78</sup> Barbara Cox and Shona Thompson. 'Multiple Bodies: Sportswomen, Soccer and Sexuality.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 35, no. 1 (2000), p. 17.

Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>79</sup> Cole, 'Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and the Technologies of the Body,' p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> Pirrko Markula. 'Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 4 (1995).

<sup>81</sup> Markula, 'Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,' p. 449.

<sup>82</sup> Markula, 'Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,' p. 450.

fruitful to concentrate on the richness of everyday experiences.’<sup>83</sup> Poststructuralists have conceptualised “technologies of self”, practices that allow for the individual to remake themselves, as a means of resisting these “technologies of power,” and consequently sport can be seen as both a dominating technology and a site of resistance.<sup>84</sup>

Although there has been a renewed focus on corporeality, there have been different perspectives among scholars as to the relative importance of the physical body. While post-structuralists draw attention to the way in which power works upon the body, they have often ignored the materiality of the human body itself, as Foucauldian analysis privileges the inscription of discursive structures onto the human body.<sup>85</sup> This move to downplay the biological is understandable, as the supposed weaknesses of the female body has long been used as a cudgel against women, particularly in sports.<sup>86</sup> However, since the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a move within feminism to bring the material back into analysis of the body, as scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz, Elsbeth Probyn, and Chris Shilling argued for a recentering of the corporeal body and a move away from the value placed on the mind as a distinct entity.<sup>87</sup> This conception of embodiment has been influential within sports feminism, because, as Woodward argues, sport ‘offers a significant site of the intersection between the lived experience of actual bodies and the discursive systems of representation,’ and indeed, the classification and performance of bodies is a key aspect of sport.<sup>88</sup> The body is not a passive recipient of social and cultural forces, but rather is a productive element that

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<sup>83</sup> Markula, ‘Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,’ p. 442.

<sup>84</sup> Pirkko Markula. ‘The Technologies of the Self: Sport, Feminism, and Foucault.’ *Sociology of Sport Journal* 20, no. 2 (2003), p. 88.

<sup>85</sup> Ian Wellard, ‘Gendered Performances in Sport: An Embodied Approach.’ *Palgrave Communications* 2 (2016), p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. x.

<sup>87</sup> Holly Thorpe. ‘Moving Bodies Beyond the Social/Biological Divide: Toward Theoretical and Transdisciplinary Adventures.’ *Sport, Education and Society* 19, no. 5 (2014), p. 667. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, p. vii.

<sup>88</sup> Kath Woodward. *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 4.

influences the possibilities of discursive power.<sup>89</sup> Woodward, while calling for the importance of understanding what it means to be embodied or enfolded, recognises the danger that this could lead to an essentialised conception of the female body.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, scholars such as Grosz and Toril Moi do resort to biological perspectives on what it means to be a woman that excludes transgender people and does not provide an adequate theoretical framework to deal with many of the issues in women's sport surrounding the classification of female athletes as female, and the impossibility of defining this scientifically.<sup>91</sup> However, to counter this difficulty, Woodward and Coffey draw on the Deleuzian concept of assemblages, arguing that the material body and embodied perceptions intersect with discursive representation to produce a body that is then seen as gendered.<sup>92</sup> The body is thus 'construed as material enfolded and disciplined and inscribed.'<sup>93</sup> Coffey points out that this process is not static, but rather is constantly in flux as various forces push and pull to influence what a body 'can and cannot do.'<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Pink contends that we should consider the body 'as part of an ecology of things in progress,' labelling this notion as "emplacement."<sup>95</sup> These scholars draw upon the recent New Materialist turn in feminism, and indeed, the importance of embodiment within sports feminism makes this a good fit. However, as Clare Fischer

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<sup>89</sup> Julia Coffey. 'Creating Distance from Body Issues: Exploring New Materialist Feminist Possibilities for Renegotiating Gendered Embodiment.' *Leisure Sciences* 41, no. 1-2, (2019), p. 75.

Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 32.

<sup>90</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 41.

<sup>91</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, p. 190.

Toril Moi. *What is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 78.

Kathleen Lennon. 'Expressing the World: Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Debates on Nature/Culture.' In *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, edited by Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal, (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018), p. 131.

Delia D. Douglas. 'Some of Us Are Still Brave: Sport and the Social Production of Black Femaleness.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 572.

<sup>92</sup> Coffey, 'Creating Distance from Body Issues: Exploring New Materialist Feminist Possibilities for Renegotiating Gendered Embodiment,' p. 77.

Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 24.

<sup>93</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 186.

<sup>94</sup> Coffey, 'Creating Distance from Body Issues: Exploring New Materialist Feminist Possibilities for Renegotiating Gendered Embodiment,' p. 77.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Pink. 'From Embodiment to Emplacement: Re-thinking Competing Bodies, Senses and Spatialities.' In *Physical Culture, Ethnography and the Body: Theory, Method and Praxis*, edited by Michael D. Giardina and Michele K. Donnelly, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 93.

suggests, this move towards a focus on the material body is not a new phenomenon within sport sociology, as some New Materialists suggest.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps most influential within the sporting embodiment sphere is Iris Marion Young's 1980 essay "Throwing Like a Girl."<sup>97</sup> Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of embodiment, as well as Beauvoir's contention that the female existence is circumscribed by its situation, Young outlined a particular female modality of movement.<sup>98</sup> While Merleau-Ponty was influential in demonstrating the manner in which consciousness is considered embodied, Young argued that he did not consider the role of gender, and the difficulties that women experience in living as unencumbered subjects.<sup>99</sup> Using the example of throwing a ball, Young argues that women fail to use the body's full potential, instead displaying a restricted and discontinuous movement. Expanding this to other forms of physical activity, Young depicts a female bodily comportment in which women's movements are not fluid and instinctive, but rather display a sense of the body as a "thing."<sup>100</sup> Movements are constricted by a competing pull between the desired movement and the underlying self-doubt that 'I cannot,' resulting in a half-hearted, ineffective movement.<sup>101</sup> This modality is not inherent to the female body but is a result of a society that views women as objects and does not encourage them to develop their full capabilities.<sup>102</sup> Chisholm however argues that Young's description of feminine movement no longer holds relevance to women today, who indeed have unprecedented opportunities within the

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<sup>96</sup> Clara Fischer. 'Revisiting Feminist Matters in the Post-Linguistic Turn: John Dewey, New Materialisms, and Contemporary Feminist Thought.' In *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, edited by Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal, (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018), p. 83.

<sup>97</sup> Iris Marion Young. 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality.' *Human Studies* 3, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>98</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 141.

<sup>99</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 141.

<sup>100</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 145.

<sup>101</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 146.

<sup>102</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p.141.

physical culture sphere.<sup>103</sup> Chisholm suggests that Young disregards the way in which women can embody free movement in fields such as rock climbing, and that she takes masculine typified activities as the norm.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Preston contends that Young has created a phenomenology of non-habitual activity, rather than outlining a distinctly feminine embodiment.<sup>105</sup> In a follow-up essay twenty years later, Young admitted that her account was a partial one that did not relate to all women and that it came from a negative point of view.<sup>106</sup> However, this partiality does not prevent the essay from being useful, and it continues to hold relevance for women today, despite the growing opportunities for women in sport.<sup>107</sup> As I will discuss further in Chapter Five, the contradictory modality of women that Young outlines holds relevance even among the most successful professional female basketball players.

While poststructuralist theory has been significant in highlighting the diversity of women's experiences, many feminists argue that its focus on subjectivity and move away from identity categories undermines the possibilities for a tangible political movement.<sup>108</sup> Although sports feminism has always been splintered in nature, Jennifer Hargreaves maintains that at its core it has always had one goal 'to expose, challenge and eliminate gender-based dominant policies and practices.'<sup>109</sup> For Hargreaves, by

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<sup>103</sup> Dianne Chisholm. 'Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology.' *Hypatia* 23, no. 1 (2008), p. 10.

<sup>104</sup> Chisholm, 'Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology,' p. 22.

<sup>105</sup> Beth Preston. 'Merleau-Ponty and Feminine Embodied Existence.' *Man and World* 29, no. 2 (1996), p. 168.

<sup>106</sup> Iris Young, "'Throwing Like a Girl": Twenty Years Later.' In *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, edited by Donn Welton, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 289-290.

<sup>107</sup> Julia Jansen and Maren Wehrle. 'The Normal Body: Female Bodies in Changing Contexts of Normalisation and Optimization.' In *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, edited by Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal, (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018), p. 42.

Gail Weiss. 'The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies.' *Continental Philosophy Review* 28, no. 1 (2015), p. 81.

<sup>108</sup> Lisa Edwards and Carwyn Jones. 'Postmodernism, Queer Theory and Judgment in Sport: Some Critical Reflections.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 44, no. 4 (2009), p. 332.

Celia Brackenridge. 'Time out—Managing Research and Managing Myself.' In *Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experience of Joy and Pain*, edited by Pirkko Markula, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 151.

<sup>109</sup> Hargreaves, 'Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?' p. 187.

destabilising identities such as gender, post-structuralism has fractured the link between theory and praxis and failed to be relevant for women outside academia.<sup>110</sup> Scraton and Flintoff further this critique. They contend that academic poststructuralist and queer theory is often exposed in the context of lived sporting experience. Transgressing normative femininity and heterosexuality often has tangible consequences, in marketing potential, athletic opportunities, and even bodily safety.<sup>111</sup> Markula counters this by pointing to Foucault's critique of the very notion of collective resistance; for Markula, the concept of group agency is a modernist idea that disregards the dispersed and invisible nature of power.<sup>112</sup> Rather, both practices of femininity and transgressive gender behaviour can be liberating 'when embedded in the double act of critical self-stylisation.'<sup>113</sup> Markula offers possibilities for the liberating nature of technologies of the self, however Hargreaves argues that Markula ignores the broader social context and that her individual focus hampers any possibility of change.<sup>114</sup> While poststructuralism has been essential in breaking down the masculine/feminine binary that plagued early sports feminism, and in highlighting the importance of difference between women, it is important that the political nature of sports feminism is not lost, and that theory continues to hold relevance for women practising sport.

A possible middle ground is so-called third-wave feminism, particularly the approach advocated by Leslie Heywood, which incorporates many of the aspects of different forms of feminism; a poststructuralist emphasis on subjectivities and difference is combined with the focus on the power structures that characterised radical feminism, yet the notion of a specific feminine form of sport is rejected.<sup>115</sup> Based on the belief that women can be both pretty and powerful, Heywood argues for culture as a place where the sporting woman can transcend gender boundaries and redefine the meaning of the muscular body.<sup>116</sup> Heywood argues that women who have grown up in the period of

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<sup>110</sup> Hargreaves, 'Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?' p. 190.

<sup>111</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' p. 103.

<sup>112</sup> Markula, 'The Technologies of the Self: Sport, Feminism, and Foucault,' p. 97.

<sup>113</sup> Markula, 'The Technologies of the Self: Sport, Feminism, and Foucault,' p. 103.

<sup>114</sup> Hargreaves, 'Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?' pp. 193-194.

<sup>115</sup> Scraton and Flintoff, 'Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport,' pp. 103-104.

<sup>116</sup> Toni Bruce. 'New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave.' *Sex Roles* 74, no. 7-8 (2016), p. 370.

Title IX and the subsequent commodification of the female athlete no longer feel the same insecurities about their sporting prowess, and rather take their strength for granted without the same gender concerns.<sup>117</sup> They feel no contradiction between displaying feminine attributes and being successful athletes. Sport has redefined what muscular strength means while continuing to embrace beauty culture, combining differing ideals of masculinity and femininity and demonstrating the complexities of women's experiences. Thus, Heywood argues that sport is a type of "stealth feminism."<sup>118</sup> Contradiction is a given, as M. Ann Hall describes:

Strong female athlete images perform negative and affirmative cultural work simultaneously; competitive and participatory models of sport *both* offer a range of possibilities for women (and men); market conditions can be oppressive to some, empowering to others, and offer the potential to do progressive *and* regressive cultural work, sometimes at the same time.<sup>119</sup>

However, this embrace of "pretty and powerful" is limited by its narrow definition of femininity and attractiveness, and can really only apply to a limited number of sports and a particular brand of athlete.<sup>120</sup> Bruce, a key proponent of third-wave feminism, even admits that the popularised image of the female athlete 'reinforces and normalizes Whiteness, heterosexuality, and an exceptionally narrow range of body types as representing "ideal" femininity.'<sup>121</sup> Heywood's work, for instance, is focused on female surfers, a niche culture where the ideal sporting shape happens to align with the toned,

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Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin. *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> Leslie Heywood. 'Third-Wave Feminism, the Global Economy, and Women's Surfing: Sport as Stealth Feminism in Girls' Surf Culture.' In *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, edited by Anita Harris, (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 63.

<sup>118</sup> Bruce, 'New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave,' p. 368.

Heywood, 'Third-Wave Feminism, the Global Economy, and Women's Surfing: Sport as Stealth Feminism in Girls' Surf Culture,' p. 63.

<sup>119</sup> M. Ann Hall. 'From Pre- to Postfeminism: A Four-Decade Journey.' In *Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experience of Joy and Pain*, edited by Pirkko Markula, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 56.

<sup>120</sup> Lindsey J. Meân and Jeffrey W. Kassing. "'I Would Just Like to Be Known as an Athlete": Managing Hegemony, Femininity, and Heterosexuality in Female Sport.' *Western Journal of Communication* 72, no. 2 (2008), p. 129.

<sup>121</sup> Bruce, 'New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave,' p. 372.



lean body that mainstream culture values.<sup>122</sup> Both Heywood and Bruce admit the limitations of third-wave feminism, however largely as an afterthought, and neither have fully grappled with the implications. Additionally, they ignore the way in which femininity is not based solely on beauty and looks, but rather is an entire way of moving and being that is not conducive to being successful in sport.<sup>123</sup> It is also worth pointing out the problematic and messy nature of the waves model, both in sports feminism and feminism more generally. Third-wave feminism is not a clean or major break from the past, and this generational model tends to pit generations of women against each other to establish a false linearity. Indeed, many scholars that do not identify as third-wave feminists display many of the attributes ascribed to third-wave feminism.<sup>124</sup> However, despite third-wave feminisms significant problems, it is noteworthy in that it offers women who love competitive sport a place within sports feminism.

If third-wave sports feminists celebrate individual choice and empowerment, a postfeminist critique examines female sexualisation from a more critical perspective, demonstrating the way in which individual gender performance can sustain problematic gender norms and inequalities.<sup>125</sup> Scholars of postfeminism critique how the broader culture has taken the gains of feminism 'into account,' while simultaneously discounting the need for a current version of feminist politics.<sup>126</sup> Utilising the third-wave language of empowerment, women in the postfeminist culture reclaim and celebrate a more conservative form of femininity and take an individualistic outlook that abandons the collective action of feminism.<sup>127</sup> Class, race, and gender power dynamics and structures are obscured and in its place is a mythology of unimpeded

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<sup>122</sup> Heywood, 'Third-Wave Feminism, the Global Economy, and Women's Surfing: Sport as Stealth Feminism in Girls' Surf Culture.'

<sup>123</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality.'

Theberge, 'Reflections on the Body in the Sociology of Sport,' p. 127.

<sup>124</sup> Hall, 'From Pre- to Postfeminism: A Four-Decade Journey,' p. 56.

Caudwell, 'Sport Feminism(s): Narratives of Linearity?' p. 117.

<sup>125</sup> Holly Thorpe, Kim Toffoletti, and Toni Bruce. 'Sportswomen and Social Media: Bringing Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, and Neoliberal Feminism into Conversation.' *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 41, no. 5 (2017), p. 370.

<sup>126</sup> Angela McRobbie. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>127</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, p. 28.

possibilities for women.<sup>128</sup> Postfeminism is best understood as a sensibility, a way for scholars to analyse how these ideas are circulated, received, and reproduced by women.<sup>129</sup> More recently, there has been a growing trend of young women reembracing a form of “popular feminism.”<sup>130</sup> Yet, while women are more willing to identify as feminists, this form of feminism does not significantly challenge the status quo, and rather pushes for media visibility as its political outcome. Calls for broader structural change and marginalised people that do not meet the standards of a commodifiable body are sidelined.<sup>131</sup> Within the sports feminist field, both postfeminism and popular feminism are useful in providing a way to understand the incorporation of these ideas within sports marketing and the manner in which female athletes present themselves.<sup>132</sup> However, McCann criticises the focus these theories place on the individual’s body as the site in which political change can occur.<sup>133</sup> She argues that ‘the idea that feminine presentation is a sign of oppression inadvertently erases political possibilities, insofar as women who are seen to conform to femininity are often dismissed as not “truly” feminist.’<sup>134</sup> Indeed, while postfeminism and popular feminism are useful ways of analysing the media presence of female athletes, it is worth considering the limits of personal appearance in creating broader political change, as well as recognising the feminist accomplishments of women that present as traditionally feminine.

Hargreaves encapsulates the current position of sports feminism as ‘manifestly

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<sup>128</sup> Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine. ‘Regulating the Abject: The TV Make-over as Site of Neo-Liberal Reinvention toward Bourgeois Femininity.’ *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008), p. 229

<sup>129</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg. ‘Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation.’ *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2019), p. 4.

<sup>130</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 11, 25.

<sup>132</sup> Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce, ‘Sportswomen and Social Media: Bringing Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, and Neoliberal Feminism into Conversation,’ p. 370.

<sup>133</sup> Hannah McCann. *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*. (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>134</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 27.

muddled, complex, and full of contradictions, but certainly not dead!’<sup>135</sup> It is apparent that gaining an understanding of women’s position within the sports space involves considering a multitude of theoretical positions. This thesis builds upon the various ideas put forward by sports feminists, challenging and revealing some of the flaws in different positions, whilst showing the utility of parts of others, and in the process arguing for the value of a feminist understanding of the WNBA.

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<sup>135</sup> Hargreaves, ‘Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?’ p. 202.

## **Chapter Two: A History of Basketball for Women**

In 1891, when James Naismith invented basketball at a YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, he did not just create a new sport for men. Almost immediately the game was seized upon by women as offering a new opportunity to play sport.<sup>1</sup> While physical education for women had already taken off among college students, as a means to improve health and restore energy to the reproductive system, it mostly took the form of callisthenic exercises and formalised exercise programs. Team games that required sharing the same physical space were not played.<sup>2</sup> It was into this environment that Senda Berenson, regarded as the architect of basketball for women, came to her position at Smith College. Plagued by chronic sickness, Berenson enrolled in the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics to become a physical education teacher. There she was imbued with a strong belief in the necessity of women building strength, whilst retaining their womanly character.<sup>3</sup>

In 1892 when she arrived at Smith College, she faced the problem that had stymied female physical educators: women disliked the callisthenic programs and wanted to play competitive sport.<sup>4</sup> Playing the rough competitive team sports, such as football, that were most popular for men would have been unthinkable for college women, but for Berenson basketball seemed to offer a solution.<sup>5</sup> In these early days of basketball, the rules were malleable enough that Berenson was able to adapt the game to combat accusations that it would masculinise women.<sup>6</sup> As well as the need to repel concerns

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Spears. 'Senda Berenson Abbott: New Woman, New Sport.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), pp. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Spears, 'Senda Berenson Abbott: New Woman, New Sport,' p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>4</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 26.

from parents, Berenson echoed the common belief of female physical educators that competitive sport was not for women, arguing that:

Unless a game as exciting as basket ball is carefully guided by such rules as will eliminate roughness, the great desire to win and the excitement of the game will make our women do sadly unwomanly things.<sup>7</sup>

Berenson thus adapted the rules to limit contact and foster team play. The court was divided into three sections and players were limited to their own section to prevent 'overexertion'. Players could not snatch the ball from each other and only three dribbles were allowed.<sup>8</sup> Although these rules limited aggression and created a distinctly restrained and ladylike version of basketball, for many women the opportunity to play a team sport was a revelation.<sup>9</sup> The game quickly spread and became the fastest growing sport for women from the 1890s to the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

Here I will argue that it was Berenson's adaptation of the rules and the subsequent battles over what values should define women's basketball that set the stage for many of the issues surrounding the WNBA, continuing to have a lasting impact on how women's basketball is perceived. This chapter will argue that women's basketball developed in a piece-meal manner, as female physical educators, male promoters, and of course, the female athletes themselves, constantly battled over what it meant for a woman to play basketball. Though physical educators to a large extent lost this gendered battle for control of women's sports, as male-controlled, competitive sport came to dominate, this battle has left a legacy for women's basketball, as it continues to

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<sup>7</sup> Senda Berenson, 'The Significance of Basket Ball for Women,' *Spalding's Official Women's Basket Ball Guide*, (1901), quoted in Steveda Chepko. 'The Domestication of Basketball.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Davenport. 'The Tides of Change in Women's Basketball Rules.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Joan S. Hult. 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 55.

be perceived as a sport with its own distinct playing style and values. Players continue to have to negotiate the standards of womanhood that were established and debated as women's basketball continued to develop.

Shortly after Berenson's innovation, the game spread west, and the first inter-institutional women's game took place just eleven months later, between the University of California-Berkeley and Miss Head's School on 18 November 1892.<sup>11</sup> Facilitated by the less-traditional, more open west-coast culture, women began to expand the game to include the first intercollegiate match in 1896, again featuring the University of California-Berkeley, this time against Stanford University.<sup>12</sup> The game was not without controversy and was the result of prolonged negotiation over the playing rules, in particular, whether the game should be played in front of a mixed audience. Berkeley only accepted on the condition that it be played in front of a women-only audience.<sup>13</sup> A writer for a university newspaper was quoted in *The San Francisco Call*, noting 'with pleasure the good judgment and tact of the Berkeley captain in refusing to play before a mixed audience. How a game such as was played on the Stanford campus can be conducive to ladylike manners and refinement the writer fails to see.'<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, on the West Coast basketball was viewed as a women's game, with very few men involved. The *Los Angeles Times* argued in 1905, 'owing to the fact that girls take quite readily to it, an idea has become prevalent that basketball is a "sissy" game, and unworthy the efforts of athletes.'<sup>15</sup> While Western colleges accepted intercollegiate play to an extent, Eastern and Southern schools were more conservative and worried about the effects of competition. Indeed, in Louisiana Clara Baer introduced even more restrictive rules to appease the parents of girls who viewed women's physical education as inappropriate

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<sup>11</sup> Spears, 'Senda Berenson Abbott: New Woman, New Sport,' p. 25

<sup>12</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery and Margaret Toohey-Costa. 'Hoops and Skirts: Women's Basketball on the West Coast, 1892-1930s.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 138.

<sup>14</sup> *The San Francisco Call*, 'Won't Play Before Men,' 10 March 1896. California Digital Newspaper Collection.

<sup>15</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 'Basketball Now on Tap,' 1 January 1905, quoted in Emery and Toohey-Costa, 'Hoops and Skirts: Women's Basketball on the West Coast, 1892-1930s,' p. 148.

and unhealthy.<sup>16</sup> In 1893, Baer introduced the game at Sophie Newcomb College, labelling her new version “Basquette,” in which the court was divided further still, with one person per square, no guarding, no dribbling, no falling down, and no talking.<sup>17</sup> This version quickly spread throughout Louisiana and parts of the South. While Baer’s version is an extreme example, what characterised women’s basketball early on was an inconsistent application of rules, and thus in 1899, Berenson was chosen to edit an official set of rules for the Spalding Athletic Library.<sup>18</sup> Berenson’s three-division court became the official norm, although women continued to play with different rules, even the five-player “men’s rules,” in certain parts of the country.<sup>19</sup>

When considering the history of basketball, it is essential to recognise the way in which religion and sport, and in particular basketball, have been intertwined in American society since the late 1800s. Early Puritans in the United States were uneasy with any recreational activity without a moral purpose.<sup>20</sup> However, this changed with Luther H. Gulick’s arrival at the YMCA Training School at Springfield College in 1887, heralding the growing integration of sport and evangelical Christianity.<sup>21</sup> Gulick promoted the union of body, mind, and spirit, symbolised by the inverted triangle logo of the YMCA, drawing on the Scripture to argue for sport as essential for the development of men and as a means of glorifying God.<sup>22</sup> The YMCA was seen as an essential part of Protestant Christianity, and physical activity was perceived as a religious activity.<sup>23</sup> Basketball in particular came out of this tradition; James Naismith invented basketball under orders from Gulick, as an attempt to create a ‘wholesome all-weather outlet for the energies of

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<sup>16</sup> Joan Paul. ‘Clara Gregory Baer: Catalyst for Women’s Basketball.’ In *A Century of Women’s Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Paul, ‘Clara Gregory Baer: Catalyst for Women’s Basketball,’ p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball*, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Davenport, ‘The Tides of Change in Women’s Basketball Rules,’ p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Steven J. Overman. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 155.

Robert Ellis. *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014) p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, p. 30.

young men.<sup>24</sup> The criticism of sport by the Puritans began to fade, as Gulick and the YMCA had provided a version of sport imbued with morality and Protestant values. This investment in “muscular Christianity” was a result of a fear of women’s encroachment on the male sphere and the decline of physical labour as people flocked to the cities and women came to dominate both the teaching profession and the membership of organised religion. Thus sport became a buttress for white masculine strength.<sup>25</sup> This movement of muscular Christianity was mostly embraced by white Protestants, particularly in the Northeast, and was intricately linked with social Darwinism and imperialistic attempts to spread Christianity.<sup>26</sup> The Black church, in contrast, largely eschewed the muscular Christianity movement, focusing on racial uplift, with some churches such as the Olivet Baptist Church supporting both men’s and women’s teams as a means to support this.<sup>27</sup> YMCAs were instrumental in spreading the gospel of muscular Christianity across the country and out of being solely the realm of the white middle-class, and while muscular Christianity declined in mainstream churches, it found new life among fundamentalists.<sup>28</sup> Though initially it was mainly a movement for men, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) began investing in gymnasiums for women, using the same arguments about transforming the body into ‘the willing servant...of the soul.’<sup>29</sup> This link between sport and religion has proved persistent in American culture and has only grown among women. Indeed, Robert Ellis argues that this is a possible form of American exceptionalism, ‘exceptional not only in religion

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<sup>24</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> William J Baker. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford Putney. *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 4, 33.

For a broad study of the relationship of physicality to the ideological construction of masculinity in this era, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*, p. 8.

Gerald R. Gems. ‘Blocked Shot: The Development of Basketball in the African-American Community of Chicago.’ *Journal of Sport History* 22, no. 2 (1995), p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*, p. 42.

Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*, p. 206.

<sup>29</sup> Abbie Mayhew. ‘Physical Training a Christian Profession.’ *Evangel* 7, No. 59, (September 1894), p. 11



(possibly) and sport (probably), but also in the combination thereof.<sup>30</sup>

By the 1920s, America was in the midst of a “sports explosion,” and basketball had become the most popular women’s sport in the U.S.<sup>31</sup> However, female educators had increasingly become concerned with the values inherent in intercollegiate sport. They believed in sport only as a means to ensure the development of cooperation, sportsmanship, and feminine strength, and worried that intercollegiate sport fostered competition above all else.<sup>32</sup> Educators generally directed their ire at sports such as basketball and track, where aggressive competition was coupled with a working-class and African-American support base. They largely ignored sports such as field hockey, which despite seemingly having similar competitive qualities as basketball, was upper-class and female dominant.<sup>33</sup> They thus attempted to reign in intercollegiate competition, and instead promoted either interclass competition or the “play day,” in which the visiting teams’ players were mixed with the home team, and the focus was on cooperation and fun.<sup>34</sup> The players wore “pinnies”, a numbered vest, rather than a uniform, ‘which deliberately downplayed the importance of team cohesion, individual accomplishment and the will to win.’<sup>35</sup> Throughout the 1920s and 1930s very few four-year colleges played intercollegiate sport.<sup>36</sup> Students generally resented the move to “play days,” and as Susan Cahn elucidates:

Athletic directors mentioned that they frequently had to remind students of the reasons for banning varsity competition, reasons many students found

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<sup>30</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> Pamela Grundy. ‘From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women’s Basketball, 1920-1960.’ *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000), p. 113.

<sup>32</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball*, p. 28.

Spears, ‘Senda Berenson Abbott: New Woman, New Sport,’ p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Roberta J. Park. ‘Sport, Gender and Society in a Transatlantic Victorian Perspective.’ In *From “Fair Sex” to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras*, edited by J.A. Mangan and Roberta J. Park, (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1987), p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> Pamela Grundy. ‘Bloomers and Beyond: North Carolina Women’s Basketball Uniforms, 1901-1997.’ *Southern Cultures* 3, no. 3 (1997), p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Grundy, ‘Bloomers and Beyond: North Carolina Women’s Basketball Uniforms, 1901-1997,’ p. 61.

<sup>36</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball*, p. 28.

unconvincing. In 1924 Wellesley students voted 237 to 33 in favor of intercollegiate sports.<sup>37</sup>

However, despite student resistance, this control over women's sport by female physical educators was made possible by the single-sex structure of physical education departments, in which women had the freedom to promote the values they saw fit.<sup>38</sup> In 1917 the Committee on Women's Athletics (CWA) was formed by physical educators, which gave them significant control over women's college athletics, publishing sports guides that gave them both a proselytizing platform and the basis of their authority. The CWA, along with the National Association for Physical Education of College Women (NAPECW), the Athletic Federation of College Women (AFCW) and the Women's division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF), served as a cohesive force against intercollegiate athletics for women, as well as women's Olympic participation, pushing instead for 'competitive restraints and female self-determination in athletic governance.'<sup>39</sup>

However, while intercollegiate sport was curtailed, this was not the only arena where women's basketball could flourish. While female physical educators had tight control over basketball in white, urban areas, by the 1920s basketball had spread throughout the country and gained particular prominence in rural areas where ideas about female decorum and femininity had long been challenged by heavy labour demands.<sup>40</sup> High school basketball thrived in those parts of the country where tightknit communities and a lack of other social pastimes made women's basketball a central part of the community, in particular in states such as North Carolina, Iowa, Texas, Kentucky, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Maryland, Mississippi, Wyoming, and North Dakota.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>38</sup> Hult, 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,' p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Hult, 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,' p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 140.

Roxanne M. Albertson. 'Basketball Texas Style, 1910-1933: School to Industrial League

Women's high school basketball attracted great crowds; in states such as Iowa, girls' basketball was significantly more popular than the boy's tournament, as tournaments were run by male promoters who invested in a form of pageantry that went alongside the basketball.<sup>42</sup> These high school women displayed a brand of basketball, and thus womanhood, that dramatically differed from the kind that female physical educators were espousing and more closely mirrored the values of their rural communities.<sup>43</sup> They took part in state and regional competitions in the same way that men did, some even playing with men's rules, and were generally supported by their community.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, female physical educators did not allow this to occur unchecked and began to voice their extreme displeasure at what they saw as the exploitative nature of these tournaments.<sup>45</sup> They were also concerned with the prevalence of male coaches, who often pushed for elite competition.<sup>46</sup> Not content with controlling their own programs, they began to put pressure on state bodies that controlled high school basketball to end their interschool competitions, receiving support particularly at white schools in larger cities.<sup>47</sup> In 1925, the National Association of Secondary School Principals passed a resolution, eliminating varsity teams and state tournaments. Twenty-one states out of

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Competition.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991).

Peggy Stanaland. 'The Early Years of Basketball in Kentucky.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991).

Janice A. Beran. 'Iowa, the Longtime "Hot Bed" of Girls Basketball.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> Beran, 'Iowa, the Longtime "Hot Bed" of Girls Basketball,' p. 188.

<sup>43</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 29. Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 131.

<sup>45</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Hult, 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,' p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 127.

Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 47.

thirty-seven dropped their tournaments, with only local, rural championships remaining.<sup>48</sup> Play days and intramural competition filled the void.<sup>49</sup> In states such as Iowa, it was only due to the work of male supporters of women's basketball that it managed to persist; after the Iowa High School Athletic Association voted to end the state tournament, the work of four male high school superintendents, with the support of the *Des Moines Register and Tribune* newspaper, kept the tournament going and formed the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union.<sup>50</sup> Iowa thus remained one of the few places in which women's basketball was able to prosper. While female physical educators were a major impetus for the return to intramural competition, in states such as Kentucky the reasoning behind dropping women's teams had more to do with the growing popularity of men's teams, and the desire for coaches to only coach boys; 80 percent of coaches in Kentucky were in charge of both the boys and girls team.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the initial push to end the Iowa girl's tournament was influenced both by moral notions about women's proper place, and the need for boys teams to use the high school gym.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, high school basketball state tournaments persisted in Iowa, Texas, and Arkansas, while states such as North Carolina held out until 1952 before women's basketball crumbled.<sup>53</sup>

High schools were not the only place where rural and working-class towns got their basketball fix. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) began holding a national women's basketball championship in 1926, with teams mostly sponsored by business and industry.<sup>54</sup> The 1920s was a time in which industry supported the notion of "welfare capitalism," as companies put into place a variety of reforms, benefits, and social

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<sup>48</sup> Hult, 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,' p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> Beran, 'Iowa, the Longtime "Hot Bed" of Girls Basketball,' p. 185.

<sup>51</sup> Stanaland, 'The Early Years of Basketball in Kentucky,' p. 177.

<sup>52</sup> Beran, 'Iowa, the Longtime "Hot Bed" of Girls Basketball,' p. 185.

<sup>53</sup> Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 54.

activities to ensure a loyal workforce.<sup>55</sup> Company teams were a key component of this policy.<sup>56</sup> Oil businesses and textile mills were some of the major sponsors of women's basketball, and teams mostly came from small communities, particularly from the Southwest.<sup>57</sup> These teams gave companies the added benefit of publicity, and companies strongly recruited the best female players in the country; players ostensibly had to work for the company but were hired for their basketball skills.<sup>58</sup> Most famous in the early years of the industrial leagues was Babe Didrikson, who worked for the Employers' Casualty Insurance Company in Dallas in order to play for the Golden Cyclones.<sup>59</sup> While college teams had to conform to strict, middle-class notions of femininity, these industrial teams were comprised of working women to whom hard work was not foreign.<sup>60</sup> They were buoyed by the rise of the ideal of the "New Woman" in the 1920s, as women pushed for a level of autonomy and challenged Victorian standards of femininity. The flapper woman represented the overthrow of restrictions on behaviour and dress standards, and the actress and the athlete became the new standard to which women aspired.<sup>61</sup> Individual sport athletes had greater prominence but team sport athletes could reach a level of commendation provided they were attractive.<sup>62</sup> For working women it did not matter whether the sport itself was traditionally feminine, but rather whether they put effort into their appearance; for working-class women wearing make-up was encouraged, whilst middle-class women were pushed towards a more natural look.<sup>63</sup> AAU tournaments were aware of this dynamic, holding beauty pageants during the tournament to showcase the

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<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Lizabeth Cohen. *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Cindy Himes Gissendanner. 'African American Women Olympians: The Impact of Race, Gender, and Class Ideologies, 1932-1968.' *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 67, no. 2 (1996), p. 172.

<sup>57</sup> Robert K. Ikard. *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women's Basketball*. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005), p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women's Basketball*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>59</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> Hult, Introduction to Part I,' p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Hult, Introduction to Part I,' p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> Hult, Introduction to Part I,' p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Hult, Introduction to Part I,' p. 12.

attractiveness of its players.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, in the early years, it was the fear of unfettered heterosexuality that most concerned physical educators.<sup>65</sup> However, the medicalisation of homosexuality in the 1930s led to fears that sport would result in masculine women, and implicitly lesbianism.<sup>66</sup> Exemplifying this trend, in 1932 a writer for *Vanity Fair*, Paul Gallico, labelled Didrikson a 'muscle moll.'<sup>67</sup> Thus, these feminising strategies became more important for the AAU.

In addition to the amateur industrial leagues, there were various travelling professional teams, most prominently the Arkansas Travelers and the All-American Redheads. These barnstorming teams played against men's teams using men's rules, yet were careful to retain their standards of beauty off the court; the All-American Redheads were so named because they all dyed their hair red or wore red wigs, a ploy for both commercial success and feminine respectability.<sup>68</sup> Female physical educators were horrified by the commercialism that accompanied AAU basketball and professional teams, particularly the carnival-like atmosphere that characterised tournaments and the male dominated coaching and leadership.<sup>69</sup> Colleges rarely competed in the AAU tournament, and the few that did, such as Wayland Baptist College, were small schools.<sup>70</sup> However the AAU continued on its own, ignoring the physical educators, and as a result the vast majority of women's basketball took place outside the education sector and under the control of men.<sup>71</sup> AAU tournaments remained the peak of women's basketball until the 1960s.<sup>72</sup>

While the majority of white colleges had curtailed their basketball programs by the 1920s, African-American colleges largely embraced competitive basketball. In North

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<sup>64</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 86.

<sup>65</sup> Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*, p. 73.

<sup>66</sup> Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 58.

<sup>68</sup> Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women's Basketball*, p. 26.

<sup>69</sup> Hult, 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,' p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women's Basketball*, p. 105.

<sup>71</sup> Hult, 'The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,' p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 102.

Carolina, for instance, almost every Black college had a team and ‘schools engaged in heated rivalries that received warm support from school administrators and fellow students.’<sup>73</sup> The sports explosion in the 1920s had impacted African American women as well, and basketball, as an accessible, cheap sport, was appealing for working-class women, especially compared to other sports deemed acceptable for women, such as tennis, which had massive barriers to entry.<sup>74</sup> A boom in the number of playgrounds, coupled with better high school education for Black women, with the accompanying athletic opportunities, further facilitated the popularity of basketball in African American communities.<sup>75</sup> While white femininity was grounded in ideals of domesticity, Black women had long been forced to work outside the home, thus they embodied strength and a respect for physicality, an image more compatible with basketball.<sup>76</sup> Local YMCAs and YWCAs offered Black Americans the opportunity to play basketball, and while this was part of a “child-saving” measure aimed at pushing middle-class standards on the working class, it offered an outlet for working-class women.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, as Jennifer Lansbury suggests, ‘African Americans did not live in a vacuum and some within the Black community worried about how white Americans perceived Black athletes.’<sup>78</sup> Striving for white, middle-class respectability, some of the more elite-oriented historically Black schools like Fisk University, Spelman College, and Howard University mirrored white colleges by refusing to allow intercollegiate play.<sup>79</sup> They instead focused on a systematic exercise regime in order to achieve ‘sound, vigorous,

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<sup>73</sup> Grundy, ‘From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,’ p. 119.

<sup>74</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 26.

<sup>75</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 70.

<sup>76</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup> Linda D. Williams. ‘Before Althea and Wilma: African-American Women in Sports, 1924-1948.’ In *Black Women in America*, edited by Kim Marie Vaz, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 282.

Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 18.

<sup>78</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> Steven A. Riess. ‘Historically Black Colleges.’ In *Sports in America: From Colonial Times to the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Steven A. Riess, (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 448.

evenly balanced, strong, and graceful bodies that they shall be efficient instruments for the use of well-trained minds in the hard work and stern conflicts of life,' and hence attempt to demonstrate that African American women were as virtuous as white women.<sup>80</sup> Some Black physical educators, such as Maryrose Allen from Howard University, extended this idea by pushing for an explicitly Black form of self-representation she called Beauty-Health, that celebrated Black womanhood while linking the notion of femininity and respectability in physical exercise with Christianity.<sup>81</sup> However, many other schools, such as Bennett College, Tuskegee Institute and Shaw University, embraced intercollegiate basketball, with some even playing with men's rules.<sup>82</sup> Schools that relied on white donors or had white staff often were less willing to allow competition, whereas schools like Tuskegee, with Black teachers and administrators, fostered competitive sports.<sup>83</sup> However, this was not a universal pattern. and policies regarding physical education developed at each school in a unique context that cannot be neatly mapped onto factors such as class, locale, or leadership.<sup>84</sup>

The AAU was segregated until 1955, when Philander Smith, a historically Black college in Little Rock, Arkansas attended the tournament. The AAU was dominated by teams from the segregated South and consequently tournament organisers, fearing conflict, discouraged Black teams from attending.<sup>85</sup> However Black colleges organised tournaments against each other and even against Black industrial teams, such as the

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<sup>80</sup> *Fisk University Catalogue, 1889-1890*, quoted in Gwendolyn Captain. 'Enter Ladies and Gentlemen of Color: Gender, Sport, and the Ideal of African American Manhood and Womanhood During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.' *Journal of Sport History* 18, no. 1 (1991), p. 91.

<sup>81</sup> Martha H. Verbrugge. *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 88-90

<sup>82</sup> Williams, 'Before Althea and Wilma: African-American Women in Sports, 1924-1948,' p. 282.

Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 74.

<sup>83</sup> Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America*, p, 124, 133.

<sup>84</sup> Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 150.

<sup>85</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 81.



Philadelphia Tribunes.<sup>86</sup> Playing basketball came with conditions for these women, however, as administrators held their players to high standards of behaviour and feminine dress. As Ruth Glover, a player at Bennett College remarked, 'we were ladies too, we just played basketball like boys.'<sup>87</sup> Black female basketball players were constantly negotiating with middle-class femininity, constructing their own notions of what it meant to be a Black woman while simultaneously accepting some white standards of femininity.<sup>88</sup> For some Black women, who often came from working-class communities, this was a departure from their own cultural traditions and principles. Anne Moody maintained that in her time at Natchez College, she 'had never in my entire life felt so much like a prisoner, not even when [she] worked for white Klan members at home.'<sup>89</sup> College players were held to a level of femininity that industrial league players were not, as teams such as the Tribunes embodied a working-class mentality that shocked their opponents at Bennett College.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, Ora Washington of the Tribunes, the most famous Black female basketball player throughout the 1930s, found herself at the centre of a debate over the proper place of Black women in society, and the level of roughness that was allowed in women's basketball.<sup>91</sup> By the 1940s, physical educators arguments against competition were becoming increasingly accepted by more conservative administrations, and African American colleges followed their white counterparts in abandoning intercollegiate basketball, focusing on intramural games and play days.<sup>92</sup> Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, while Black men had rapidly

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<sup>86</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 92.

Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 37.

<sup>87</sup> Rita Liberti. "'We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball Like Boys': African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928-1942.' *Journal of Sport History* 26, no. 3 (1999), p. 575.

<sup>88</sup> Liberti, "'We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball Like Boys': African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928-1942,' p. 579.

<sup>89</sup> Anne Moody. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), p. 224.

<sup>90</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 37.

<sup>91</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Liberti, "'We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball Like Boys': African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928-1942,' p. 578. Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 130.

increasing athletic possibilities, college varsity teams for women had crumbled and their basketball prospects dramatically narrowed.<sup>93</sup>

Throughout the 1940s there was a small resurgence of competition for women, as younger physical educators, coming off the experience of World War II and the shift in gender roles it had forced, were more receptive to competition.<sup>94</sup> However, this was stymied by the conservative cultural turn the United States took in the 1950s, as women's options were curbed by a renewed emphasis on traditional, domestic gender roles that emphasised their difference from men.<sup>95</sup> Tournaments were eliminated, teams were disbanded, and women instead flocked to cheerleading as an appropriate feminine activity.<sup>96</sup> Hit particularly hard were industrial teams, as the bond they had with local communities began to crumble.<sup>97</sup> Throughout the early years of women's basketball, women had struck a delicate balance between their feminine self-presentation and the rough sport of basketball, and as a result had not sufficiently staked a claim to strength and assertiveness as feminine qualities.<sup>98</sup> While cheerleading had faced similar critiques as basketball in the 1920s, with detractors questioning whether women could perform the athletic acrobatics required, and whether their voices could handle the stress of cheering, the emphasis on appearance and femininity made it a perfect fit for 1950s America.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 119.

<sup>94</sup> Joan S. Hult. 'Introduction to Part II.' In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 210.

<sup>95</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 117.

<sup>96</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 121.

Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 136.

Hult, 'Introduction to Part II,' p. 211.

<sup>97</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 112.

Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women's Basketball*, p. 129.

<sup>98</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 117.

<sup>99</sup> Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' pp. 136-137.

In contrast, the fear of homosexuality, meshed with the notion of the mannish female athlete, combined to cast a greater degree of suspicion over female basketball players.<sup>100</sup> Nera White, who played for Nashville Business College in AAU tournaments in the 1950s and 1960s and who is regarded as one of the best female basketball players in history, was regularly questioned about her masculine appearance, and one coach even requested that a doctor check her anatomy.<sup>101</sup> The need to preserve male-female distinctiveness in the 1950s was intertwined with the growing popularity of basketball for men. Throughout the early years of basketball, it was considered largely a women's game, and it was not until the 1930s that the image of it as a "sissy" sport for men began to dissolve.<sup>102</sup> Post-World War II, men's basketball was bolstered by the beginning of the NCAA tournament in 1939 and the NBA in 1949, and the accompanying television coverage that entailed. By the 1960s, basketball was enmeshed firmly as a men's game.<sup>103</sup> Women, conversely, had been pushed to the sidelines cheering men on, which, as Grundy contends, 'relegated women to a tightly restricted position within that larger cultural complex.'<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the popularity of cheerleading marginalised Black women, as the more subjective nature of cheerleading meant they could be easily excluded from teams, which became a major desegregation issue in the South, sparking numerous protests.<sup>105</sup>

Nevertheless, in the 1960s some physical educators began reconsidering their anti-competitive philosophy, and in 1969 modern women's intercollegiate basketball began with the First National Invitational Tournament.<sup>106</sup> Hosted by Carol Eckman at West

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<sup>100</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 117.

<sup>101</sup> Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women's Basketball*, p. 136.

<sup>102</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 122.

<sup>103</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 122.

<sup>104</sup> Grundy, 'From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960,' p. 141.

<sup>105</sup> Pamela Grundy. *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 285.

<sup>106</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 132.

Jill Hutchison. 'Women's Intercollegiate Basketball: AIAW/NCAA.' In *A Century of Women's*

Chester State University over the misgivings of some of her peers, this gave women at sixteen, mostly small schools the opportunity for competitive national play, and the tournament continued for the next three years.<sup>107</sup> In 1971, at the last of the Invitational Tournaments, the five-player game was introduced for college ball—AAU ball had used the men’s rules since 1969—triggered partly by the US government’s concern that female athletes were struggling at the international level against the Soviet Union, as they were not used to the five player rules.<sup>108</sup> In 1972, the national championship tournament was sponsored by the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW), an organisation of physical educators. This marked a major turning point for basketball, as physical educators had long seen it as the sport in which competitive evils were most inherent.<sup>109</sup> From the CIAW, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) emerged and continued to sponsor the tournament until 1982.<sup>110</sup>

Women’s collegiate sports were changed immensely by the passage of “The Education Amendments of 1972” which contained the significant “Title IX”, mandating that men and women receive the same educational opportunities.<sup>111</sup> Though not intended as a bill targeting athletics, female athletic directors quickly realised its significance and worked hard to battle for the resources they were entitled to under the law.<sup>112</sup> Yet while Title IX offered new and exciting opportunities for female basketball players, it offered a challenge for the AIAW in attempting to maintain female control of basketball.<sup>113</sup> While the female educators of the AIAW allowed intercollegiate sport, they were determined

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*Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 309.

<sup>107</sup> Hutchison, ‘Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball: AIAW/NCAA,’ pp. 309-310.

<sup>108</sup> Hutchison, ‘Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball: AIAW/NCAA,’ p. 310.

Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women’s Basketball*, p. 154.

Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball*, p. 132.

<sup>109</sup> Hutchison, ‘Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball: AIAW/NCAA,’ p. 311.

<sup>110</sup> Hutchison, ‘Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball: AIAW/NCAA,’ p. 309.

<sup>111</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball*, p. 140.

<sup>112</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball*, p. 143.

<sup>113</sup> Joan S. Hult. ‘The Legacy of AIAW.’ In *A Century of Women’s Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, edited by Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, (Reston: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), p. 298.

to ensure that education came first, disapproving of scholarships, commercialism, and recruitment.<sup>114</sup> However, Title IX used the male model of collegiate sport to determine equality, and the AIAW, after much internal debate, adhered to this.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, female players pushed for the right to receive the benefits that men did, as a lawsuit from a group of players from Florida compelled the AIAW to remove its scholarship ban.<sup>116</sup> Greater investment from colleges had the effect of changing the types of schools that were successful; while smaller schools had previously dominated, a relic of the AAU era, in 1978 UCLA won, and larger schools with more resources began to achieve greater success.<sup>117</sup>

By 1981, the NCAA, which controlled men's athletics, began to show an interest in women's basketball.<sup>118</sup> After failing to stop Title IX, the NCAA recognised the potential in women's basketball and decided to host their own tournament the following year.<sup>119</sup> In 1982, schools were forced to choose between the NCAA and the AIAW tournament, and almost half chose the NCAA, citing their better resources.<sup>120</sup> The AIAW folded later that year, marking the end of female control of athletics and 'closing a century of women's efforts to blaze a distinctive athletic trail.'<sup>121</sup> Athletic departments merged their men's and women's departments, with men gaining control, and the growing prestige—and salaries—of women's basketball coaching meant more male coaches.<sup>122</sup> However, the greater resources of the NCAA allowed women's basketball to grow into a big spectator sport, providing players with greater opportunities to play at a high

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<sup>114</sup> Hult, 'The Legacy of AIAW,' pp. 289-292.

<sup>115</sup> Hult, 'The Legacy of AIAW,' p. 289.

<sup>116</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 179.

<sup>117</sup> Hutchison, 'Women's Intercollegiate Basketball: AIAW/NCAA,' p. 319.

<sup>118</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 179

<sup>119</sup> Hult. 'The Legacy of AIAW,' p. 300.

Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 179.

<sup>120</sup> Hult. 'The Legacy of AIAW,' p. 301.

<sup>121</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 181.

<sup>122</sup> Hult. 'The Legacy of AIAW,' p. 300.

Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 181.

competitive level.<sup>123</sup> This move was the culmination of a century-long debate over the proper place of women in competitive athletics, a repudiation of female educators' attempts to restrict high-level basketball, and a triumph for female athletes who relish competition, though at the expense of female coaches and administrators.

College basketball was not the only place where women could play basketball at a high level. In 1976 women's basketball was introduced to the Olympics, just the second women's team sport added, behind volleyball.<sup>124</sup> In 1978, the first attempt at a professional league, the Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL), was started. The WBL relied on its players' feminine appearance and sexual appeal to promote the league, minimising both its lesbian and African American players in the promotional material.<sup>125</sup> The WBL lasted only three seasons, folding after profits could not keep pace with its rapid expansion.<sup>126</sup> While college basketball continued to flourish, particularly with the success of the USC team in the early 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that professional basketball would be tried again.<sup>127</sup> The 1996 Olympic team was part of a concerted push to promote women's basketball, building off the growing popularity of college basketball and promoting its stars across America.<sup>128</sup> This laid the groundwork for the possibility of a women's professional league in the United States.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, two leagues emerged in the aftermath of the Olympics, the independent American Basketball League (ABL) and the WNBA, which was backed by the NBA.<sup>130</sup> Mirroring the debates between the NCAA and the AIAW, women were again forced to decide between

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<sup>123</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 180.

<sup>124</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 103.

<sup>125</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 186.

<sup>126</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 187.

<sup>127</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 197.

<sup>128</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 215.

<sup>129</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 224.

<sup>130</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 226.

a women-centred, independent organisation and an established men's league.<sup>131</sup> The marketing clout of the WNBA won out, with the ABL folding in the 1998-99 season, and thus the WNBA has persisted as the sole women's professional basketball league in America.<sup>132</sup>

The gendered battle over women's basketball was largely lost by those that value women's control of sports, as both the NCAA and WNBA do not conform to the woman-centred vision of female physical educators. However, as I have argued, physical educators' mode of thinking pushed a white, middle-class view of femininity on working-class and Black women. For instance, in their fever to create a female-centred sport, they:

Leveled charges against commercial and sexual exploitation in sport, yet neglected to examine either the economic exploitation of working women or their own class and racial biases. Women sport reformers acted, rather, to defend their interests as professional, middle-class women.<sup>133</sup>

After all, physical educators nearly killed women's basketball in the 1930s. It was saved by women outside of the white, middle-class: Black women, working-class women, and women in the South. By demanding a place within competitive sport, and negotiating with the attendant gender strictures, they ensured that women's basketball would grow to the place where it is today. As Susan Cahn argues:

It was women's bold insistence on the right to play and their willingness to create and model expansive definitions of womanhood that formed the thread between the early and middle decades of the twentieth century and the dramatic changes of recent years.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 225.

<sup>132</sup> Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 229.

<sup>133</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, p. 76.

<sup>134</sup> Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, p. 245.

The legacy of these battles over women's basketball persists and continues to influence what it means to play basketball as a woman.



## **Chapter Three: “Dunking Divas”: Gender, Race and Sexuality (1997-2013)**

Lisa Leslie (1997-2009), Sheryl Swoopes (1997-2011), and Rebecca Lobo (1997-2003) were walking down an arena hallway. All three were wearing 1990s style leather jackets, Lobo a jaunty beret, Leslie a white crop top, and Swoopes large hoop earrings. The camera alternated between zooming into each of their made-up faces and their uniform bags, embroidered with the WNBA logo and their names. They were walking towards the bright lights of the basketball court, the place where they were finally taking their place on the big stage. But before they reached the court, the commercial finished, boldly proclaiming “We Got Next: Opening Tip June 21, 1997.”<sup>1</sup> Airing during the NBA playoffs, using the pickup term used to claim the next game “We Got Next,” the WNBA was claiming the right to the bright lights of professional basketball. It was their turn.

However, the overemphasis on femininity—and lack of actual basketball in this commercial—raises a question that has plagued the WNBA since its inception. That is, how to successfully market a league of largely Black, athletic women, many of whom identify as queer, in a sport that has been coded as male since the 1940s and 1950s. The WNBA and its players have had to grapple with the discourses of gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion that circulate in sport and American society more broadly. Consequently, they have simultaneously reproduced dominant ideals and challenged gendered boundaries. Assuming that commercial success was dependent on portraying its players as feminine, heterosexual role models, the league has continually struggled to find a marketing message that highlights the diverse modes of gendered subjectivities that its players embody.<sup>2</sup> The approach the WNBA ended up taking—highlighting its feminine, heterosexual stars—was plainly evident to the players. One of

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<sup>1</sup> WNBA. ‘#WNBAVault: We Got Next.’ *Facebook* Video, 0:30, 25 April 2021, accessed 19 September 2021, <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=191318836017220>>

<sup>2</sup> Tamryn Spruill. ‘The WNBA’s Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the “Layers on Top of Layers” of Player Identities,’ *The Athletic*, 21 June 2019, accessed 29 April 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1040613/2019/06/21/the-wnbas-long-road-to-embracing-and-marketing-the-layers-on-top-of-layers-of-player-identities/>>

the Ravens players Chloe pointed out the elephant in the room, 'I mean everybody sees it, you know what I'm saying? And it's no secret and the league is going to do what they do.'

How then do WNBA players comprehend and respond to this approach by the league? What about the sporting public more widely? This chapter examines these representations and the way in which the players themselves communicate often contradictory ideas to the public to present themselves in a specific way, particularly through their autobiographies, *Players' Tribune* articles, and media presence. I argue that the early years of the league were characterised by an emphasis on respectable femininity and motherhood, obscuring the presence of lesbian players and promoting its stars as middle-class, role models in direct contrast to the NBA. While initially there was some interest in promoting the game itself, though clouded by these other factors, by the early to mid-2000s, basketball had disappeared almost completely from the league's marketing. Flagging ratings meant a renewed emphasis on femininity and greater sexualisation of players. However, while the initial wave of players largely expressed their support for promoting femininity, I contend that by the late 2000s there was evidence of a level of dissatisfaction towards this strategy by players. These notions of femininity, sexuality, and race are refracted through the oft-forgotten lens of religion, which I argue is crucial to understand WNBA players self-representation. As this chapter shows, the first generation of players had to continuously negotiate these shifting notions of identity and womanhood, often reinforcing—but occasionally challenging—the league's idea of what it means to be an athletic woman.

The choice of Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo, and Sheryl Swoopes as the faces of the new WNBA was somewhat forced upon the league, as many of their teammates on the 1996 US Olympic team chose to play in the rival ABL.<sup>3</sup> However, all three had been popular on their respective college teams and having recently graduated they still lingered in the public consciousness, whereas other possible stars such as Cynthia Cooper (1997-2004)

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<sup>3</sup> Mechelle Voepel. 'Before 3 to See, This Trio Starred,' *ESPN.com*, 15 April 2013, accessed 8 February 2021, <[https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/\\_/id/9173270/wnba-rebecca-lobo-lisa-leslie-sheryl-swoopes-paved-way-3-see](https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/_/id/9173270/wnba-rebecca-lobo-lisa-leslie-sheryl-swoopes-paved-way-3-see)>

and Teresa Weatherspoon (1997-2004) had long been playing professionally overseas.<sup>4</sup> Lobo, for instance, had been one of the most popular players on the 1996 Olympic team due to her undefeated previous season at the University of Connecticut, despite the fact that she was the least experienced player.<sup>5</sup> Leslie called her the 'weakest link' on the team and suggested that she only made the team for 'marketing purposes.'<sup>6</sup> Though the WNBA was limited by the decision by many of the best female players to play in the ABL, there were still many good players to choose from. Thus, the decision the WNBA made to centre Leslie, Lobo, and Swoopes makes it clear that they explicitly wanted to emphasise heterosexual femininity in their marketing.<sup>7</sup> Leslie, for instance, was a model, and prided herself on her feminine appearance; her autobiography *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You* takes its name from Leslie's signature lipstick that she wore even while playing.<sup>8</sup> It is apparent throughout Leslie's autobiography that she was not only proud of her femininity, but saw it as imperative to the future of the WNBA, arguing that 'the best and strongest image is one that shows the unique beauty and strength of women.'<sup>9</sup> Leslie was not alone in this; Cooper, whose stellar play quickly propelled her to star status, suggested 'I think it's important for WNBA players to project the image of athleticism on the court and femininity off the court.'<sup>10</sup>

Swin Cash (2002-2016), meanwhile, boasted that she was a former model, while Swoopes claimed that she had wanted to be a cheerleader.<sup>11</sup> Leslie, Cooper, Cash, and Swoopes chose to project an image of themselves as feminine, attractive, heterosexual

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<sup>4</sup> Lyndsey D'Arcangelo. "Wow, This Is Real. And It's Really Going to Happen": The Origin Story of the WNBA, From Those Who Lived It,' *The Athletic*, 24 July 2019, accessed 8 February 2021, <<https://theathletic.com/1092068/2019/07/24/wow-this-is-real-and-its-really-going-to-happen-the-origin-story-of-the-wnba-from-those-who-lived-it/>>

<sup>5</sup> Voepel, 'Before 3 to See, This Trio Starred.'

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Leslie and Larry Burnett. *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*. (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2008) p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> Tara McPherson. 'Who's Got Next? Gender, Race, and the Mediation of the WNBA.' In *Basketball Jones: America above the Rim*, edited by Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Cooper. *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*. (New York: Warner Books, 1999), p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> Swin Cash. *Humble Journey: More Precious Than Gold*. (White Oak: Empowering You Publishing, 2013), p. 98.

Sheryl Swoopes and Greg Brown. *Bounce Back*. (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1996), p. 4.

women, who deployed “emphasised femininity” as a way of deflecting insults about female athletes.<sup>12</sup> Yet Cooper’s statement reveals something interesting: it is only off-the-court that she suggests femininity is necessary. This reflects Cox and Thompson’s notion of “multiple bodies,” as athletes adapt their feminine presentation depending on their social location.<sup>13</sup> Cox and Thompson argue that female athletes are aware of the dualistic construction of masculinity and femininity in the sporting context, and emphasise different parts of their body depending on the location.<sup>14</sup> Leslie made this notion of multiple femininities explicit, pointing out that she likes ‘the transformation from my persona as a Wonder Woman athlete to my normal, regular self, which usually felt more like Lucille Ball. I liked the difference.’<sup>15</sup> For Leslie, displaying toughness on the court did not take away from her femininity, and while her femininity might be displayed differently, ‘physical competence and femininity are combined into a coherent whole.’<sup>16</sup>

Leslie and Cooper’s arguments reflect Heywood’s “third-wave” position, where images of athletes are not solely pretty or powerful but can be both.<sup>17</sup> This position was furthered by Lauren Jackson (2001-2013), who, while drafted slightly later than Leslie and Cooper, was still in a league that relied on femininity and sexuality for its marketing. Jackson in fact supported this emphasis on the power of athletically and sexually charged bodies, remarking on a naked photo shoot that:

Some people in the US, women in particular, saw it as attention-seeking. There were comments that if you’re a woman in sport you have to get naked to gain attention. It wasn’t that at all. It was both Australian men and women, Olympic athletes, posing for those pictures. I thought it was beautiful, very artsy, displaying amazing bodies. We put so much effort and time into creating these

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<sup>12</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies: Sportswomen, Soccer and Sexuality,’ p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies: Sportswomen, Soccer and Sexuality,’ p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 192.

Bruce, ‘New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave,’ p. 371.

<sup>17</sup> Heywood, ‘Third-Wave Feminism, the Global Economy, and Women’s Surfing: Sport as Stealth Feminism in Girls’ Surf Culture,’ p. 72.

bodies so they can perform, why not show them off?<sup>18</sup>

These statements from early WNBA players suggest the possibility that women can be athletic while adhering to traditional femininity. However, this ignores that this form of representation is not available to everyone, and, as Bruce has shown, largely coheres to heterosexual, white women with toned, small bodies.<sup>19</sup> Though Cooper and Leslie, as African-American women, challenge the whiteness of this discourse, they continue to purport this narrow feminine ideal.

Historically, Black women have subscribed to a more active, strength-orientated femininity, however they also have had to contend with a white society that denigrates Black women as hyper-muscular and unfeminine.<sup>20</sup> To some extent, Black WNBA players' insistence on maintaining femininity could be seen as challenging Black stereotypes, giving space for Black women to be perceived as both feminine and attractive and countering the myth of Black deviance. However, in addition to reifying a narrow, white conception of femininity, there is a class divide amongst Black women and the way they present themselves that demonstrates the limitations of cooperating with a white norm. After growing up in poverty, Cooper felt inferior to her college classmates, reflecting that before attending the University of Southern California (USC) she had never had any white friends, and that fellow students 'were so far out of my league I considered looking for a back door to enter the dorm.'<sup>21</sup> She attributed her transformation into a "lady" to her wealthy friends, Ann and Marsha James, who in addition to helping her with fashion and styling advice, helped her 'take some of the street talk out of my speech.'<sup>22</sup> In Cooper's Pygmalion-like transformation, femininity is equated with a particular form of respectability, demonstrating the manner in which race and class intersect in constraining how female athletes are able to present their

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<sup>18</sup> Lauren Jackson and Freda Marnie Nicholls. *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*. (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2018), p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce, 'New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave,' p. 372.

<sup>20</sup> Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 24. James McKay and Helen Johnson. 'Pornographic Eroticism and Sexual Grotesquerie in Representations of African American Sportswomen.' *Social Identities* 14, no. 4 (2008), p. 492.

<sup>21</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 54.

athleticism and indicating the limits of the discourse of muscular femininity and the “pretty and powerful” form of sports feminism. For Black women, even those who perform the ideology of white femininity satisfactorily, the benefits are only fleeting and conditional.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Black women in the WNBA were not only trying to display femininity more generally, but a specific form of Black female middle-class respectability that challenged conceptions of Black women as hypersexual. The importance of this performance of respectable feminine style is strikingly clear in the players’ discussion of their hair; indeed, in earlier autobiographies, the styling of hair is one of the few ways that race becomes legible. Swin Cash, for instance, described her experience playing in China with her Chinese teammates thus:

For a lot of them it was also their first time interacting with an African American woman...I tried to teach them as much about my culture as I could. I showed them the different haircuts and hairstyles that I’d get and all about my hair.<sup>24</sup>

Maxine Leeds Craig describes how historically Black women were viewed as the standard-bearers of the race, communicating their good character through grooming practices, and particularly through straightening their hair.<sup>25</sup> Many of the WNBA players discuss their hair in a similar way, reflecting the kind of class and respectability politics that have long characterised debates over Black women’s hair.<sup>26</sup> Eurocentric standards of beauty meant that long, wavy hair was highly valued, while short hair that would not grow long was met with derision.<sup>27</sup> Grooming in this framework was ‘a weapon in the battle to defeat racist depictions of Blacks.’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mary McDonald. ‘Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women’s National Basketball Association.’ *Sociological Perspectives* 45, no. 4 (2002), p. 387.

<sup>24</sup> Cash, *Humble Journey: More Precious Than Gold*, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig. *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Robin M. Boylorn. ‘Baby Hair: For Gabby, Blue Ivey, Tiana, and Me.’ In *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, edited by Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris and Robin M. Boylorn. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2017), p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>28</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, p. 35.

The Black power movement challenged this emphasis on grooming, encouraging women and men to wear their hair natural. But the popularity of straightened hair soon returned, and indeed remains the dominant standard.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, many workplaces view natural, un-straightened Black hair as unprofessional, and thus Black women straightened their hair to secure job prospects.<sup>30</sup> Hair was an important aspect of early WNBA players attempts to put forward an image of middle-class respectability. Lisa Leslie stressed that ‘I think it is important for us to have our hair combed,’<sup>31</sup> while part of Cynthia Cooper’s transformation into a “lady” involved her teammates showing her ‘how to comb my hair and wear it different ways.’<sup>32</sup> In this way, femininity, hair, and class politics were closely intertwined. This is one illustration of Brittney Cooper’s argument that ‘respectability ideology provided a foundation for articulating what a Black woman or Black man actually was.’<sup>33</sup>

Many of these issues surrounding gender and race are intimately intertwined with sexuality and the implicit fear of lesbianism that has pervaded women’s sport since the 1930s. As Pat Griffin points out, a “heterosexy” image is a defence mechanism for women to deny charges of homosexuality; femininity and heterosexuality are largely synonymous.<sup>34</sup> Lisa Leslie devoted a section of her autobiography to prescribing what is best for the WNBA in terms of player presentation, arguing that a feminine appearance is imperative.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, she believed that ‘it is good for the WNBA when our players get married and have babies.’<sup>36</sup> Certainly, this was something the league also believed, as at the inception of the league it pushed a visibly pregnant Sheryl Swoopes as one of the faces of the league.<sup>37</sup> Swoopes appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport* heavily pregnant, accompanied by the headline ‘A Star is Born: Sheryl

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<sup>29</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 280.

<sup>32</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Brittney C. Cooper. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, p. 194.

<sup>35</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 280.

<sup>36</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 279.

<sup>37</sup> McDonald, ‘Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women’s National Basketball Association,’ p. 383.

Swoopes and the WNBA are both due in June,' and later, a "Little Rascals" commercial featured her pushing her son in a swing.<sup>38</sup> By highlighting motherhood, both the league and Leslie were projecting an image of maternal caring, and implicitly stressing the heterosexuality of its players. Motherhood thus acted as a shield against charges of lesbianism, while furthering the image of the WNBA as family-friendly and moral, and its players as role-models for modern women.<sup>39</sup> In some ways this was beneficial, challenging the dominant stereotype of the bad Black single mother, giving Black women access to the mother glorification that previously only applied to white middle-class women.<sup>40</sup> Yet it did not challenge the underlying racial dynamics, instead simply giving Black women contingent access to white femininity, confining their sexuality to the domestic space.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, as I will discuss in Chapters Four and Six, the WNBA pushed motherhood as a marketing strategy without providing the necessary maternity benefits.

Such was the power of Swoopes' maternal image that, when she later came out, she was read through a homonormative framework— in which heterosexual values are reproduced in a homosexual relationship—as her femininity and her stable relationship allowed her to be 'comfortably consumed by a predominantly White media and by White lesbian and other consumers.'<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the response to Swoopes' announcement was fairly muted despite being the most high-profile team athlete to

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<sup>38</sup> Victoria Hernandez. 'Sheryl Swoopes, a WNBA Superstar, on Her Big Nike Moment: "I Still Get A Little Choked Up,"' *Los Angeles Times*, 14 February 2019, accessed 22 May 2020, < <https://www.latimes.com/fashion/la-ig-sneakers-sheryl-swoopes-nike-womens-sneakers-20190214-story.html>>

<sup>39</sup> Daniela Baroffio-Bota and Sarah Banet-Weiser. 'Women, Team Sports, and the WNBA: Playing Like a Girl.' In *Handbook of Sports and Media*, edited by Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 532.

<sup>40</sup> McDonald, 'Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women's National Basketball Association, p. 383.

Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. 'Introduction.' In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> McDonald, 'Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women's National Basketball Association, p. 387.

Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> Samantha King. 'Homonormativity and the Politics of Race: Reading Sheryl Swoopes.' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13, no. 3 (2009), p. 282.



come out at that time, reflecting the invisibility that shrouds Black lesbians. Though often viewed as transgressing femininity in other ways, Black lesbians are rarely prominent figures, sitting outside the racial logic of American society.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to Swoopes' homonormative portrayal, players like Latasha Byears (1997-2008), who was not only a Black lesbian, but was '5-foot-11 and cut at 203, with tats and a gold tooth with an 'L' on it (a family tradition), gully and outspoken,'<sup>44</sup> were seen as unpalatable, unable to fit into the image of respectable femininity the league had cultivated. The figure of Byears is emblematic of the way in which 'racism and heterosexism mutually construct one another.'<sup>45</sup> An embodiment of the "new jack athlete," Byears was the exact kind of Black woman the WNBA was trying to distance themselves from, and the kind of lesbian that was valued less both economically and culturally, and as such was marginalised.<sup>46</sup>

Lisa Leslie encapsulated the WNBA and its players' uncomfortable relationship with homosexuality by suggesting that:

What happens in the bedroom needs to stay in the bedroom, regardless of a player's sexual orientation. Just focus on upholding the integrity of the game and the positive image of the league.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Samantha King. 'Contesting the Closet: Sheryl Swoopes, Racialized Sexuality, and Media Culture.' In *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, edited by David L. Leonard and C. Richard King. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011), p. 178.

Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, p. 106.

<sup>44</sup> Scoop Jackson. 'Hard Time with Latasha Byears,' *ESPN Page 2*, 7 September 2005, accessed 10 November 2015,

<<http://espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=jackson/050907&num=0>>

<sup>45</sup> Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> Lisa Doris Alexander. "'Raindrops on a Window": Race and Sex and the Framing of the Sheryl Swoopes Narrative.' In *A Locker Room of Her Own: Celebrity, Sexuality, and Female Athletes*, edited by David C. Ogden and Joel Nathan Rosen, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), p. 136.

Mary G. McDonald. 'Out-of-Bounds Play: The Women's National Basketball Association and the Neoliberal Imaginings of Sexuality.' In *Sport and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption, and Culture*, edited by David L. Andrews and Michael L. Silk. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), p. 222.

<sup>47</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 280.

While Leslie ostensibly said she did not care if players are gay, this statement comes almost immediately after the section of her book where she described in detail her relationship with her husband, suggesting at the very least that she believes the stigma of lesbianism is detrimental to the league. This discomfort with lesbianism, and the fear of being labelled one, was clearly persistent in the league at the time; Chamique Holdsclaw (1999-2010) detailed her horror at her boyfriend suggesting that she was having an affair with a female teammate<sup>48</sup> and said that she chose the University of Tennessee because she 'wanted to go to a straight school,'<sup>49</sup> while Swoopes' mother said that Swoopes left the University of Texas because of lesbians on the team.<sup>50</sup> Both players later came out publicly, yet their earlier statements suggest the immense discomfort the issue raised and a strong desire to deflect accusations of lesbianism. As Griffin contends, this fear of the lesbian label is a form of social control, a way of preventing bonding between teammates and limiting the ability of women to claim their power.<sup>51</sup>

This promotion of respectable femininity and heterosexuality is palpable in the early commercials for the league and those that featured WNBA players. Banet-Weiser has suggested that 'brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships.'<sup>52</sup> Such branding is another way in which WNBA players constituted an image of sporting femininity. For example, the choices that early WNBA players made in their sponsorship decisions further highlight the importance that these players placed on stressing their femininity. This is exemplified by Rebecca Lobo's 1997 Reebok commercial.<sup>53</sup> Drafted by the New York Liberty, Lobo's commercial intertwines shots of her practising basketball alone in Madison Square Garden, training and running on New York streets, and talking directly

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<sup>48</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> Susan C. Biemesderfer, 'Hoop Schemes,' *The Advocate*, 18 August 1998, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Toby Miller. *Sportsex*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 115.

<sup>51</sup> Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), quoted in Kim Toffoletti and Holly Thorpe. 'The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram.' *Journal of Consumer Culture* 18, no. 2 (2018), p. 302.

<sup>53</sup> Reebok. 'Rebecca Lobo Reebok Commercial 1997,' *YouTube* Video, 0:59, posted by Michael Oh, 3 March 2013, accessed 21 May 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5fKI2fX6ig>>

to camera with an immaculate bob and a string of pearls, opining that ‘you can be feminine, and you can be athletic at the same time.’ As the only white member of the original three WNBA stars, Lobo was easily able to portray a particular, highly valued type of middle-class, culturally white femininity that emphasises classiness and glamour and eschews sexualisation.<sup>54</sup>

Women’s sport has often tried to distance itself from working-class imagery, using language like ‘ladies’ to give the athletes a sense of propriety and respectability.<sup>55</sup> The WNBA has continued this and in particular has attempted to distance itself from the often racialised, inner-city image of the NBA.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the commercial emphasises that although Lobo is playing in the big city, she is ‘from a little farm town,’ suggesting that she reflects the values of small-town white America. It should be pointed out that in the early days of the league, the notion of even playing professional basketball was revolutionary and Lobo was clearly emphasising the new possibilities the WNBA offered, pointing out that ‘the images [girls] see aren’t just going to be models walking down the runway, but women running down the court.’ At a time when women’s sport was gaining in popularity, Reebok clearly recognised the marketing potential of WNBA players and the value in being seen as supportive of women’s professional sport. Reebok wanted to be seen as encouraging ‘[women] since day one,’ demonstrating the way in which discourses of gender equality are transformed into a marketable attribute, as female empowerment becomes legible through the purchasing of products.<sup>57</sup>

While this advertisement and many other media representations portrayed a particular form of sporting femininity, it is significant that these sponsorships were even available at the time. Sheryl Swoopes was the first woman to have a signature shoe—the Nike Air Swoopes—and although others soon followed, including Lobo, Leslie, Cooper, Candace

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<sup>54</sup> Rachel Allison. *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), p. 119.

<sup>55</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 52. McDonald, ‘Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women's National Basketball Association,’ p. 387.

<sup>56</sup> Baroffio-Bota and Banet-Weiser, ‘Women, Team Sports, and the WNBA: Playing Like a Girl,’ p. 528.

<sup>57</sup> Toffoletti and Thorpe, ‘The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram,’ p. 302.

Parker (2008-present) and Dawn Staley (1996-2005), this boom did not last long, and no WNBA player has had a signature shoe since Candace Parker with Adidas in 2012.<sup>58</sup> By calling them the Air Swoopes, a reference to Michael Jordan's famous Air Jordan shoe line, Nike was positioning Swoopes as a female counterpart to Jordan, communicating a level of respect and prestige to shoe buyers.<sup>59</sup> Swoopes helped design the shoes, and did not want them to be 'too girly,'<sup>60</sup> choosing a black and white colour scheme that could traditionally be seen as unisex. However, Swoopes was clearly thinking of the material realities of being a woman that embodied femininity in her appearance; the Air Swoopes came with a strap designed to prevent nail damage when pulling on the shoe, and indeed, Swoopes 'did play with nails.'<sup>61</sup> Playing with nails, and incorporating that choice into a signature shoe, would seem to be a choice based purely on communicating femininity, as in basketball it is generally seen as dangerous to have long fingernails. Like hair, however, nails have a distinct role in Black femininity, as long nails with artistic, original designs have long been a form of Black female self-expression.<sup>62</sup> The media obsession with Black track star Flo-Jo's long nails, for example, reflects that while she was perceived as feminine, it was a type of femininity outside the white, cultural

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<sup>58</sup> In 2021, Breanna Stewart did sign a deal with Puma that included a signature shoe, however these are yet to be released. Adidas has also released a new version of Candace Parker's shoe to coincide with the 2021 Playoffs.

Maria Clifton. 'SneakerCenter: Sheryl Swoopes on Being The First Woman to Have a Signature Athletic Shoe,' *ESPNW*, 22 October 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/espnw/culture/story/\\_/id/27901597/sneakercenter-sheryl-swoopes-being-first-woman-signature-athletic-shoe?fbclid=IwAR3nDQml4-GUX01E6tZCWhMvF5GycAnFrnGGXxNEwYje1Ib3m1nSt7F3WcU](https://www.espn.com/espnw/culture/story/_/id/27901597/sneakercenter-sheryl-swoopes-being-first-woman-signature-athletic-shoe?fbclid=IwAR3nDQml4-GUX01E6tZCWhMvF5GycAnFrnGGXxNEwYje1Ib3m1nSt7F3WcU)>

Calvy Click. 'The Complete History of Women's Signature Basketball Shoes,' *Complex*, 10 April 2013, accessed 22 May 2020, <<https://www.complex.com/sneakers/2013/04/the-complete-history-of-womens-signature-basketball-shoes>>

Aaron Dodson and Nick DePaula. 'The Complete History of Signature Sneakers in the WNBA,' *The Undefeated*, 22 September 2021, accessed 18 October 2021, <<https://theundefeated.com/features/the-complete-history-of-signature-sneakers-in-the-wnba/>>

<sup>59</sup> Hernandez, 'Sheryl Swoopes, a WNBA Superstar, on Her Big Nike Moment: "I Still Get A Little Choked Up."'

<sup>60</sup> Hernandez, 'Sheryl Swoopes, a WNBA Superstar, on Her Big Nike Moment: "I Still Get A Little Choked Up."'

<sup>61</sup> Clifton, 'SneakerCenter: Sheryl Swoopes on Being The First Woman to Have a Signature Athletic Shoe.'

<sup>62</sup> Miliann Kang. *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 122.

norm.<sup>63</sup> Within this framework, Swoopes' thought process in designing her shoes becomes clearer as nails are an 'important vehicle that illustrates race and gender.'<sup>64</sup>

In 1999 Nike created a series of "Little Rascals" advertisements for the signature shoes of Swoopes, Leslie, and Cooper.<sup>65</sup> The ads involved three young female fans in WNBA jerseys accosting the players in their daily life with technical critiques of their game. One, for instance, involves the girls approaching Cooper in a diner, arguing that in last night's game she should have passed the ball to Tina Thompson (1997-2013) rather than pulling up for a three-pointer.<sup>66</sup> This ad in many ways is a rarity; female fandom is generally trivialised and feminised, with the assumption being that women are uninterested in the technical aspects of the game and are only there for the off-court storylines.<sup>67</sup> These ads show three young girls engaging in sports fandom with a high level of technical detail, and not about men's sport, but about a women's sport that it had only recently become possible for them to aspire towards playing professionally. This creates an impression of seriousness, presenting the notion that the WNBA is worth investing in, and that its players are worth admiring. While they are critiquing the players, it is in a humorous fashion, with the players laughing at the girl's gusto, and it is not the sort of criticism of unathletic play that has plagued women's basketball; it suggests WNBA players should be taken seriously as athletes, with all the examination that comes with that.

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<sup>63</sup> Lindsay Parks Pieper. 'Star-Spangled Fingernails: Florence Griffith-Joyner and the Mediation of Black Femininity,' *Sport in American History*, 20 April 2015, accessed 11 September 2021, <<https://ussporthistory.com/2015/04/20/star-spangled-fingernails-florence-griffith-joyner-and-the-mediation-of-black-femininity/>>

<sup>64</sup> Pieper, 'Star-Spangled Fingernails: Florence Griffith-Joyner and the Mediation of Black Femininity.'

<sup>65</sup> Rachel Galligan. 'Top WNBA Commercials of the 90s,' *Hero Sports*, 18 May 2018, accessed 22 May 2020, <<https://herosports.com/wnba/90s-tv-commercials-bud-light-nike-barbie-reebok-ruru>>

<sup>66</sup> Nike. 'Nike Little Rascals WNBA 1,' *YouTube* Video, 0:34, posted by dante65, 7 September 2006, accessed 21 May 2020, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=5&v=5\\_DOL061B9c&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=5_DOL061B9c&feature=emb_logo)>

<sup>67</sup> Lindsey Meân. 'Empowerment Through Sport? Female Fans, Women's Sport, and the Construction of Gendered Fandom.' In *Sport and Its Female Fans*, edited by Kim Toffoletti and Peter Mewett. (New York: Routledge, 2012) p. 171.

Additionally, while it is true that women's sport is frequently marketed towards children, and its fans often constructed as such, the level of detail and passion these young girls convey resists this framing, suggesting a level of maturity in their appreciation of the game.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, another of the little rascals commercials offers a tongue-in-cheek appraisal of Leslie's now infamous femininity, with the girls waylaying Leslie in a mall, telling her that her newly purchased pumps would 'destroy your knees.'<sup>69</sup> The line 'pumps are for ex-players' accompanies an image of her signature basketball shoes. While Leslie is dressed in an overtly feminine style, the "rascals" are all wearing WNBA jerseys, shorts, and basketball shoes, with one even carrying the official WNBA ball. While the ad does not hugely challenge Leslie's femininity, it does show the possibilities of a basketball-inspired style for young girls, suggesting that girls wanted to wear basketball clothing and shoes too.

However, it is highly significant that what the "little rascals" commercial did *not* feature was the WNBA players actually playing basketball. It was not the only commercial that used the language and iconography of basketball, yet minimised images of on-court action. A 1997 Bud Light WNBA commercial portrayed Lisa Leslie eating breakfast at a diner bench, swatting away the pastry of the man next to her when he tries to dip it in her coffee, saying 'nobody dunks in my house.'<sup>70</sup> While this is followed by a few videos of her blocking shots on the court, the bulk of the ad takes place in the diner. By emphasising the everyday activities of WNBA players these advertisements 'reiterate their status as relatable, non-threatening women.'<sup>71</sup> As Banet-Weiser suggests 'action shots of strong, sweaty female bodies, simply by their sheer corporeality, challenge

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<sup>68</sup> Meân, 'Empowerment Through Sport? Female Fans, Women's Sport, and the Construction of Gendered Fandom,' pp. 175-176.

<sup>69</sup> Nike. 'Nike WNBA Little Rascals 5,' *YouTube* Video, 0:16, posted by dante65, 28 June 2007, accessed 21 May 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1hn7WHrr50>>

<sup>70</sup> Bud Light. 'Bud Light-WNBA,' *YouTube* Video, 0:30, posted by LisaLeslie, 14 October 2012, accessed 21 May 2020, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFAhqCqKBuW&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFAhqCqKBuW&feature=emb_logo)>

<sup>71</sup> Carrie Dunn. 'Media Coverage of Women's Sport: Personal Reflections.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 842.

dominant masculine conventions involving sport.<sup>72</sup> These advertisements were for women's sport and had to incorporate basketball in some way, but by enabling the players to remain in everyday attire and in a largely stationary position, they did not have to deal with the problem of depicting an athletic, aggressive, strong female body. While, as Wearden and Creedon found, sporting goods companies such as Nike and Reebok tended to be more willing to present women in active roles, recognising that the WNBA audience might have a different perspective on sporting femininity, these commercials suggest that there was still a reluctance to emphasise athleticism and competition.<sup>73</sup>

The positioning of the young female "little rascals" looking up at their WNBA heroes does demonstrate the importance the WNBA and its players placed on being role models, particularly throughout the first years of the league. Cooper, for instance, described how at the inception of the league, her 'teammates and I planned to become positive role models for the youth of Houston,'<sup>74</sup> while Lisa Leslie described WNBA players as 'great role models,' many of whom had gone to college or were working mothers.<sup>75</sup> Both Leslie and Cooper tie being role models to a form of middle-class, feminine respectability, and Cooper in particular stressed the importance of being a role model for 'kids in the inner city who think their lives are hopeless.'<sup>76</sup> Swoopes and Sue Bird further positioned themselves as role models for children by publishing autobiographical texts as picture books for children, combining their life stories with advice targeted at young athletes.<sup>77</sup> Of course, many sporting stars, male and female, desire to project themselves as role models, and use sporting autobiographies to do so.<sup>78</sup> What is interesting is how the WNBA connected being a role model to a particular form of colour-blind femininity, minimising race and emphasising gender, thus

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<sup>72</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser. 'Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender.' *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 23, no. 4 (1999), p. 403.

<sup>73</sup> Wearden and Creedon, "'We Got Next": Images of Women in Television Commercials During the Inaugural WNBA Season,' p. 207.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 279.

<sup>76</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 2

<sup>77</sup> Sue Bird and Greg Brown. *Be Yourself*. (Kirkland: Positively for Kids, Inc., 2004). Swoopes and Brown, *Bounce Back*.

<sup>78</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, p. 108.

distancing themselves from the image of the supposedly disrespectful, spoiled Black NBA players.<sup>79</sup> Respectable, feminine role models were positioned explicitly against Black masculinity.

The NBA of the 1990s and early 2000s was 'touted as the archetype of decline, with Michael Jordan as the prized relic of a dying breed and Latrell Sprewell, Allen Iverson, and Ron Artest as the poster children of a sorry new lot.'<sup>80</sup> Unlike Michael Jordan, who had positioned himself as mainstream and non-threatening to white America, these new players embraced hip-hop culture and were unapologetic about their Blackness.<sup>81</sup> Coupled with this was a dramatic increase in salaries, and a narrative soon emerged that NBA players were only interested in money, and were receiving it at too young an age.<sup>82</sup> This critique, based on racist paternalism, meant that WNBA players could be situated in opposition, as moral, respectable, altruistic women.<sup>83</sup> Being underpaid became reframed as playing for the "love of the game." Having to stay in college to ensure post-career options was simply evidence they were role models. A 2019 article in *The Athletic*, for instance, argued one 'small bright spot' of low salaries was 'fans never really have to question the motives of [WNBA players]. It's hard to play for the money if you're not making very much of it.'<sup>84</sup> The fact that the majority of the WNBA was Black did not matter, as the league tried to make gender the only salient point in their marketing.<sup>85</sup> As McPherson argues, Black femininity was pitted against Black

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<sup>79</sup> Banet-Weiser, 'Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender,' p. 410.

<sup>80</sup> Lisa A. Flores, Karen Lee Ashcraft, and Tracy Marafiotte. 'We Got Game: Race, Masculinity, and Civilization in Professional Team Sport.' In *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication*, edited by Thomas K. Nakayama and Rona Tamiko Halualani, (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 417.

<sup>81</sup> Stacy L. Lorenz, and Rod Murray. "'Goodbye to the Gangstas": The NBA Dress Code, Ray Emery, and the Policing of Blackness in Basketball and Hockey.' *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 38, no. 1 (February 1, 2014), p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> Flores, Ashcraft, and Marafiotte, 'We Got Game: Race, Masculinity, and Civilization in Professional Team Sport,' p. 418.

<sup>83</sup> Banet-Weiser, 'Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender,' p. 410.

<sup>84</sup> Alex Coffey. "'It Could Be Over Next Year": The Tricky Balance WNBA Players Face When Preparing for Life After Basketball,' *The Athletic*, 12 July 2019, accessed 29 April 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1074271/2019/07/12/it-could-be-over-next-year-the-tricky-balance-wnba-players-face-when-preparing-for-life-after-basketball/>>

<sup>85</sup> Mary McDonald. 'The Marketing of the Women's National Basketball Association and the



masculinity 'by way of a narrative and visual logic that simultaneously function[ed] to deny racism.'<sup>86</sup>

Though this was true at the league's inception, the importance of promoting their players as role models was heightened in 2004 with the "Malice in the Palace" event in which members of the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers were involved in a brawl that spilled into the stands, thus confirming the fears of many white Americans about this new style of NBA player.<sup>87</sup> The fear that WNBA players would be associated with this violent image was palpable, particularly after a 2008 on-court fight between the Detroit Shock and the Los Angeles Sparks. Leslie was interviewed post-game in tears, saying 'as a role model, this is not the way we want to represent ourselves,' while DeLisha Milton-Jones (1999-2016) lamented that 'it's sad that the fight garnered more attention than us being phenomenal role models and incredible athletes.'<sup>88</sup> There was evidently a fear of being associated with a lower-class form of womanhood, as even when promoting its Black players, the WNBA stressed middle-class respectability. Yet, access to this for Black women is always conditional, as evidenced in 2007, when radio announcer Don Imus called the Rutgers University women's basketball team 'nappy headed hos' and 'some rough girls.'<sup>89</sup> While Imus' comments were condemned as racist and led to his firing, they demonstrate how Black women's femininity is only respected if it conforms to white middle-class norms. Imus compared the Rutgers team to their opponents, the Lady Vols, who he called 'cute'; though both teams were majority Black, it was the Lady Vols who supposedly embodied an acceptable form of Black femininity, while Rutgers

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Making of Postfeminism.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 35, no. 1 (2000), p. 43.

<sup>86</sup> McPherson, 'Who's Got Next? Gender, Race, and the Mediation of the WNBA,' p. 194.

<sup>87</sup> Flores, Ashcraft, and Marafiote, 'We Got Game: Race, Masculinity, and Civilization in Professional Team Sport,' p. 417.

<sup>88</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. 'The Story Behind the Biggest Brawl in WNBA History,' *Deadspin*, 12 September 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://deadspin.com/the-story-behind-the-biggest-brawl-in-wnba-history-1837850806>>

<sup>89</sup> David J. Leonard and C. Richard King. 'Introduction: Celebrities, Commodities, and Criminals: African American Athletes and the Racial Politics of Culture.' In *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, edited by David J. Leonard and C. Richard King. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011), p. 13.

David Carr. 'Networks Condemn Remarks by Imus,' *The New York Times*, 7 April 2007, accessed 7 July 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/07/arts/television/07imus.html>>

were manly and rough, 'like the Toronto Raptors [NBA team]'.<sup>90</sup> Rutgers coach C. Vivian Stringer responded to Imus by calling her players 'young ladies of class,' demonstrating how class is leveraged to combat a vision of Black womanhood that does not fit mainstream norms.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, this further illuminates the link between class and hair; all the Black team members on Rutgers wore their hair straight, yet Imus viewed them as working-class and thus denigrated them as 'nappy headed.'<sup>92</sup>

Highlighting gender while minimising race, Brüning suggests, is emblematic of a Black postfeminist sensibility, leaving the subject as 'an empty signifier of racial and feminist progress.'<sup>93</sup> The visibility of these Black women suggests some progress yet obscures the actual political concerns of Black women and the cultural specificities of what it means to be a Black woman. Indeed, as Collins argues, a respectable, unaggressive woman is less likely to fight to lessen their subordination.<sup>94</sup> The autobiographies of WNBA players tended to mirror the league's position, with race seldom mentioned in comparison to the struggles they face as women in the sporting world. For instance, Sue Bird (2002-present), who is white, said of her college teammates in her autobiography aimed at children, 'I can honestly say we were all colorblind.'<sup>95</sup> Considering her later statements show a sophisticated recognition of the way the intersection of race and gender has affected the league and its players, this earlier statement is more reflective of the position of the WNBA at the time, and the dominance of a postfeminist sensibility that pushed individual achievement and minimised structural injustice.<sup>96</sup> The only autobiography that deviated from this even slightly was Holdsclaw's, who discussed her desire to know more about African-American history and 'know more about being a

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<sup>90</sup> Cheryl Cooky, Faye L. Wachs, Michael Messner, and Shari L. Dworkin. 'It's Not About the Game: Don Imus, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Media.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27, no. 2 (2010), pp. 140-141.

<sup>91</sup> Cooky et al. 'It's Not About the Game: Don Imus, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Media,' p. 153.

<sup>92</sup> Althea Prince. *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*. (London: Insomniac Press, 2009), p. 100.

<sup>93</sup> Kristina Brüning. 'Olivia Pope: A Black Post-Feminist Subject? Analyzing *Scandal's* Intersecting Post-Feminist and Colorblind Discourses.' *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019), p. 465.

<sup>94</sup> Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, p. 138.

<sup>95</sup> Bird and Brown, *Be Yourself*, p. 32.

<sup>96</sup> Sarah Spain. Championship Duo: Sue Bird & Megan Rapinoe. *That's What She Said*. Podcast. 28 November 2018, <[http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play/\\_/id/25391424](http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play/_/id/25391424)>

Black woman in this world and our struggles and triumphs as a people,<sup>97</sup> although she did not link this to the WNBA and her position as an athlete.

Yet the experience of WNBA players reflects the notion that 'Black women can be both invisible *and* hyper-visible in particular sporting and popular cultural spaces,'<sup>98</sup> and that this hyper-visibility comes into effect when social and economic inequalities are apparent.<sup>99</sup> Cynthia Cooper is not alone in discussing her poverty and violence-stricken childhood in the South Central Los Angeles projects; Sugar Rodgers (2013-2020) described her family being in and out of prison while drug dealers were in front of her house, Tanisha Wright (2005-2020) learnt to play basketball using milk crates as baskets, and Shannon Bobbitt (2008-2010) experienced homelessness while growing up in the Bronx.<sup>100</sup> To some extent, these WNBA players are constrained within a 'ghetto-to-glory' narrative, as race is made legible to the reader by drawing on established storylines of Black experiences.<sup>101</sup> Yet some players are acutely aware of this narrative and seek to disrupt it; Essence Carson (2008-present), for instance, is explicit in challenging the audience:

There are a lot of stereotypes about the hood. Some are true, but most are just some surface-level b.s. It's like, I do want to tell you the truth, but I don't know if you want to hear something that may not fit into your stereotype.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 115.

<sup>98</sup> Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe. "'And Still Serena Rises: Celebrating the Cross-Generational Continuities of Black Feminisms and Black Female Excellence in Sport.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 122.

<sup>99</sup> Rasul A. Mowatt and Bryana H. French. 'Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility: A Black Feminist Augmentation of Feminist Leisure Research.' *Journal of Leisure Research* 45, no. 5 (2013), p. 645.

<sup>100</sup> Sugar Rodgers. 'Making It Out,' *The Players' Tribune*, 10 September 2015, accessed 19 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/sugar-rodgers-wnba-new-york-liberty>>

Tanisha Wright. 'The Way In,' *The Players' Tribune*, 10 November 2015, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/tanisha-wright-wnba-the-way-in>>  
Bobbitt, *Bobbitt: 5'2" Giant Handling the Odds*, p. 40.

<sup>101</sup> McKay and Johnson, 'Pornographic Eroticism and Sexual Grotesquerie in Representations of African American Sportswomen,' p. 496.

<sup>102</sup> Essence Carson. 'Write Your Story, Babygirl,' *The Players' Tribune*, 19 September 2017,

Carson thus works to challenge the one-dimensional paradigm of Blackness that dominates American culture and marginalises Black women.<sup>103</sup>

While there is evidently significant evidence that the WNBA initially desired to promote itself through a feminine, maternal lens, they did still present their players as athletes, and while there was a colour-blind approach, they did draw on some of the same imagery of 'urban authenticity' as the NBA.<sup>104</sup> One of the WNBA's first commercials with Bud Light featured two men playing on a street court, only to be interrupted by Cynthia Cooper, who tells them 'you play like girls.'<sup>105</sup> The two men then respond 'Thank you!' Like the other commercials, this does not actually feature Cooper playing basketball, but it does subvert the expectations that come with being accused of playing sport like a girl. Additionally, the street ball setting suggests that early WNBA advertising did not completely want to separate itself from the NBA's 'urban' strategy. Andrew, Mower and Silk argue that media portrayals have resulted in urban space becoming indistinguishably linked with Blackness, and thus the street ball court has become a signifier of Blackness and authenticity.<sup>106</sup> While utilising problematic and one-dimensional depictions of Blackness to create revenue risks essentialising Black athletes, there was at least some recognition on the part of the WNBA that the majority of its athletes were Black; it was no accident that the main girl in the "Little Rascals" commercial was Black.

These small hints at a more progressive advertising strategy that recognised the diversity of its athletes would not remain as the league progressed into the early 2000s. While the league started on a wave of optimism—and crowd sizes that would never be

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accessed 13 November 2018, < <https://www.theplayertribune.com/en-us/articles/essence-carson-music-wnba-sparks>>

<sup>103</sup> bell hooks. *yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 59.

<sup>104</sup> David L. Andrews, Ronald L. Mower, and Michael L. Silk. 'Ghettocentrism and the Essentialized Black Male Athlete.' In *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, edited by David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011), p. 70.

<sup>105</sup> WNBA. 'Cynthia Cooper WNBA Commercial 1997,' *YouTube* Video, 0:31, posted by video editor, 12 March 2014, accessed 21 May 2020,

<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7upCO3RVjw&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7upCO3RVjw&feature=emb_logo)>

<sup>106</sup> Andrews, Mower, and Silk, 'Ghettocentrism and the Essentialized Black Male Athlete,' p. 69.

matched—attendance began to decline and four of the initial franchises folded.<sup>107</sup> The future of the WNBA seemed uncertain, and players like Vickie Bullet (1997-2002) worried that the league was ‘shaky. I don't know if we're going to make it another four [years].’<sup>108</sup> There were constant questions about its profitability yet little investment, with not even a rights fee included in its television contract with ABC and ESPN.<sup>109</sup> In this precarious position, the WNBA increased its reliance on conservative gender norms to sell the league, doubling down on advertising their players as women first, almost completely eliding their status as athletes. The 2003 “This Is Who I Am” commercial featured Ticha Penicheiro (1998-2012) driving and lounging against a yellow sports car in a gold jumpsuit, Lisa Leslie telling us she’s ‘glamorous, so what?’ while walking down a catwalk next to a pool in an evening dress, Sheryl Swoopes in a pink crop top and short shorts saying she’s ‘responsible because I know my son is watching,’ and Sue Bird declaring suggestively, ‘I am not as sweet as you think I am.’<sup>110</sup> Other players pose in front of a white screen, occasionally holding a basketball, all with their hair out, a full face of makeup, and feminine dress. Only a few very brief clips of the players playing betrays the fact that it is an ad for a sports league. This is what Helene Shugart labels ‘passive objectification,’<sup>111</sup> as by displaying their athletes in glamorous, non-athletic ways the WNBA tried to limit the revolutionary potential of strong, athletic women. As Lobo later described, ‘for it to kind of go backwards to the place where it doesn’t matter what you did on the court, we need you to look cute in front of the camera or be in leather pants on a convertible was just a really bizarre way to do things.’<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Berri, ‘The Relative Success Story of the WNBA,’ p. 191.

<sup>108</sup> Ken Denlinger. ‘For WNBA, a Full Court Press,’ *The Washington Post*, 15 July 2002, accessed 22 September 2021, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/07/15/for-wnba-a-full-court-press/654c8a60-05eb-4c8c-81eb-c1ab2a62e87d/>>

<sup>109</sup> Denlinger, ‘For WNBA, a Full Court Press.’

<sup>110</sup> WNBA. ‘This is Who I Am-Long.’ Video, 0:60, posted by claymore, 11 August 2013, accessed 21 May 2020, <<https://adland.tv/adnews/wnba-who-i-am-long-2003-060-usa>>

<sup>111</sup> Helene Shugart, ‘She Shoots, She Scores: Mediated Constructions of Contemporary Female Athletes in Coverage of the 1999 US Women’s Soccer Team,’ (2003), quoted in Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women’s Professional Soccer*, p. 110.

<sup>112</sup> Sarah Spain. Basketball Love Story: Rebecca Lobo. *That’s What She Said*. Podcast. 23 October 2018, <<http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play?id=25063603>>

By 2008, the WNBA was quite explicit in telling reporters that they were emphasising a particular version of womanhood, with Renee Brown, the vice president of player personnel, saying they were trying to present players as ‘mothers, daughters, sisters, nieces and entrepreneurs.’<sup>113</sup> They introduced courses on fashion and makeup into the rookie orientation, part of what then league president called ‘contributing to how to be a professional.’<sup>114</sup> This is a common theme among women’s sports leagues, and indeed women in the workforce more generally, where a feminine appearance is conflated with professionalism.<sup>115</sup> While Brown presents the makeup classes as something the women enjoy, as Bartky points out, appropriate makeup choices in a professional setting are highly constrained, and ‘the woman who uses cosmetics in a genuinely novel and imaginative way is liable to be seen not as an artist but as an eccentric.’<sup>116</sup> Allison furthers this, highlighting that these constraints are highly classed and raced, as a “professional” appearance, particularly in terms of hair and makeup, is hard to achieve for Black women or masculine-presenting women.<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, Brown explicitly stated that the WNBA was linking womanhood and entrepreneurship, reflecting a postfeminist, neoliberal sensibility in which women are compelled to portray ‘desirable,’ middle-class femininity to be successful career women in an unstable work environment where selling oneself is key.<sup>118</sup>

While the players did admit to the importance of wearing makeup, they seemed to recognise that it was largely for commercial reasons, rather than any affective pleasure they received. Candace Parker voiced hope that ‘as time goes on, I think [looks] will be less and less important,’ while Alexis Hornbuckle (2008-2013) suggested ambivalence, saying, ‘hey, you’ve got to play the game. That’s life.’<sup>119</sup> Even Brown admitted that many

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<sup>113</sup> Shannon Ryan. ‘Banking on Beauty,’ *Chicago Tribune*, 4 May 2008, accessed 21 May 2020, <<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2008-05-04-0805030427-story.html>>

<sup>114</sup> Ryan, ‘Banking on Beauty.’

<sup>115</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women’s Professional Soccer*, p. 122.

<sup>116</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky. ‘Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power.’ In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 138.

<sup>117</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women’s Professional Soccer*, p. 135.

<sup>118</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, ‘Regulating the Object: The TV Make-over as Site of Neo-Liberal Reinvention toward Bourgeois Femininity,’ p. 240.

<sup>119</sup> Ryan, ‘Banking on Beauty.’

of the women did not know how to apply mascara coming in, which perhaps indicates that they were not particularly interested.<sup>120</sup> Lobo in 2018 acknowledged the pragmatic acceptance of forced gender norms, acknowledging:

I think we were just so happy to have a league, like all right, whatever we need to do we got to do it, we've got to promote this, and so if that meant putting on, if you're Diana Taurasi, putting on whatever outfit and getting your hair and makeup done, ok, cause that's not crossing a huge line, it's not like you're asking us to wear these ridiculous spandex uniforms... We got to do whatever is necessary to make sure this league exists next year.<sup>121</sup>

Candace Parker is perhaps most representative of this trend in the league, following in the same tradition as Leslie and Swoopes. Drafted in 2008 to the Los Angeles Sparks, Leslie's team, Parker and Leslie became known as the 'dunking divas,' as Parker's attractiveness—and its marketability—became a central story.<sup>122</sup> Sparks coach Michael Cooper expressed excitement that single men might now watch the WNBA, while Parker's lucrative endorsements with Gatorade and Adidas were not just because of her exceptional talent and dunking ability, but according to Travis Gonzalez, Adidas' head of global public relations for basketball, because 'she's an attractive girl.'<sup>123</sup> Parker, like Leslie, is one of the few women who are able to dunk, a subject explored more thoroughly in Chapter Five, and by challenging female athletic limits she offered new possibilities of what women's basketball could be. However, by portraying her in feminised, objectifying terms it limits the transgressive potential of dunking and women's athleticism.

In addition, Parker followed in Swoopes' footsteps by appearing on the cover of *ESPN The Magazine* in 2009 heavily pregnant, wearing 'a vaguely virginal white dress'<sup>124</sup> and

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<sup>120</sup> Ryan, 'Banking on Beauty.'

<sup>121</sup> Spain, *Basketball Love Story*: Rebecca Lobo.

<sup>122</sup> McDonald, 'Out-of-Bounds Play: The Women's National Basketball Association and the Neoliberal Imaginings of Sexuality,' p. 217.

<sup>123</sup> Ryan, 'Banking on Beauty.'

<sup>124</sup> Louisa Thomas. 'Candace Parker Knows What She Wants.' *Grantland*, 18 June 2013, accessed 9 November 2015, <<http://grantland.com/features/the-life-career-wnba-candace-parker/>>

accompanied by the tagline 'how big can Candace Parker get?'<sup>125</sup> Like Swoopes' article, this tagline ties her pregnancy into her basketball career and the promotion of the league in general, emphasising the degree to which pregnancy and motherhood were crucial elements of the early WNBA. However, Parker was sexualised in a way that Swoopes was not; the article began by saying 'Candace Parker is beautiful. Breathtaking, really, with flawless skin, endless legs and a C cup she is proud of but never flaunts.'<sup>126</sup> This would later be repeated post-pregnancy in an article for *Deadspin*:

Parker returned yesterday against the Mercury and once again sportswriters found themselves talking about her boobs: just before the game, Parker had to pump breast milk in the locker room for her daughter's post-game feeding.<sup>127</sup>

As McKay and Johnson point out, this kind of 'pornographic eroticism' is a common recuperative strategy to position muscular sportswomen within more acceptable boundaries, reclaiming sport as a masculine endeavour.<sup>128</sup> This fetishization of Parker fits within a tradition of sexualising Black athletes by focusing on specific, segmented areas of their bodies, a way of imagining them as 'racialised and sexualised spectacles.'<sup>129</sup> Additionally, the humorous tone of the sexualisation reflects the larger culture of denigrating the league, as popular culture at this time largely considered the WNBA as a joke. None of these techniques the league employed to present its players as feminine actually helped, as sportswriters and sports fans continued to insult their attractiveness and label them as lesbians.<sup>130</sup> No matter how feminine or attractive the

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<sup>125</sup> Allison Glock. 'The Selling of Candace Parker,' *ESPN.com*, 12 March 2009, accessed 10 November 2015, <<http://espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3967891>>

<sup>126</sup> Glock, 'The Selling of Candace Parker.'

<sup>127</sup> Tommy Craggs. 'In Season Debut, Candace Parker Produces Six Points, Several Fluid Ounces of Breast Milk,' *Deadspin*, 6 July 2009, accessed 10 November 2015, <<http://deadspin.com/5308300/in-season-debut-candace-parker-produces-six-points-several-fluid-ounces-of-breast-milk>>

<sup>128</sup> McKay and Helen Johnson, 'Pornographic Eroticism and Sexual Grotesquerie in Representations of African American Sportswomen,' p. 492.

<sup>129</sup> McKay and Helen Johnson, 'Pornographic Eroticism and Sexual Grotesquerie in Representations of African American Sportswomen,' p. 500.

<sup>130</sup> For example: Bill Simmons. 'This is Who I Am...' *ESPN Page 2*, 31 August 2005, accessed 10 November 2015,

<<http://espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=simmons/050901>>

David Breitman. 'The Top 10 Ways to Make the WNBA Slightly Less Terrible,' *Spike*, 17 September 2009, accessed 10 November 2015,



players were, 'women of colour are policed for simply having non-white bodies.'<sup>131</sup>

A key piece of context that is often missing in work about women and sport is religion and Christianity. It is impossible to understand these issues of femininity, sexuality, and race without acknowledging the central role religion plays in the lives of WNBA players and their construction of their gendered and raced embodiment. In 2019, Maya Moore (2011-present), one of the WNBA's biggest stars, announced that she would not play in the 2019 season due to her desire to focus on her 'ministry dreams.'<sup>132</sup> Moore had long made her Christian faith part of her public persona, signing autographs with the Bible verse Colossians 3:23, and this decision was the culmination of her belief in sharing her faith.<sup>133</sup> While sitting out the season for religious reasons is unique to Moore, the public display of religious devotion is not an uncommon sight amongst WNBA players. Leslie described her saluting gesture with her teammate DeLisha Milton-Jones as being a sign that they were 'soldiers for Jesus,' a sign that spread amongst Sparks fans which Milton-Jones and Leslie used to 'spread the good word.'<sup>134</sup> Chamique Holdsclaw's first Nike commercial was based around the number 23, a reference to Psalm 23.<sup>135</sup> Swin Cash's entire autobiography is centred on her relationship with God in her journey to return to the Olympics.<sup>136</sup> With few exceptions, WNBA player autobiographies invoke some reference to their Christian faith and how important that is to their basketball journey. Yet while there has been much scholarly work on the relationship between religion and sport this has almost entirely focused on men, and little is known about sportswomen's

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<<http://www.spike.com/articles/kzyrnc/the-top-10-ways-to-make-the-wnba-slightly-less-terrible>>

<sup>131</sup> Mary G. McDonald and Renee Shelby. 'Feminism, Intersectionality and the Problem of Whiteness in Leisure and Sport Practices and Scholarship.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 508

<sup>132</sup> Maya Moore. 'The Shift,' *The Players' Tribune*, 6 February 2019, accessed 7 February 2019, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/maya-moore-wnba-announcement>>

<sup>133</sup> Moore, 'The Shift.'

Maya Moore. 'God Has Used Me in Ways I Don't Even Know and I'm Still Learning How God Wants To Use Me Now,' *Beyond the Ultimate*, 2012, accessed 28 March 2019, <<http://beyondtheultimate.com/athlete/Maya-Moore>>

<sup>134</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 176.

<sup>135</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 32.

<sup>136</sup> Cash, *Humble Journey: More Precious Than Gold*.

relationship to God.<sup>137</sup>

Sport and religion have historically been closely intertwined, as discussed in Chapter Two, and the relationship between sport and evangelism is particularly prominent in sports ministry organisations, such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA).<sup>138</sup> The FCA, for instance, reported 88,317 attendants at their 2018 camps, in which sporting activities are combined with prayer and bible study.<sup>139</sup> WNBA players such as Cynthia Cooper and Maya Moore credit the FCA or AIA's Ultimate Training Camp as instrumental in their religious education, with college being an important time in which their religious beliefs strengthened.<sup>140</sup> The FCA was formed in 1954, as sports ministers enlisted popular male athletes to promote masculinity and evangelical Christianity.<sup>141</sup> While the early focus was on celebrity athletes, by the 1970s sports ministers began to see sport as an individual embodied religious experience, which enabled a greater emphasis on non-celebrity sports people, particularly women and young people.<sup>142</sup> The rise of evangelical Christianity in the 1980s hastened the permeation of Christian athletes at all levels.<sup>143</sup> By the 1990s, women and young people made up the largest proportion of sports ministry participants, while the AIA's focus on basketball attracted women and Black athletes.<sup>144</sup> No longer is the emphasis on conversion through conversational witnessing, but rather they see their power in their

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<sup>137</sup> One prominent exception is Annie Blazer. *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*. (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>138</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 3.

<sup>139</sup> Fellowship of Christian Athletes. 'FCA Camps Catapult Coaches and Athletes into a Strong Faith in Jesus Christ,' *FCA Camps*, accessed 15 June 2020, <<https://www.fcacamps.org/2018-camp-impact/>>

<sup>140</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 103.

Moore, 'God Has Used Me in Ways I Don't Even Know and I'm Still Learning How God Wants To Use Me Now.'

<sup>141</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 9.

<sup>142</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 9.

<sup>143</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 157.

<sup>144</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 10.

Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*, p. 202.

sporting performance and behaviour.<sup>145</sup> Sport is seen as a forum for God's will, an area in which athletes can feel God's pleasure, while athletic pain is made 'meaningful by positioning this pain as an opportunity to connect with the divine.'<sup>146</sup> This is apparent in WNBA player's discussion of injuries, as Tamika Catchings (2001-2016) suggested that after tearing her ACL, 'God gave me peace...He used that time without basketball to help me refocus and see that He wanted to be the center of my life.'<sup>147</sup> Sports ministers continue to promote the link between Christian morality and sports that Gulick had pushed, arguing for a specific Christian mode of playing sport that incorporated moral values.<sup>148</sup>

This religiosity has a significant influence on conceptions of femininity and marriage. Annie Blazer's exploration of women in sports ministry found that they tended to have traditional views on gender roles and the importance of femininity for women.<sup>149</sup> Women were able to expand 'godly femininity to included strength, action, and leadership, while maintaining a sense of the importance of traditional feminine nurturing.'<sup>150</sup> Resources such as books are available for female athletes to encourage and promote this, and in one, basketball player Karen Drollinger is quoted as saying:

Femininity may not help a female athlete shoot free throws better, but accepting and fulfilling one's godly image gives her inner confidence to perform to the best of her ability. In other words, femininity is a necessity if women athletes are to be all that God created them to be.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 30.

<sup>146</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 80.

<sup>147</sup> Tamika Catchings, 'My Success in Basketball is Temporary. The Most Important Thing is Keeping Jesus the Focus of My Life,' *Beyond the Ultimate*, 2012, accessed 28 March 2019, <<http://beyondtheultimate.com/athlete/Tamika-Catchings>>

<sup>148</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 45.

<sup>149</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 23.

<sup>150</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 23.

<sup>151</sup> Deb Hoffman, Julie Caldwell, and Kathy Schultz, *Experiencing God's Power for Female Athletes: How to Compete, Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (1999), quoted in Blazer,

While they were able to include athletics as an important part of evangelical femininity, evangelical women still maintained a strong belief in male leadership and superiority.<sup>152</sup> Lisa Leslie embodied these traits; as discussed earlier Leslie strongly believed in the importance of feminine appearance, yet believed that it is compatible with being a successful basketball player.<sup>153</sup> Mirroring the notion of multiple femininities, for evangelical women, it is still possible to play aggressively, as long as they maintain their femininity and Christian integrity.<sup>154</sup> Leslie's views on marriage and gender roles typify those of the sports ministry, as she discussed her relationship with her husband, saying they were 'both a little old-fashioned in our thinking, kind of old school. You know, "the man works and the woman stays home" kind of people.'<sup>155</sup> Leslie promoted marriage and family as an important part of the WNBA; heterosexual marriage is an essential, and assumed, part of evangelical Christianity. For instance, in the FCA magazine *Sharing the Victory*, WNBA player DeLisha Milton-Jones' marriage is held up as 'an example fulfilling God's plan of a spouse for every Christian'.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, the respectability politics that players like Leslie espoused have their roots in the Black Baptist church of the late nineteenth century, which helped to shape the notion that racial uplift was contingent on conforming to a respectable model of behaviour, including adherence to gender norms.<sup>157</sup>

Maya Moore, who was drafted in 2011 and sits at the intersection of the older generation of stars and the newer players drafted post-2013, is indicative of the way sport and religion has become inextricably intertwined in American culture, and particularly the specific place of importance it holds for African American women. Black

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*Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 120.

<sup>152</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 162.

<sup>153</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 192.

<sup>154</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 114.

<sup>155</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 238.

<sup>156</sup> Chad Bonham, 'D-Nasty Sunshine,' *Sharing the Victory* (2010), quoted in Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 114.

<sup>157</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 14.

feminist thought has demonstrated how cultural traditions, such as the church, have been used to navigate the barriers embedded within institutions and have helped to build resilience.<sup>158</sup> Black churches have served as the organisational base for Black civil society, providing both institutional and moral support for social justice movements.<sup>159</sup> Viewed in this light, Maya Moore's involvement in social movements such as Black Lives Matter, and her continuing push for racial justice, is revealing.<sup>160</sup> Initially, Moore announced her break from basketball as a move to spend more time with family and religious ministry, as she 'learned a long time ago that my purpose is to know Jesus and to make Him known.'<sup>161</sup> Moore later revealed that she had been spending her time working towards criminal justice reform, starting the campaign Win for Justice to push for a fair trial for Jonathan Irons, a family friend who was wrongfully convicted at the age of sixteen.<sup>162</sup> Certainly, Moore considers 'prosecutorial reform as part of that ministry and family,'<sup>163</sup> as religion and social justice are inseparable. Moore is not alone in connecting her religion to social justice work; Swin Cash, for example, connected her work with her charity, Cash for Kids, to her relationship with God. Cash even relied on the language of 'assumed heterosexual marriage' that is an essential part of sports ministry, saying, 'one of the greatest relationships I have in my life is with my charity Cash for Kids. I'm married to helping it be a vehicle for young children to get inspired and succeed.'<sup>164</sup> By drawing on this language, Cash is highlighting the religiosity from

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<sup>158</sup> Akilah R. Carter Francique, 'Theoretical Considerations in the Examination of African American Girls and Women in Sport.' In *Race, Gender and Sport: The Politics of Ethnic 'Other' Girls and Women*, edited by Aarti Ratna and Samaya Farooq Samie. (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 73.

<sup>159</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p. 129.

<sup>160</sup> Dave Zirin. 'WNBA Teams Show What Black Lives Matter Solidarity Looks Like,' *The Nation*, 11 July 2016, accessed 15 June 2020, <<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wnba-teams-show-what-blacklivesmatter-solidarity-looks-like/>>

<sup>161</sup> Moore, 'The Shift.'

<sup>162</sup> Josiah Bates. 'WNBA Star Maya Moore Skips Second Year of Professional Basketball, and 2020 Olympics, to Focus on Criminal Justice,' *Time*, 23 January 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, <<https://time.com/5770359/wnba-maya-moore-criminal-justice-jonathan-irons/>>

<sup>163</sup> Sean Gregory. 'Maya Moore Was One of the WNBA's Biggest Stars. Then She Stepped Away to Fight For Justice,' *Time*, 5 March 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://time.com/5793243/maya-moore-basketball-justice/>>

<sup>164</sup> Blazer, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*, p. 13.

Cash, *Humble Journey: More Precious Than Gold*, p. 83.

where she derives her moral grounding. Similarly, Tamika Catchings maintained that ‘God’s purpose for me is not only to play basketball, but also to prepare our youth to catch their dreams one star at a time through the Catch the Stars Foundation.’<sup>165</sup> However, this push for social justice remains linked to a religiosity that pushes a narrow and harmful conception of gender norms and sexuality.<sup>166</sup> Moore, for example, in 2020 tweeted an endorsement of Ultimate Marriage, an online course that promotes a ‘biblical’ heterosexual version of marriage, including advocating for wives to be submissive and husbands to be leaders.<sup>167</sup> More overtly, in 2013 Sophia Young (2006-2015) tweeted her opposition to same-sex marriage, and when met by backlash from fans, tweeted ‘I will stand up for Jesus Christ.’<sup>168</sup> While religion plays an important role in social justice movements, it has also been a regressive force for some WNBA players. Yet, it has simultaneously acted as a positive force for social change.

Certainly, religion complicates WNBA players’ relationship with femininity and heterosexuality, and is a factor in many players embrace of conservative gender norms in their self-presentation. As this chapter has argued, the self-presentation of many of the early WNBA players clearly suggests an adherence to a narrow range of gender norms, and a strong belief that emphasised femininity was the best way to sell the league. This was partly due to pressure from the league but was also influenced by external beliefs like religion. However, when reading autobiography it is essential to question ‘how speaking subjects take up, inhabit, and speak through certain discourses of identity that are culturally salient and available to them at a particular historical

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<sup>165</sup> Catchings, ‘My Success in Basketball is Temporary. The Most Important Thing is Keeping Jesus the Focus of My Life.’

<sup>166</sup> Brittney C. Cooper. ‘Jesus Wasn’t a Slut Shamer, or How Conservative Theology Harms Black Women.’ In *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, edited by Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris and Robin M. Boylorn, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2017), p. 32.

<sup>167</sup> Maya Moore. Twitter Post. 18 May 2020, 4:03 am  
<<https://twitter.com/MooreMaya/status/1262081197414506497>>

Dale Partridge. ‘The Biblical Roles of a Husband and Wife,’ *Ultimate Marriage*, accessed 15 June 2020, <<https://ultimatemarriage.com/episodes/the-biblical-roles-of-a-husband-and-wife/>>

<sup>168</sup> Meredith Bennett-Smith. ‘Sophia Young, WNBA All-Star, Publicly Opposes Same-Sex Marriage Despite League’s LGBT Fanbase,’ *The Huffington Post*, 9 February 2013, accessed 15 July 2020, <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/sophia-young-same-sex-marriage-wnba\\_n\\_3848930?ri18n=true&guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/sophia-young-same-sex-marriage-wnba_n_3848930?ri18n=true&guccounter=1)>

moment.<sup>169</sup> Players were operating in a landscape where the very notion of a successful professional women's league was unprecedented, and thus the construction of Leslie and Cooper's experience is both reflective of this context and working to reaffirm predominant discourses.<sup>170</sup> For Leslie, being feminine on the court was challenging the notion that all female athletes were masculine, yet in the process she was reasserting a limited version of femininity and womanhood. In recent years, she has been more reflective of the difficulties she and other female athletes faced:

When you're a female athlete, there are struggles: You need to be pretty so people care, but you don't want to be too pretty or people are going to question your game. You need to be passionate and driven to win, but not too emotional. You need to be true to yourself, but not too true for fear of losing out on a sponsorship or potentially isolating certain demographics. You have to be strong and fit, but not too strong because a muscular woman isn't considered commercially attractive.<sup>171</sup>

Leslie was proud of her femininity, not an uncommon position in the league, yet other players expressed their ambivalence or endured demeaning promotions to ensure the success of the league. Cooper even recognises the possibility of a generational divide:

The pressures of society certainly aren't the same as when I was growing up. In the past twenty years, I think most everyone has accepted the idea that women can be competitive and assertive... Many men who would never have looked twice at female athletes now find themselves attracted to us.<sup>172</sup>

Certainly, in this passage Cooper is still relying on the male gaze as validation, yet she also recognises that the position of female athletes in society is changing and that women basketball players may no longer need to emphasise their femininity to such a strong degree. This generational aspect would become evident, as these slight

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<sup>169</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, quoted in Carly Stewart. 'Utilizing Sporting Autobiographies for Feminist Research: The Case of Cyclist Nicole Cooke,' p. 295.

<sup>170</sup> Meân and Kassing, "'I Would Just Like to Be Known as an Athlete": Managing Hegemony, Femininity, and Heterosexuality in Female Sport,' p. 128.

<sup>171</sup> Lisa Leslie. 'Who Got Next?' *The Players' Tribune*, 15 May 2016, accessed 13 November 2018, < <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/lisa-leslie-wnba-20th-season>>

<sup>172</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, pp. 180-181.

indications of players questioning the feminisation of the WNBA would become a flood with the 2013 drafting of Brittney Griner and the “3 to See.”



## **Chapter Four: The "3 to See" and Beyond**

The 2013 draft class was one of the most anticipated in the history of the league, and a seminal moment in the effort to redefine the WNBA as more inclusive and embracing of LGBT fans and players. The first three picks—Brittney Griner (2013-present), Elena Delle Donne (2013-present), and Skylar Diggins-Smith (nee Diggins; 2013-present) — were highly anticipated due to very successful college careers, and the WNBA capitalised on that by marketing them as the “3 to See.” The financial impact was immediate, as ratings and merchandise sales increased dramatically, yet what was most revolutionary was the cultural impact on the WNBA, as Griner in particular forced the league to change its strategy of marginalising lesbian or masculine-presenting players.<sup>1</sup>

The contrast between the autobiographical and self-representational work of some of the WNBA’s first stars, and the players of the “3-to-See” era, suggests that WNBA players have begun to interrogate the narrow range of gender identities that they had previously been offered, and have become much more accepting of differing sexualities. However, the stereotypes and strictures that dominate women’s sport continued to constrain them, raising the question: Is it possible to carve out an alternative sporting identity within a mainstream sporting culture that still expects women to act and perform femininity in normative ways? The players of the “3 to See” era struggled with this question, and I argue that it was their refusal to accept the status quo that changed the culture of the WNBA, setting the stage for the current, dramatically transformed WNBA.

Prior to Griner’s entrance into the league, the WNBA had largely marginalised its gay players and fans. Unable to completely ignore its lesbian fan base, the league resorted to

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<sup>1</sup>Associated Press. ‘Brittney Griner, Elena Delle Donne, Rookies Boost WNBA,’ *USA Today*, 22 July 2013, accessed 25 June 2020, <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/wnba/2013/07/22/brittney-griner-elena-delle-donne-skylar-diggins-ratings-tv-viewership/2575873/>>  
Jere Longman. ‘WNBA Hopes Griner Can Change Perceptions, as Well as Game Itself.’ *The New York Times*, 13 April 2013, accessed 25 June 2020, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/sports/basketball/brittney-griner-could-be-a-game-changer-for-the-wnba.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/sports/basketball/brittney-griner-could-be-a-game-changer-for-the-wnba.html?_r=0)>

“gay vague” advertisings—utilising strategies that would go unnoticed by straight fans—while some individual teams did small-scale, piece-meal marketing directly to the gay community.<sup>2</sup> The WNBA distanced itself from these attempts, calling the Los Angeles Sparks’ partnership with the lesbian Girl Bar ‘a local promotion; a team matter.’<sup>3</sup> As Lobo described, ‘we would kind of just joke around, about like how long is the league going to pretend that those fans are not sitting in the stands.’<sup>4</sup> It was Griner that changed this status quo. By coming out just following the 2013 draft by ‘casually included herself as a gay role model for girls’ in an interview with *SI.com*, Griner forced the league to contend with how to market its most prominent college star and number one draft pick, who did not in any way conform to the vision of femininity that the league had pushed.<sup>5</sup> Griner was a presence on and off the court; she was 6 foot 8, had unmatched physical potential, and could dunk the ball, while off-court she modelled menswear for Nike and refused to take the league’s makeup course.<sup>6</sup> As Layshia Clarendon (2013-present) described her, ‘you kind of couldn’t deny [her]...she literally was, like, a larger-than-life, queer, black woman of color.’<sup>7</sup> In 2014, just one year after the Griner draft, the WNBA celebrated LGBT Pride for the first time. They were the first sports league to do so, and significantly it was the first time the WNBA publicly acknowledged its gay fanbase. It may seem overly dramatic to attribute this change to one player, but several players argue that Griner was essential to this shift. Ravens player Chloe, for example, told me that ‘just her being her has allowed some change in our league, which is huge and I’m very proud of her.’

Griner’s impact is not only a result of her openness and visibility, but also her

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<sup>2</sup> Mary G. McDonald, ‘Rethinking Resistance: The Queer Play of the Women’s National Basketball Association, Visibility Politics and Late Capitalism.’ *Leisure Studies* 27, no. 1 (2008), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Gustkey. ‘Sparks are Altering Marketing Strategy,’ *Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 2001, accessed 25 June 2020, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2001/may/04/sports/sp-59242>>

<sup>4</sup> Spain, Basketball Love Story: Rebecca Lobo.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley Morris. ‘Brittney Griner and the Quiet Queering of Professional Sports.’ *Grantland*, 24 April 2013, accessed 9 June 2020, <<http://grantland.com/features/brittney-griner-quiet-queering-professional-sports/>>

<sup>6</sup> David Astramskas. ‘Brittney Griner Signs Deal With Nike to Model Men’s Clothing,’ *BallisLife.com*, 7 June 2013, accessed 25 June 2020, <<https://ballislife.com/brittney-griner-nike-model/>>

<sup>7</sup> Spruill, ‘The WNBA’s Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the “Layers on Top of Layers” of Player Identities.’

willingness to be vocal about challenging the damaging culture of homophobia that has persisted in women's sport. She singled out her college Baylor for particular criticism, though women's college sport more generally has not been as willing as professional sport to combat anti-lesbian rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> The College choices of Swoopes and Holdsclaw highlight the effectiveness and prevalence of utilising fear of lesbianism as a negative recruitment tool, that is, alleging that another team or coaching staff is full of lesbians to discourage players attending.<sup>9</sup> Griner described the 'paranoid world of women's college basketball, where too many coaches spend an unhealthy amount of time worrying about whether their programs will be seen as "too gay."<sup>10</sup> Baylor, a conservative private Baptist university, has been particularly notorious for silencing its lesbian players so as not to damage its recruitment, with a policy that bans homosexuality.<sup>11</sup> Griner was asked to hide her sexuality and banned from mentioning it on social media, while the school blocked any media inquiries about the topic.<sup>12</sup> Griner described her anger at the hypocrisy of the college, lamenting that 'they want to keep the policy, so they can keep selling themselves as a Christian university, but they are more than happy to benefit from the success of their gay athletes.'<sup>13</sup> As Pat Griffin points out, the bargain that women's college sports have struck for a small piece of the male-dominated sporting landscape is silence and complicity on the very existence of lesbianism.<sup>14</sup> Some have questioned why Griner even attended Baylor considering their homophobic policies, to which Griner contended that she did not know about them, and even asked coach Kim Mulkey if her being gay was fine, to which Mulkey replied 'you can be black, white, blue, purple, whatever. As long as you come here and do what you need to do and hoop, I

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<sup>8</sup> Griffin, 'Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport,' p. 198. Britni de la Cretaz. 'How Women's College Basketball Pressures Players to Fit "A Certain Kind of Image,"' *Global Sport Matters*, 23 June 2021, accessed 22 July 2021, <<https://globalsportmatters.com/culture/2021/06/23/how-womens-college-basketball-pressures-players-to-fit-a-certain-kind-of-image/>>

<sup>9</sup> Biemesderfer, 'Hoop Schemes.'

<sup>10</sup> Brittney Griner and Sue Hovey. *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Fagan. 'Owning the Middle.' *ESPN The Magazine*, 29 May 2013, accessed 16 June 2020, <[http://espn.go.com/espn/feature/story/\\_/id/9316697/owning-middle](http://espn.go.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/9316697/owning-middle)>

<sup>12</sup> Fagan, 'Owning the Middle.'

Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 7, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 115

<sup>14</sup> Griffin, 'Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport,' p. 195.

don't care.'<sup>15</sup> As Griner pointed out 'being gay is a real thing; nobody is blue or purple unless they're choking to death,'<sup>16</sup> and Mulkey's insincere comments resulted in Griner being trapped at a school where her identity was obscured and diminished. Griner's refusal to be silent in light of her mistreatment at Baylor made visible the conditional tolerance that many universities practiced.

After coming to the WNBA, Griner was determined to be much more public with her sexuality and was able to mostly control her own narrative. She told reporter Kate Fagan post-draft, it feels so good saying it: I am a strong, black lesbian woman.'<sup>17</sup> Yet while Griner mainly focused on Baylor's anti-LGBT policy in her autobiography, she has directly challenged the WNBA's positions, not only refusing the makeup classes, but questioning the league's new potential uniform designs with shorter shorts as 'an obvious attempt to create something more traditionally feminine, to show our bodies in a way that will attract more men.'<sup>18</sup> Griner pointed out that while some of the women may like wearing shorter shorts, most of the players felt uncomfortable, and found them unflattering. Griner even quit playing volleyball in high school because she did not want to wear the short shorts.<sup>19</sup> What is interesting about Griner's autobiography is that she is not only pushing back against the feminine beauty standards that have dominated women's sport and the constraints imposed on players by the league, but is recognising the complex work that goes into constructing a vision of athletic femininity. She clearly works to establish an alternative form of athletic identity, and highlights that the WNBA has allowed her a certain freedom to express herself in a way her college experience did not:

I looked at that new tat, along with the red stars on my left and right shoulders—the ones I had to cover up when I played at Baylor—I suddenly had this *aha* moment. *Hell yeah, I can show off my tats now! I feel free!*<sup>20</sup>

While Griner remains critical of the WNBA's desire to market to heterosexual men,

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<sup>15</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Fagan, 'Owning the Middle.'

<sup>18</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 190.

<sup>19</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 5.

rather than better engage the LGBT community, she credited the league with her new confidence in expressing her identity and paying greater attention to how she 'wanted to represent myself away from the court.'<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, Griner has directly challenged this culture of silence and fear of the lesbian label that the league's early stars perpetuated. Brittney Griner was talking about her time at Baylor University, yet she could have been addressing Leslie directly, when she questioned 'how come [straight teammates] didn't have to keep their business behind closed doors? Why was I doing something wrong?'<sup>22</sup> Yet while Griner became the face of change in the WNBA and forcing the league to begin to embrace LGBT fans and players, Griner recognised that there are still many who view players like her as unnatural; her decision not to play in the 2012 London Olympics caused some to speculate that she wanted to avoid gender testing.<sup>23</sup> Griner, who described her body as 'flat and thin, my voice low,' and prefers to dress in men's clothes, not only fails to do femininity "correctly," but is enmeshed in a historical discourse that dehumanises Black women, labelling them as hypermuscular and aberrant, their athletic success based wholly on a supposed unfair advantage.<sup>24</sup>

The legacy of gender and sex testing builds on and codifies these racist assumptions. Althea Gibson, a Black tennis star in the 1950s, was denied permission to participate unless she took a chromosome test, while in 2018 the IAAF's new gender verification regulations primarily target Black track athletes.<sup>25</sup> As Brady and Schirato point out, 'the cultural intelligibility of sex requires sex and gender to cohere (and to continue to cohere) in a particular, and normative, way,' and when someone like Griner challenges this by performing gender in a masculine way she is subject to continued scrutiny and abuse.<sup>26</sup> Griner, for her part, recognised these dynamics at play:

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<sup>21</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>23</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 55.

Douglas, 'Some of Us Are Still Brave: Sport and the Social Production of Black Femaleness,' p. 579.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas, 'Some of Us Are Still Brave: Sport and the Social Production of Black Femaleness,' p. 575.

<sup>26</sup> Anita Brady and Tony Schirato. *Understanding Judith Butler*. (London: Sage Publications,

But when they question my very being, my gender, and accuse me of living a giant lie, I can't even begin to understand that kind of ignorance and hate. And fear. It's sad, really, that there are so many people who are threatened by anyone who seems different, anyone who stands out because of how they look or act. I think most of the crap that people say about me is just a way to devalue my accomplishments. But I also think there are some paranoid, twisted fools out there who actually believe the accusations they make.<sup>27</sup>

The culture of sport and the predominance of traditional discourses leaves limited room for alternative constructions of athletic identity.<sup>28</sup> Griner may have been revolutionary in transforming the WNBA into a space where less feminine women could express themselves, however it came at a cost of personal pain and attacks from the larger sporting community.

Initial media coverage of Griner was largely positive, focusing on her potentially revolutionary impact for the WNBA and gay athletes. However, this quickly changed following her marriage to WNBA player Glory Johnson (2012-present), a 2015 domestic violence incident, and public divorce. Media coverage almost completely ignored Griner's (or Johnson's) on-court accomplishments, instead focusing solely on the various developments in their relationship. For example, *Bleacher Report*, one of the most popular sports websites, only had two basketball related articles about Griner for the 2015 season, despite a successful season in which Griner won Defensive Player of the Year, yet they posted multiple articles about Griner's personal life. While domestic violence in sports is an essential topic to cover, many outlets covered the allegations to an extent that they rarely cover the WNBA, and the salacious tone many articles took suggested a "told you so" attitude towards the behaviour of WNBA athletes, rather than a nuanced take on violence in queer relationships. Griner's actions became a way to "prove" that domestic violence was not a male problem and deflect from other allegations against male athletes.

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2011), p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> Meân and Kassing, "'I Would Just Like to Be Known as an Athlete': Managing Hegemony, Femininity, and Heterosexuality in Female Sport,' p. 142.

The outsized coverage of Griner's behaviour did somewhat reflect the time in which this incident happened, as media discussion of domestic violence in male sports had reached a fever pitch, following the release of security camera footage of NFL player Ray Rice knocking out his fiancée. Though this was certainly not the first case of domestic violence in the NFL—at the time there were twelve active NFL players who had been arrested for domestic violence—the video evidence, combined with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's sloppy handling of the case, meant that it received significantly more national attention than previous cases.<sup>29</sup> Domestic violence thus became a spectacle, a media story where the media and public could speculate on the severity of the crime, the punishment imposed by the league, and, most concerningly, the possibility of a redemptive arc in which spectacular play could “redeem” one for off-court behaviour.<sup>30</sup> This reflects Enck-Wanzer's argument that generally there is a 'broader social investment in sensational instances of assaults (usually gruesome murders and/or high-profile individuals).'<sup>31</sup> Griner's fame, coupled with the fact that the perpetrator was a Black woman, fits nicely into this conception and hence the coverage reflected the spectacle culture of domestic violence.

Furthermore, coverage of domestic violence in sport largely elides the society-wide issue of domestic violence, instead making the mostly Black athletes of the NFL the face of this crime.<sup>32</sup> Though Griner is obviously not a male NFL player, I contend that the spectacle surrounding her does suggest that when it comes to media coverage, framing decisions are 'embedded deeply within other cultural hierarchies.'<sup>33</sup> To many, Griner already fit the stereotype of a rough, masculine athlete, and this incident simply offered

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<sup>29</sup> Jessica Luther. 'A Societal Mirror and a Force for Change: The NFL and Its Response to Domestic Violence.' In *Football, Culture and Power*, edited by David J. Leonard, Kimberly B. George and Wade Davis, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 176-177.

<sup>30</sup> Luther, 'A Societal Mirror and a Force for Change: The NFL and Its Response to Domestic Violence,' p. 185.

Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer. 'All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News.' *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Enck-Wanzer, 'All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News,' p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Luther, 'A Societal Mirror and a Force for Change: The NFL and Its Response to Domestic Violence,' p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Enck-Wanzer, 'All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News,' p. 4.

“proof”; a *USA Today* article, for instance, conflated her rough style on the court with domestic violence.<sup>34</sup> Sheryl Swoopes even criticised Griner, saying:

People already have an idea of what the WNBA is about and what it's like, so then when they see [the Brittney Griner/Glory Johnson] type of drama, then it becomes a 'See, I told you so.'<sup>35</sup>

This was further complicated by Glory Johnson, who presents as significantly more “feminine looking” than Griner, continuing to identify as a straight woman, who ‘simply fell for an individual,’<sup>36</sup> and who described their early relationship as being one in which Griner was the pursuer. Thus, Griner reinforced the fear of what Griffin calls the “lesbian bogeywoman” in women’s sports, that is, the fear of the lesbian that preys upon straight women.<sup>37</sup> Swoopes’ response to this incident also suggests the limits of a homonormative understanding of sexuality, as her statement that ‘my issue with her situation is just putting all her business out there,’<sup>38</sup> reflects similar statements by Leslie that suggest homosexuality should be hidden. Griner’s experience highlights Modleski’s argument that attempts to trouble traditional gender alignments do not always have a subversive effect, especially for Black women, as ‘this kind of “play” may have extremely conservative implications.’<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Scott Gleeson. ‘Brittney Griner Opens Up On Marriage Split, Anger and Her Renewed Focus,’ *USA Today*, 23 July 2015, accessed 22 June 2020, <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2015/07/23/brittney-griner-glory-johnson-marriage-split-domestic-violence/30547237/>>

<sup>35</sup> Kate Fagan. ‘What Sheryl Swoopes Got Wrong About Today's WNBA.’ *ESPN W*, 8 October 2015, accessed 22 June 2020, <<http://espn.go.com/espnw/news-commentary/article/13835681/what-sheryl-swoopes-got-wrong-today-wnba>>

<sup>36</sup> Abigail Pesta. ‘Glory Johnson Surprised Even Herself When She Fell in Love with a Woman,’ *Cosmopolitan*, 11 November 2015, accessed 22 June 2020, <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a48195/glory-johnson-wnba-fell-in-love/>>

<sup>37</sup> Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Adena Andrews. ‘Q&A With Sheryl Swoopes: WNBA Legend Talks State of the Game,’ *ESPN W*, 5 October 2015, accessed 23 June 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/13805995/wnba-legend-sheryl-swoopes-discusses-state-wnba](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/13805995/wnba-legend-sheryl-swoopes-discusses-state-wnba)>

<sup>39</sup> Tania Modleski. ‘Cinema and the Dark Continent: Race and Gender in Popular Film.’ In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 224.



The coverage of Griner mirrors that of a 2012 domestic violence incident involving Chamique Holdsclaw, which was met with sensationalistic and outsized coverage that focused on her ‘tough fall’ from grace and her struggles with depression.<sup>40</sup> The WNBA has struggled with how to deal with this issue, not implementing a domestic violence policy until the 2020 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).<sup>41</sup> Domestic violence in same-sex relationships has been both a taboo topic and a salacious media story that has enamoured audiences that rarely engage with the WNBA otherwise. While Griner has largely not commented on this situation, besides apologising and saying she has learned from the experience, she has talked about her previous irritation with the media and their sensationalising of her sexuality. Though she famously came out in a *Sports Illustrated* interview, she was annoyed that she was ambushed, as she had planned to come out in a way that she could tell her own story and argued that the media reports on gay athletes in a way that ‘far too often we get reduced to a headline.’<sup>42</sup>

Griner, having only been in the WNBA for one year when her autobiography was published, largely presented the league in a positive light, saving her ire for Baylor University and fans online. By contrast, Layshia Clarendon explored similar themes to Griner but suggested that the WNBA still had a way to go.<sup>43</sup> Clarendon, who in a 2015 *Players’ Tribune* article identified themselves as ‘black, gay, female, non-cisgender and Christian,’ revealed the divide that existed in WNBA locker rooms surrounding lesbian players. Clarendon said that some of the players refused to wear Pride t-shirts due to their moral and religious beliefs.<sup>44</sup> The WNBA decided in response not to force the issue and did not send the T-shirts out. While Clarendon has seen the change in the league, it is clear that lesbianism still acts to divide players and limit women. I would point out

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<sup>40</sup> Jay Busbee. ‘Chamique Holdsclaw, Former WNBA Star, Arrested For Domestic Violence Incident,’ *Yahoo Sports*, 17 November 2012, accessed 22 June 2020, <<https://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/the-turnstile/chamique-holdsclaw-former-wnba-star-arrested-domestic-violence-132434992.html>>

<sup>41</sup> Tamryn Spruill. ‘“The Time is Now For Women’s Sports”: Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA’s Watershed CBA Deal,’ *The Athletic*, 14 January 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1534181/?source=twittered>>

<sup>42</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Layshia Clarendon. ‘Keeping the Faith,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 21 August 2015, accessed 19 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/layshia-clarendon-wnba-faith-sexuality>>

<sup>44</sup> Clarendon, ‘Keeping the Faith.’

that Clarendon's piece suggested a much more nuanced understanding of sexuality and race, and how that might affect the marketability of the league, than Leslie's insistence on femininity. Clarendon drew on theories of intersectionality in her work, grappling with the way in which their identity as a Black, non-binary person affects their presentation, maintaining that 'gender is largely a spectrum. I understand that my presentation is more masculine than not. Most people see me and attach any number of their own identities: gay, male, black.' They additionally realised that their 'very existence challenges every racial, sexual, gender and religious barrier.'<sup>45</sup> Like Griner, Clarendon challenges the cultural intelligibility of sex, and as such presents a view of Black sexuality that has previously remained invisible.<sup>46</sup>

Clarendon is one of the few to reveal the tensions between religion and gender and sexuality in their writing. Clarendon followed a similar path to many other WNBA players, finding religion in college through The Way, a non-denominational, Black church, which largely preaches social justice.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Clarendon found that their religious experience in the WNBA has not been as welcoming as they would like, as the incident with her teammates' refusal to wear the Pride T-Shirts indicates. Clarendon grappled with the Faith and Family nights that most teams hold, questioning 'my faith should be accounted for as much as any. But is it a safe space for me? Is it a safe space for any other LGBT person? Is it just one representation of faith that we're really discussing here?... What if the pastor conversationally detours into marriage?'<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Clarendon is the only player to address the exclusionary nature of common locker room routines such as pre-game prayer, pointing out that it is assumed that everyone will participate. However, I would suggest that Clarendon offers an example of how religion can be utilised in non-discriminatory or alternative ways. Similarly, Ravens player Jasmine, who has often publicly professed her faith, told me that she 'has a relationship with God and that's what's most important to me...not based on what a church says I have to do in that church or that religion.'

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<sup>45</sup> Clarendon, 'Keeping the Faith.'

<sup>46</sup> King, 'Contesting the Closet: Sheryl Swoopes, Racialized Sexuality, and Media Culture,' p. 209.

<sup>47</sup> Clarendon, 'Keeping the Faith.'

<sup>48</sup> Clarendon, 'Keeping the Faith.'

Candice Wiggins (2008-2016) added to the tensions over sexual orientation in comments made after her retirement, when she alleged that she had been bullied for being straight and being 'proud to be a woman.'<sup>49</sup> She claimed that she was deliberately targeted physically on-court and that '98 percent of the women in the WNBA are gay women.'<sup>50</sup> Other WNBA players were quick to refute Wiggins' claims of a toxic culture, and expressed their disappointment that Wiggins, as Natasha Cloud (2015-present) described, 'disrespected and demeaned a certain group of women to whom sexual preferences are different than hers, backing every simple-minded stereotype out there about women's sports.'<sup>51</sup> Wiggins argued that most WNBA players look 'like men,'<sup>52</sup> reinforcing stereotypes about female athletes, as well as furthering the stereotype of the rough, mean lesbian who preys upon straight women and steals their femininity. Additionally, as Tara VanDerveer, Wiggins' college coach, pointed out, these comments received much greater media attention than fellow Stanford alum Nneka Ogwumike's (2012-present) MVP award and championship.<sup>53</sup> Like in the Griner situation, the media appetite is much higher for scandals that boost popular negative conceptions of the league, presenting it as a failing league full of bitter, lesbian women.

In contrast to the reaction to Griner, the response to Elena Delle Donne coming out was much more muted. Before coming out, Delle Donne was positioned as the 'wholesome girl next door,' the epitome of the 'good white girl.'<sup>54</sup> Delle Donne was characterised by

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<sup>49</sup> Mechelle Voepel. 'WNBA Has No Comment, But Many Players Dispute Candice Wiggins' Allegations of Bullying Culture,' *ESPN.com*, 21 February 2017, accessed 8 June 2020 <[https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/18736607/wnba-players-dispute-candice-wiggins-controversial-allegations](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/18736607/wnba-players-dispute-candice-wiggins-controversial-allegations)>

<sup>50</sup> Tod Leonard. 'Wiggins: WNBA's "Harmful" Culture of Bullying, Jealousy,' *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 20 February 2017, accessed 25 June 2020, <<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/sd-sp-wigginsside-20170217-story.html>>

<sup>51</sup> Gene Wang. 'Mystics Rebuke Candice Wiggins Comments on Bullying and Sexuality in WNBA,' *The Washington Post*, 28 February 2017, accessed 8 June 2020 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dc-sports-bog/wp/2017/02/27/mystics-rebuke-candice-wiggins-comments-on-bullying-and-sexuality-in-wnba/>>

<sup>52</sup> Leonard, 'Wiggins: WNBA's "Harmful" Culture of Bullying, Jealousy.'

<sup>53</sup> Tom FitzGerald. 'Tara VanDerveer Defends WNBA from Candice Wiggins' Allegations,' *SFGate*, 22 February 2017, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://www.sfgate.com/collegesports/article/Tara-VanDerveer-defends-WNBA-from-Candice-10952346.php>>

<sup>54</sup> Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, p. 53.

her support for her family and charity, supporting her disabled sister, and raising awareness for Lyme disease, which she suffers from. She acts as a role model for young girls, publishing fiction books about basketball aimed at middle-schoolers.<sup>55</sup> This framing has remained largely unchanged since coming out, and this is reflected in her self-presentation. The first time she mentioned her sexuality in her autobiography was discussing her wife, and she used her wedding to raise money for her foundation. Additionally, she and her wife were chosen for the wedding website, *The Knot*, as the first same-sex “Dream Couple,” further publicising her foundation.<sup>56</sup> Delle Donne’s construction of her relationship, like Swoopes’, fits the notion of “homonormativity,” and indeed neither publicly came out until they were in committed, long-term relationships.<sup>57</sup> Delle Donne, as an attractive, nurturing, white woman, can be positioned in a different manner to Griner and Clarendon, and while her openness with her sexuality remains important in the changing sports landscape, I would stress the importance of recognising how her white femininity privileges her within homophobic discourses.

When Sheryl Swoopes criticised Brittney Griner, she contrasted her with Skylar Diggins-Smith, who she called ‘good for this league...she’s beautiful, but she can play.’<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Skylar Diggins-Smith’s femininity draws directly from the lineage of Lisa Leslie and Candace Parker, particularly in how she initially presented herself. Indeed, in her autobiography, written for children and tweens, Diggins-Smith highlighted her delight at seeing Leslie play and her feminine comportment, saying ‘Leslie is both elegant—she wears lipstick on the court!—and dominant.’<sup>59</sup> Diggins-Smith further demonstrated the notion of multiple femininities that Leslie embodies, describing her game mindset as ‘when she walks to the court, she wants to display her beauty. On the court, she wants

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McDonald, ‘Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women’s National Basketball Association,’ p. 382.

<sup>55</sup> Elena Delle Donne. *Elle of the Ball (Hoops)*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Elena Delle Donne and Sarah Durand. *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 247.

<sup>57</sup> King, ‘Contesting the Closet: Sheryl Swoopes, Racialized Sexuality, and Media Culture,’ p. 206.

<sup>58</sup> Andrews, ‘Q&A With Sheryl Swoopes: WNBA Legend Talks State of the Game.’

<sup>59</sup> Skylar Diggins and Sean Jensen. *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*. (Racine: BroadStreet Publishing Group, 2016), p. 50.

to display her inner beast.’<sup>60</sup> The degree to which she embodies femininity thus shifts for Diggins-Smith depending on her social location, and like Leslie, she did not conceive of femininity as incompatible with athletic prowess and aggression.<sup>61</sup> Yet, in her first few years in the league, she was largely covered for her looks and her celebrity friendships. Scoop Jackson of *ESPN.com*, for instance, wrote an entire piece about the ‘balancing act’ Diggins had to juggle between her looks and her playing career,<sup>62</sup> while a *Bleacher Report* article began by saying ‘let’s address the obvious immediately, since this is what so many people see in WNBA star Skylar Diggins: she’s gorgeous.’<sup>63</sup> Mentioning her looks became almost a prerequisite for covering her, to the detriment of discussing basketball, and like Candace Parker, became a way to sexualise and trivialise her; a *Bleacher Report* story described an *Instagram* video of her twerking by saying ‘this video is probably getting a bit more attention than the playoffs.’<sup>64</sup>

McKay and Johnson argue that this kind of ‘pornographic eroticism,’ and particularly the focus on her ‘buttocks,’ constructs Black women as ‘primitive, transgressive, and “wild”’; thus ‘black women’s bodies... are easily watched, desired, and possessed but also pathologized.’<sup>65</sup> Additionally, by focusing on her twerking, the article reduced her basketball skills to a humorous footnote, saying ‘in case you were wondering, Diggins averaged 8.5 points and 3.8 assists per game this season.’<sup>66</sup> The sexualisation is unrelated to her sporting acumen as she is not positioned as attractive due to her

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<sup>60</sup> Diggins and Jensen, *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*, p. 146.

<sup>61</sup> Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies: Sportswomen, Soccer and Sexuality,’ p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Scoop Jackson. ‘The Skylar Diggins Balancing Act,’ *ESPN.com*, 23 December 2011, accessed 23 June 2020, <[http://espn.go.com/espn/commentary/story/\\_/page/jackson-111223/skylar-diggins-notre-dame-balances-beauty-athleticism](http://espn.go.com/espn/commentary/story/_/page/jackson-111223/skylar-diggins-notre-dame-balances-beauty-athleticism)>

<sup>63</sup> Alex Tam. ‘Diggins on Stardom: I’m Not Just a Pretty Face,’ *Bleacher Report*, 3 November 2014, accessed 2 February 2016, <<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2254838-diggins-on-stardom-im-not-just-a-pretty-face>>

<sup>64</sup> Brian Josephs. ‘Skylar Diggins Posted an Instagram Video of Her Twerking Today,’ *Bleacher Report*, 29 September 2013, accessed 2 February 2016, <<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1791768-skylar-diggins-posted-an-instagram-video-of-her-twerking-today>>

<sup>65</sup> McKay and Helen Johnson, ‘Pornographic Eroticism and Sexual Grotesquerie in Representations of African American Sportswomen,’ p. 494.

<sup>66</sup> Josephs, ‘Skylar Diggins Posted an Instagram Video of Her Twerking Today.’

strength or power as men are, thus it further reifies norms of gendered difference.<sup>67</sup> One area where Diggins-Smith does differ from early WNBA players is her willingness to talk about racism in her autobiography, describing an incident in which a college coach tried to recruit her, yet told her that he did not 'usually give scholarships to girls from the inner-city,' as 'they have problems adjusting to the academics.'<sup>68</sup> This incident makes explicit the link between the inner-city and Blackness, and the racism that Black athletes in America face, valued for their athletic skills but not their intellect.

The contradictions inherent in the "3 to See" era were encapsulated in the WNBA's 2015 "Watch Me" commercial.<sup>69</sup> No longer is the game of basketball absent from WNBA promotion; the commercial is replete with game highlights of players dunking, performing intricate crossovers, athletic layups, difficult jump-shots, and vicious blocks. Yet, this is undermined by a voiceover asking, 'you think I can't...give it everything I have and still be flawless,' cutting from game footage to Candace Parker on a red carpet in a strapless dress, her wedding ring in a prominent position. Performing athletic feats is only acceptable if it is softened by feminine displays and proof of heterosexuality. The players' motherhood is still pushed by the league, as Parker's ability to 'get her [daughter] to school on time' is juxtaposed with players being able to 'box her out'; the physical and somewhat violent act of boxing out is thus softened by images of young children and the supposedly caring nature of women. However, this commercial does show the impact of Griner and the growing acceptance of gay fans and players, questioning 'you think I can't... be who I want, love who I want,' over an image of Seimone Augustus (2006-2020) with her partner.

This was a positive step forward in the league's engagement with the LGBT community, and a tacit acknowledgement that they had not done so in the past. However, much of the non-basketball related imagery is superfluous, particularly as this was an ad

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<sup>67</sup> Kim Toffoletti and Peter Mewett. "Oh Yes, He is Hot": Female Football Fans and the Sexual Objectification of Sportsmen's Bodies.' In *Sport and Its Female Fans*, edited by Kim Toffoletti and Peter Mewett (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 106.

<sup>68</sup> Diggins and Jensen, *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*, p. 123.

<sup>69</sup> WNBA. 'Watch Me,' *YouTube* Video, 1:00, 22 September 2015, accessed 23 June 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GGeAKkM6sY>>

supposedly for the Conference Finals when the league should have been promoting the specific games rather than the WNBA more generally. The commercial could have been an opportunity to develop and promote the rivalries that power sport, and that the WNBA as a relatively young league needs to foster. Additionally, the commercial demonstrates a need to speak back to trolls and critics, saying ‘I know what you’re thinking,’ followed by some negative stereotypes, hence the ad becomes largely an opportunity to counter misogyny; rather than building excitement for some competitive playoff basketball, it presents the league as a quasi-cause, a way to counter stereotypes about women.

### **The New WNBA**

The change that the “3 to See” heralded has come in fits and starts, but it has progressed to the point that current WNBA players have a radically different perspective on issues of race, gender, and sexuality compared to their forebearers. With access to different, current discourses of identity, and more opportunities to construct their own self-image through outlets such as *The Players’ Tribune*, players have challenged the controlling discourses that surround women in sport and refused to accept “pretty and powerful” as the only model to follow. The autobiographical work of newer WNBA players—and more recent public statements by the “3 to See”—suggest that they are aware of the constraints that female athletes face, particularly women of colour, and are working to combat them. They have reformulated issues of motherhood and femininity away from being simply heterosexual signifiers, instead showing the possibilities of queer femininity and the political potential of feminine women. They have created the space for a range of different gender performances including female masculinity, while shining the spotlight on previously obscured racial issues. To the extent that the WNBA has changed, it is the players that have pushed them there.

WNBA players are well aware and highly critical of who the league had chosen to spotlight in their promotional material, recognising that they were going for a certain feminine look. Nneka Ogwumike described ‘I wouldn’t say it was so much jealousy, it was more so we know who they’re going to pick...it was like they’re picking her, every

time.<sup>70</sup> Clarendon was more explicit, pointing out that the league is ‘a big chunk of queer women of color,’<sup>71</sup> yet this has largely been obscured in the marketing. Clarendon recognised the racialised beauty standards that have contributed to this, identifying that ‘dark skinned women...aren’t the first choices in advertisements and in the beauty industry.’<sup>72</sup> While Ravens player Jasmine told me that she had not felt pressure from the league to look or act a certain way, she did follow this by saying ‘if you’re strong enough mentally and you’re your own person and you’re mature, you’ll be fine,’ which does suggest to me that there is at least some level of pressure that needs to be dealt with. Jasmine does meet the standards of femininity that the league had desired—when I interviewed her, she wore false eyelashes and nails—so perhaps she was unlikely to feel the kind of pressure that others might be more susceptible to. Regardless, it is apparent that at least in its public promotions, the WNBA had previously made deliberate decisions in who it picked.

Yet, as Ogwumike revealed, ‘it’s changing now,’<sup>73</sup> as the WNBA’s newest commercials and their recent social media presence demonstrate a growing willingness to embrace players that do not conform to gender norms and to showcasing the variety of different women in the league. The 2019 “Make Way” commercial features none of the apologetic tone of the 2015 commercial,<sup>74</sup> none of the feminine signifiers to soften action that had dominated previous commercials. Almost all of the commercial is game action, in both indoor and outdoor courts, and even when the players are wearing street clothes, the inauthentic outfits of the 2003 ‘This is Who I Am’ commercial are replaced by a variety of different looks; Stefanie Dolson (2014-present) may be wearing a dress with her hair out, but she is next to Essence Carson wearing a white T-Shirt and oversized jacket and Natasha Cloud in a black hoody. As the voiceover points out, they are ‘undeniably,

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<sup>70</sup> The Players’ Tribune. ‘The Monetization of Female Athletes,’ *Facebook* Video, 11:46, 28 December 2019, accessed 29 April 2020,

<<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1084884801877512>>

<sup>71</sup> Spruill, ‘The WNBA’s Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the “Layers on Top of Layers” of Player Identities.’

<sup>72</sup> Spruill, ‘The WNBA’s Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the “Layers on Top of Layers” of Player Identities.’

<sup>73</sup> The Players’ Tribune, ‘The Monetization of Female Athletes.’

<sup>74</sup> WNBA. ‘Make Way,’ *YouTube* Video, 1:00, 2 May 2019, accessed 16 July 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoAN2ZzQfH0>>



unapologetically us.’ No longer are they trying to counter trolls and those who dismiss the league, but rather aiming to celebrate the skill and authenticity of the women in the league. Clarendon was one player who voiced their support:

When I first saw it, I was just like, “Yes, finally!” It shows players dressed in all different ways — parts of the Make Way campaign involve people who just look like me, who are gender nonconforming. That’s one of the only times I’ve seen people who look like me in ad campaigns like that. They’re not just people who are perceived to be femme, perceived to be straight — that’s typically what we’ve done in marketing the league — it’s embracing what our league is.<sup>75</sup>

While previous commercials had relied on what sportswriter Natalie Weiner calls ‘empowerment pop,’<sup>76</sup> “Make Way” features a club beat that gives the commercial more credibility with a younger audience. This divide between empowerment pop and the music the players actually listen to was made clear to me at a Dallas Wings game I attended. Marketed as “inspiring women’s night,” the pre-game was accompanied by pop music sung by women, until the players came out to warm up, when it was immediately replaced by hip-hop. While the WNBA has historically not embraced hip-hop music, as rapper Rapsody argues ‘you gotta infuse hip hop into the WNBA because basketball is street, it is culture...[the connection is] organic,’<sup>77</sup> something the commercial echoes, saying ‘this game is...for the culture.’<sup>78</sup> There is clearly an attempt to inject authenticity and street culture into the WNBA’s marketing.

Of course, the WNBA is still trying to sell a product, and the ad is a bet that the players’

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<sup>75</sup> Michelle Garcia. ‘Layshia Clarendon Gears Up For the Connecticut Sun’s Pride Night,’ *Out*, 12 July 2019, accessed 13 July 2020, <<https://www.out.com/sports/2019/7/12/layshia-clarendon-gears-connecticut-suns-pride-night>>

<sup>76</sup> Natalie Weiner. ‘How Music Can Help Push the WNBA Forward,’ *SB Nation*, 30 May 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/2019/5/30/18645627/wnba-music-rapsody-new-york-liberty>>

<sup>77</sup> Weiner, ‘How Music Can Help Push the WNBA Forward.’

<sup>78</sup> WNBA, ‘Make Way.’

‘authenticity will resonate with younger, hipper audiences.’<sup>79</sup> Authenticity is a fraught concept, particularly when combined with a capitalistic goal, yet the players’ presentation in this commercial does seem to align with their self-presentation on social media and in their game-day attire. Following a practice popularised by the NBA, fashion photos and videos of players entering the arena, called ‘game day fits,’ are circulated on *Twitter* and *Instagram*, with the WNBA’s official account tweeting polls where fans can vote on their favourite outfit.<sup>80</sup> What is palpable in these polls is a growing comfort and embrace of androgynous and masculine styles, as, for example, a photo of Brittney Sykes (2017-present) in a masculine look with ripped jeans, sneakers, a plain white shirt, and short hair is placed alongside A’ja Wilson (2018-present) in a more feminine jacket and short-shorts. Yet Sykes’ outfit choices are no less deliberate or thought-out than Wilson’s; as sportswriter Britni de la Cretaz argues, ‘game-day fashion is a highly cultivated and carefully crafted aesthetic.’<sup>81</sup> While femininity is often regarded as artificial or performative, what these game day fits reveal is that masculinity is also highly constructed, thus these displays of female masculinity help reveal the ‘cultural fiction’ that is gender.<sup>82</sup> As Layshia Clarendon pointed out ‘everyone expresses their gender, literally.’<sup>83</sup>

Tamera Young (2008- 2020) furthered this notion, as in an article for *The Players’ Tribune*, she revealed her journey from being forced to wear dresses as a child, to shopping in the men’s department and creating her own style, which she labels ‘tomboy chic.’<sup>84</sup> She described her reasoning as:

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<sup>79</sup> Spruill, ‘The WNBA’s Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the “Layers on Top of Layers” of Player Identities.’

<sup>80</sup> WNBA. Twitter Post. 25 July 2019, 6:14 am, <<https://twitter.com/WNBA/status/1154122629197910016>>

<sup>81</sup> Britni de la Cretaz. ‘Androgyny is Now Fashionable in the W.N.B.A.’ *The New York Times*, 18 June 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/opinion/androgyny-wnba-fashion.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>>

<sup>82</sup> Broad, ‘The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Resistance in Women’s Sport,’ p. 190.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Spain. Liberty: Layshia Clarendon. *That’s What She Said*. Podcast. 26 May 2020, <<http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play?id=29224655>>

<sup>84</sup> Tamera Young. ‘Style Confidence,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 7 February 2020, accessed 30 April 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/ty-young-las-vegas-aces>>

I wear boy clothes because I love the way they fit and because they give me that swag, but I also always make sure to put my own feminine spin on them and make them pop with jewelry, shoes and other accessories.<sup>85</sup>

Young's style is deliberate, and as a result, she has a significant *Instagram* following and sells clothing to fans; the desire for this style is unmistakable.<sup>86</sup> While Skerski contends that this 'tomboy chic' style has become a way of simply recuperating masculine styles to signify heterosexual femininity,<sup>87</sup> Young's openness with her relationship with reality star Mimi Faust contradicts this.<sup>88</sup> Instead, I would view Young as what Broad labels a 'boundary stripper,' as her blend of both feminine and masculine styles destabilises both categories.<sup>89</sup> Both the WNBA commercial and the embrace of players' individual aesthetics is an attempt to create an environment that allows for different modes of self-presentation, which, as Beal argues, creates the possibility of social change as 'a multitude of gendered subjectivities are legitimated.'<sup>90</sup> The players' off-court life and style are not elided completely, but rather a variety of gendered embodiments are embraced as being on equal style footing and without drawing attention to the loaded implications.

Additionally, in a similar manner to the NBA, it becomes a marketing tool, a way of engaging with fans and publicising players' unique personalities. In the past, by only drawing on a select group of players that met specific femininity criteria, the WNBA passed up on opportunities to grow the league. Clarendon, for instance, pointed out that 'it's such a shame a player like a Seimone Augustus didn't get more credit and wasn't promoted more... because of kind of who she is and this underlying homophobia.'<sup>91</sup> Augustus, who embodies the androgynous look that is now popular, was also one of the

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<sup>85</sup> Young, 'Style Confidence.'

<sup>86</sup> Young, 'Style Confidence.'

<sup>87</sup> Jamie Skerski, 'Tomboy Chic: Re-Fashioning Gender Rebellion.' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15, no. 4 (2011), p. 477.

<sup>88</sup> Aaron Dodson. 'Inside the Sneaker Room of Tamera "Ty" Young—the WNBA's Biggest Sneakerhead,' *The Undeclared*, 16 August 2018, accessed 13 July 2020, <<https://theundefeated.com/features/inside-the-sneaker-room-of-tamera-ty-young-the-wnbas-biggest-sneakerhead/>>

<sup>89</sup> Broad, 'The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Resistance in Women's Sport,' p. 199.

<sup>90</sup> Beal, 'Feminist Ethnographies in Sport and Leisure,' p. 235.

<sup>91</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

most successful and electrifying players in the league, and by refusing to promote her as a star the WNBA limited its own attempts to present women's basketball as exciting and skilful. Clarendon hoped that Augustus is the last player that will suffer from the treatment and pointed to Courtney Williams (2016-present) as a player the WNBA is promoting well.<sup>92</sup> Williams, who described her fashion as 'like a little boy,'<sup>93</sup> is a similarly electric and fun player, and the WNBA reaps the rewards in being willing to promote her and embracing her masculine look. Williams' described the importance of her proud embodiment of masculine style, telling the WNBA for Pride month that 'part of being a "real model" is being openly and visibly queer.'<sup>94</sup> Through her 'confrontational, "in your face," individualised, unapologetic expressions of sexuality and gender transgression,'<sup>95</sup> Williams acts as a form of queer resistance, ignoring the traditional management of gender roles in sport that prescribe femininity—the apologetic—in favour of unapologetic embrace of female masculinity.

Halberstam suggests that there is not only one form of female masculinity, but rather a multiplicity of ways of embodying masculinity, and this diversity reveals an array of queer genders, destabilising the gender binary.<sup>96</sup> Young, for instance, strongly attested that 'I'm a woman. And I *love* being a woman. The fact that I like to wear boy clothes doesn't change that.'<sup>97</sup> In contrast, Clarendon uses she/her, they/them, and he/him pronouns, and describes themselves as identifying as 'a woman, but like more than a woman, but not a guy, kind of someone who's in the middle. Like I feel like my identity is not just solidly one, or it's fluid and moving.'<sup>98</sup> While in her 2015 *Players' Tribune* article Clarendon identified as 'non-cisgender,' she now identifies as trans, labelling that an 'umbrella term' that includes non-binary people.<sup>99</sup> Clarendon had previously

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<sup>92</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>93</sup> de la Cretaz, 'Androgyny is Now Fashionable in the W.N.B.A.'

<sup>94</sup> WNBA. Twitter Post. 16 June 2020, 11:00pm

<<https://twitter.com/WNBA/status/1272876589408235523>>

<sup>95</sup> Broad, 'The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Resistance in Women's Sport,' p. 186.

<sup>96</sup> Jack Halberstam. *Female Masculinity* (20th Anniversary ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 139.

<sup>97</sup> Young, 'Style Confidence.'

<sup>98</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>99</sup> Dani Bar-Lavi. "'Being Black and Non-Binary is My Superpower": Layshia Clarendon on Race, Gender, Social Justice and the WNBA,' *Sports are From Venus*, 18 August 2020, accessed 12 February 2021, <<https://sportsarefromvenus.com/2020/08/18/being->

vacillated on how masculine they wanted to look on any particular day when considering top surgery,<sup>100</sup> yet in 2021 they underwent top surgery to remove breast tissue and announced through *Twitter* that they were feeling ‘free & euphoric in my body.’<sup>101</sup> The WNBA, the Players Association, and Clarendon’s then-team, the New York Liberty, all released statements of support, along with numerous supportive comments from fellow players.<sup>102</sup> Even before the WNBA had an openly transgender player, many players’ had voiced their support for transgender rights. For example, Clarendon and Sue Bird co-signed a letter to the NCAA requesting that all NCAA events be moved out of Idaho following the passing of HB500, which prevents transgender women from playing on women’s sporting teams and allows for gender verification.<sup>103</sup> Certainly, as Clarendon pointed out, ‘the WNBA [has a lot of room to grow] for the non-binary people,’<sup>104</sup> and indeed the WNBA’s very name as a women’s league is exclusionary. Clarendon though is optimistic that players would continue to educate themselves, ‘like this league always does, and then I think we’ll be leaders for other people.’<sup>105</sup> Both Clarendon and Young work to demonstrate the queer possibilities of female masculinity in making legible a variety of different gender identities and the significance of reclaiming masculinity away from being something that adheres exclusively to men.<sup>106</sup>

As the history of the WNBA attests, these issues of femininity, masculinity, and style are

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black-and-non-binary-is-my-superpower-layshia-clarendon-on-race-gender-social-justice-and-the-wnba/>

<sup>100</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>101</sup> Layshia Clarendon. Twitter Post. 30 January 2021, 6:34am, <<https://twitter.com/Layshiac/status/1355237900963573760>>

<sup>102</sup> Cathy Engelbert. Twitter Post. 30 January 2021, 6:52am, <<https://twitter.com/CathyEngelbert/status/1355242404828340224>>

Mey Rude. ‘History-Making Trans WNBA Star Layshia Clarendon Gets Top Surgery,’ *Out*, 2 February 2021, accessed 16 February 2021, <<https://www.out.com/sports/2021/2/02/history-making-trans-wnba-star-layshia-clarendon-gets-top-surgery>>

<sup>103</sup> Bela Kirpalani. ‘Sue Bird, Layshia Clarendon and More Sign Letter Asking NCAA Not To Host Events in Idaho,’ *The Next*, 11 June 2020, accessed 7 July 2020, <<https://thenext.substack.com/p/sue-bird-layshia-clarendon-and-more>>

<sup>104</sup> Bar-Lavi, “‘Being Black and Non-Binary is My Superpower’”: Layshia Clarendon on Race, Gender, Social Justice and the WNBA.’

<sup>105</sup> Bar-Lavi, “‘Being Black and Non-Binary is My Superpower’”: Layshia Clarendon on Race, Gender, Social Justice and the WNBA.’

<sup>106</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 272.

intimately interlinked with sexuality and the willingness to embrace lesbian players and fans. In addition to celebrating Pride month, the WNBA has increasingly told the stories of its lesbian players, and this has created fan engagement that manifests in interesting ways. At the 2019 All-Star game, Chicago Sky teammates and married couple, Allie Quigley (2008-present) and Courtney Vandersloot (2011-present) were placed on opposite teams and often matched up against each other during the game. Vandersloot had joked before the game that '[Quigley's] not scoring,'<sup>107</sup> against her, and the crowd reacted with delight as Quigley scored repeatedly, laughing as Quigley taunted Vandersloot after hitting a three-pointer over her. Here I suggest that the meaning of marriage is contested, as promoting marriage has moved away from being the heterosexual signal of the past, towards an embrace of same-sex partnerships. Understanding this relationship, labelled "Vanderquigs,"<sup>108</sup> has become a part of the cultural knowledge of being a WNBA fan, and at the All-Star game helped create an affective response amongst fans who appreciated the meaning of the back-and-forth game play between them. However, while the WNBA has been more of a presence in promoting its LGBT players, Ravens player Chloe believed that it was 'their last resort...as much as they want to deny that or put out a different face of the league, you know, they're very particular with who they push out and everything.' While somewhat pessimistic about the league's decisions, Chloe recognised the value in players' own self-presentation, arguing 'we just have to continue being us and hopefully we get some recognition that way.' For Chloe, it is the players that have been forcing the change.

Certainly, despite what Candice Wiggins alleged, not all WNBA players are lesbians or masculine-presenting. The WNBA's embrace of a wider array of gender presentations has included players who continue to embody femininity; a pre-game pump-up video on the Jumbotron at Dallas Wings games, for example, includes about half the players with

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<sup>107</sup> Madeline Kenney. 'WNBA All-Star rosters: Elena Delle Donne separates Courtney Vandersloot from Allie Quigley, Diamond DeShields,' *Chicago Sun-Times*, 23 July 2019, accessed 20 July 2020, <<https://chicago.suntimes.com/chicago-sky-and-wnba/2019/7/23/20707955/wnba-all-star-rosters-elena-delle-donne-vandersloot-quigley-diamond-deshields>>

<sup>108</sup> Joan Niesen. 'Meet the Vanderquigs: How the Chicago Sky Stars Make Their Unique Relationship Work,' *SI.com*, 25 July 2019, accessed 23 July 2019, <<https://www.si.com/wnba/2019/07/25/chicago-sky-vandersloot-quigley-marriage-helps-basketball-life>>

their long hair out and loose around their face while they dribble. While historically the league has forced a form of heterosexual femininity that is damaging, that is not to say that femininity is inherently problematic, and though female masculinity can have a radical impact, it is important to, as McCann argues, 'not dismiss feminine-appearing persons as merely cultural dupes labouring under false-consciousness who might instead be liberated through donning something else.'<sup>109</sup> It is essential to theorise the femininity of WNBA players in a way that both recognises the cultural and organisational imperatives that might compel players to present femininely, and appreciates the value and affective pleasure that femininity can hold for some. As the WNBA has moved away somewhat from the notion that femininity will result in commercial success, I want to instead look at how the players interact and experience femininity and the possibility of what McCann labels queering femininity.<sup>110</sup>

Current WNBA players often view the interaction between femininity and masculinity in humorous ways, affectionately joking about the different ways players dress or look. Short length, for example, as Griner earlier attested to, was a controversial issue when the league attempted to mandate tighter, shorter shorts. Now, players have the choice to wear shorts of various lengths, as well as other uniform choices; some players, like A'ja Wilson, prefer to tuck their jersey into their sports bra, whereas for others like Sue Bird, the neckline hiding their bra is preferable.<sup>111</sup> For some players like Griner, long shorts are desirable, and indeed, both Griner and Dawn Staley mentioned the short uniforms as why they did not want to play volleyball.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, players like Chiney Ogwumike (2014-present) and Sophie Cunningham (2019-present) wear their shorts very short. In the Ravens gym, one player was walking around, jokingly hiking her shorts up, sparking further good-natured jokes and comments from players and

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<sup>109</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 8.

<sup>111</sup> Tamryn Spruill. 'Hoops Happening: Today in Women's Basketball—Tuesday May 1, 2018,' *Swish Appeal*, 1 May 2018, accessed 23 July 2020, <<https://www.swishappeal.com/2018/5/1/17305038/2018-wnba-hoops-happenings-womens-basketball-nike-uniforms-breanna-stewart-wild-feminist-sue-bird>>

<sup>112</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 50. LaChina Robinson. Girls of Color Title IX: An Unfulfilled Promise. *Around the Rim*. Podcast. 25 June 2020, <[http://www.espn.com/espnradio/newyork/play/\\_/id/29359026](http://www.espn.com/espnradio/newyork/play/_/id/29359026)>

coaches. Here short length is no longer an oppressive force, but something to be laughed about, something that can be seen as a choice in the construction of a gendered embodiment. Additionally, it is important to not just look at what feminine styles can signify, but also what they can do and the capacities they generate, hence I suggest that it is useful to draw on a New Materialist perspective.<sup>113</sup> Cunningham, for instance, revealed that she wears her shorts shorter not just because 'I like the girlier look,' but also because 'I hate the long shorts because of my sweat they just ride up... I liked the feel of having freedom on my legs.'<sup>114</sup> While Cunningham admitted that she does desire a feminine appearance, her main reason for making her fashion decision was a practical one that would help her feel more comfortable on the court, and hence improve her game. Moreover, various men's players in both college and the NBA have started wearing shorter shorts.<sup>115</sup> The shorts can thus be viewed as part of a material assemblage that generates physical capacity, thus challenging the idea of femininity as inherently limiting.

Within the Ravens locker room, femininity held a humorous position, a framing that was furthered by Diana Taurasi's (2004-present) reaction to 2018 playoff opponent and close friend Sue Bird breaking her nose. Taurasi quipped 'when you have a nose like mine, you don't give a shit. When you have a face like Sue, I would worry, too.'<sup>116</sup> Taurasi poked fun at Bird's attractiveness, an integral part of so much of the earlier WNBA marketing, yet also had no doubt that Bird would play the next game through injury. Indeed, Bird was not actually too worried about her nose, returning to score twenty-two points and win the playoff series while wearing a mask to protect her

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<sup>113</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 7

<sup>114</sup> Jeff Metcalfe. 'Phoenix Mercury Rookie Sophie Cunningham Explains Her Short Shorts,' *AZ Central*, 8 June 2019, accessed 24 July 2020, <<https://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/wnba/mercury/2019/06/08/phoenix-mercury-rookie-sophie-cunningham-explains-her-short-shorts/1389457001/>>

<sup>115</sup> Shannon Ryan. 'Who Wears Short Shorts? These College Basketball Players Wear Short Shorts,' *Chicago Tribune*, 20 May 2019, accessed 23 July 2020, <<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/college/ct-spt-ncaa-tournament-short-shorts-trend-20190320-story.html>>

<sup>116</sup> Alex Simon. Twitter Post. 3 September 2018, 10:09 am, <<https://twitter.com/AlexSimonSports/status/1036405722857201664>>



face.<sup>117</sup> Taurasi will joke about Bird's appearance and the league's previous reliance on it as a marketing tool, but only in the context of recognising her athletic prowess. As McCann argues, while femininity has traditionally been associated with passivity and weakness, it is not necessarily incompatible with humour, possibility, or transformation, and indeed humour may be a crucial element.<sup>118</sup>

These vignettes reveal the place of queer femininity within the WNBA, destabilising the historical link between masculinity and lesbianism in sport. While Bird had previously been positioned as the heterosexual "girl-next-door," she publicly came out in 2017 and subsequently has been in a high-profile relationship with soccer star Megan Rapinoe.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, at Ravens training sessions various players, both straight and gay, wore jewellery and nail polish even while training. While Rebecca Lobo's pearls had been viewed as a marker of heterosexual respectability, current players' openness about their sexuality yet with similar accessory choices reconceptualises the place of gender norms and suggests a role for queer femininity in establishing a bridge between femme and heterosexual femininity. These 'shared bodily connections'<sup>120</sup> enable us to reconceive femininity, moving away from viewing it as a masquerade, particularly in an environment like the current WNBA where the requirement of compulsory, oppressive femininity seems to have lessened.

Scholars of postfeminism, such as McRobbie, have frequently conflated a celebration of feminine appearance with an abandonment of collective feminist principles in favour of neoliberal, empowerment rhetoric.<sup>121</sup> While McRobbie's critiques of the oppressive beauty and fashion demands placed on women are valuable and are clearly evident

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<sup>117</sup> Matt Ellentuck. 'Masked Sue Bird Set the Internet Ablaze with Dagger After Dagger to Save the Seattle Storm, SB Nation, 5 September 2018, accessed 24 July 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/wnba/2018/9/5/17821620/sue-bird-highlights-wnba-playoffs-2018-video-mask-nose-seattle-storm>>

<sup>118</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 139.

<sup>119</sup> Mechelle Voepel. 'Ready To Let You In,' *ESPN.com*, 20 July 2017, accessed 17 April 2020, <<http://www.espn.com/espnw/feature/20088416/wnba-all-star-sue-bird-ready-let-in>>

<sup>120</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 140.

<sup>121</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, p. 32.

throughout the history of the WNBA, she risks overemphasising the political role of the body, ignoring the political potential of feminine women who become associated 'with a lack of "true" feminist political sentiment'<sup>122</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in Skylar Diggins-Smith's more recent public persona and her growing outspokenness on issues of race and gender equality, while maintaining her feminine dress and appearance. A prime example of this is motherhood; historically used to bolster players' femininity and heterosexuality, Diggins-Smith's frank discussion of her experience while pregnant and when suffering from post-partum depression reframed pregnancy as a labour issue. While Sheryl Swoopes had been glorified for 'being ready, willing and able to balance her career with motherhood,'<sup>123</sup> the league itself did not offer the support to its players to make this achievable. Until the 2020 CBA, players were guaranteed just 50 percent of their salary if they could not play due to pregnancy, leading players like Diggins-Smith and Bria Hartley (2014-present) to hide their pregnancy and play while pregnant.<sup>124</sup> Diggins-Smith demanded a trade from the Dallas Wings, accusing them of not being supportive, and subsequently played a leading role in the CBA negotiations to demand reforms, saying 'obviously the taste that was in my mouth last year was wanting to improve the conditions as a mother.'<sup>125</sup> By reframing pregnancy as a labour issue, Diggins-Smith thus moved it out of the realm of postfeminist notions of choice and empowerment and put the burden back onto the WNBA to offer the structures necessary to support working mothers. The WNBA needed to switch from viewing motherhood as a discursive tool to recognising the practical impacts it had on its players.

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<sup>122</sup> McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, p. 30.

<sup>123</sup> McDonald, 'Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women's National Basketball Association,' p. 383.

<sup>124</sup> Kelsey Trainor. 'Skylar Diggins-Smith on the WNBA's CBA: "Closed Mouths Don't Get Fed,"' *High Post Hoops*, 2 February 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://highposthoops.com/2020/02/02/wnba-skylar-diggins-smith-closed-mouths-dont-get-fed/>>

Thuc Nhi Nguyen. 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms,' *Los Angeles Times*, 12 April 2020, accessed 29 April 2020, <<https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-04-12/wnba-improved-conditions-for-players-particularly-mothers>>

<sup>125</sup> Trainor, 'Skylar Diggins-Smith on the WNBA's CBA: "Closed Mouths Don't Get Fed."'

One of the things that became clear to me in my ethnographic research with the Ravens was just how commonplace the presence of players' and coaches' children was. Many of the children were at training, included in the team huddle, helping players rebound, and shooting around when they had the opportunity. This can be seen in much of the social media output from teams in the "Wubble"—the name given for the bubble-like environment at IMG academy where the 2020 WNBA season was held due to Covid-19—as players brought their children and WNBA, team, and player accounts on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* posted videos of children playing in team environments, including on-court or in recovery ice-baths.<sup>126</sup> Many of the players were working mothers, and as Ravens player Taylor pointed out, players are often away and have to leave their children with 'nannies or significant others.' She gave the example of assistant coach Holly, saying:

Sometimes her girls are here when they're here, you know, they're here with her all the time cause she's out. Like I said, like we're always gone. So, she barely has time to see her girls. So, when they hear that, you know, they're here... So sometimes we have a full house.

This underscores the practical realities of being a WNBA player or coach, and the importance of having a welcoming and supportive environment. All the players were very complimentary of the Ravens organisation, with Isabella describing the arrangements:

[They] created a playroom for the game days. So, they've hired a nanny, she comes in and usually brings her daughter to help cause there's just a lot of kids...They get here like an hour and a half before the game. And then there's just toys in there and the kids can go in there and play and come in and out however they want. So, yeah, this organization is really good as far as taking care of other things aside from basketball.

The juxtaposition between the Ravens and Diggins-Smith's experience with the Wings

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<sup>126</sup> Phoenix Mercury. Twitter Post. 21 July 2020, 10:27 am, <<https://twitter.com/PhoenixMercury/status/1285370799260672008>>  
Arielle Chambers. Twitter Post. 21 July 2020, 9:52 am, <<https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/1285361890160451585>>

reveals the piecemeal approach the league took prior to the new CBA and the importance of pushing for change.

The WNBA does continue to promote motherhood and its family-friendly appeal, sharing photos and videos of players' children and substituting the cheerleaders that adorn the sidelines of male sports with less sexualised dance groups. One Dallas Wings game I attended had a "Mom Crew," where older women made up the dance group, some with fake baby carriers and baby dolls. However, the emphasis on motherhood has moved away from presenting it as a heterosexual signifier, recognising that many of the players have children through same-sex relationships. For example, the Indiana Fever announced their 2020 schedule in a video with the twin daughters of Fever player Candice Dupree (2006-present) and Connecticut Sun player DeWanna Bonner (2009-present).<sup>127</sup> Again we see the possibilities of queering traditional feminine attributes and giving voice to different family arrangements and different forms of working motherhood. Players continue to challenge the idea that femininity can have only one meaning and that it precludes athletic success. As Napheesa Collier (2019-present) encapsulated 'my entire life, I was seen as kind of a girly-girl, but I was also really athletic. Those two things aren't mutually exclusive. (It's wild, I know.)'<sup>128</sup> By recognising that both masculine and feminine stylings are constructed, I contend that we can remove the idea that femininity is inherently problematic in its artifice, and rather look at the specific factors that compel players to present in certain ways while recognising that femininity does not preclude feminism. However, while feminine presentation should not be conflated with gender roles or values, it is not only a style but may influence embodiment, as will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

One area where these issues of femininity come to the forefront is hair and the power of the ponytail. Historically, Pat Griffin argues, a ponytail has been viewed as a signifier of

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<sup>127</sup> Indiana Fever. 'Candice Dupree & Her Twins Help Announce the 2020 Indiana Fever Schedule,' *WNBA Video*, 1:20, 13 July 2020, accessed 17 July 2020, <<https://fever.wnba.com/video/candice-dupree-her-twins-help-announce-the-2020-indiana-fever-schedule/>>

<sup>128</sup> Napheesa Collier. 'One of the 144,' *The Players' Tribune*, 24 September 2019, accessed 30 April 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/napheesa-collier-wnba>>

femininity and heterosexuality, particularly for white women.<sup>129</sup> Prince argues that the lesbian connotation of short hair also exists for Black women, but with the extra difficulty that natural hair often does not grow long, thus necessitating hairpieces or weaves.<sup>130</sup> Possibly most reflective of the significance of the ponytail in the WNBA was the media and fan obsession with Seattle point guard Sue Bird's famous ponytail. Her 'enviable perfect ponytail'<sup>131</sup> is repeatedly mentioned in game broadcasts and articles about her and there is even a Twitter account with the handle @SueBirdsHair. While this previously may have read as supporting Griffin's thesis that the emphasis on the ponytail distanced the league and Bird from accusations of lesbianism, Bird challenged this reading by coming out as gay in 2017.<sup>132</sup> Thus, as in the case of Cunningham's shorts, it is useful to view the ponytail through a New Materialist perspective, looking at what a ponytail actually does and the capacities it generates, that is the 'thing-power' of the inanimate material components.<sup>133</sup>

These capacities were revealed during the 2019 All-Star game, as the crowd laughed and cheered as Liz Cambage (2011-present) dribbled the ball up the court performing fancy dribble moves and waving off guard Kayla McBride (2014-present), whose role this usually would be. She flicked her ponytail around—in regular games she keeps it in a more practical bun—and batted her false eyelashes, all to the delight of the crowd. This in some ways reinforces Griffin's argument and demonstrates how discursive norms are implicated in the bodily assemblage. It reflects Coffey's notion that the unstable assemblages of gender and sexuality influence the body's perceived capabilities, and that women perform 'body work' to further reinforce this assemblage.<sup>134</sup> However, it also strengthens Clark's analysis of ballet dancers, which revealed that the materiality of hair and its accompanying material entities—hair ties,

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<sup>129</sup> Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, p. 73.

<sup>130</sup> Prince, *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*, p. 55.

<sup>131</sup> Lisa Altobelli. 'Sue Bird is a Leader On and Off the Court for USA Basketball,' *USA Basketball*, 17 September 2014, accessed 27 July 2020, <<http://www.usab.com/news-events/news/2014/09/sue-bird-continues-to-make-history-with-usa-basketball.aspx>>

<sup>132</sup> Voepel, 'Ready To Let You In.'

<sup>133</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 27.

<sup>134</sup> Coffey, 'Creating Distance from Body Issues: Exploring New Materialist Feminist Possibilities for Renegotiating Gendered Embodiment,' p. 77.

bobby pins, hair spray—is a ‘material-discursive intra-action’ that ‘creates a body with an increased capacity to dance, create, and participate in new intra-actions.’<sup>135</sup> In an exhibition game such as the All-Star game, Cambage was willing to wear her hair in a long, impractical ponytail, reflecting her willingness to play around on the court, yet in a real game, putting her hair in a bun increases her capacity to compete. As Clark argues, the way one ‘feels with her hair in a bun shapes her physical way of being.’<sup>136</sup> By looking at this from a new materialist perspective, we can give new meanings to the ponytail and women’s hair more generally, viewing it as a materialist assemblage with an affective force, rather than simply as a discursive signifier.

However, there are limits to recognising the practical realities of hairstyles rather than the discursive meanings, which become particularly pertinent when it comes to Black women, whose hair has ‘been a difficult and painful issue for many.’<sup>137</sup> This was evident in a 2019 disagreement between Liz Cambage and Kalani Brown (2019-present), in which Cambage expressed frustration that she was ‘constantly getting tangled in Kalani’s hair,’<sup>138</sup> extensions that were styled in Senegalese twists, and tweeted after the game ‘I get y’all tryna be cute with some inches but tye that cheap shit up.’<sup>139</sup> While this could be viewed through the lens of practicality—Cambage argued her comments were due to Brown’s hair ‘directly impact[ing] my ability to perform my job’—Black sportswriter Tamryn Spruill argued that many Black women saw the comments as evidence of colourism.<sup>140</sup> Cambage, a light-skinned, mixed-race woman, has the kind of natural wavy hair that has historically been valued, while women whose hair would not grow long were subject to scorn and wore wigs or weaves to meet Eurocentric

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<sup>135</sup> Marianne Clark. ‘Reimagining the Dancing Body with and through Barad.’ In *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies*, edited by Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe and David L. Andrews, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020) p. 218.

<sup>136</sup> Clark, ‘Reimagining the Dancing Body with and through Barad,’ p. 218.

<sup>137</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, p. 126.

<sup>138</sup> Tamryn Spruill. ‘Untangling the WNBA’s Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath,’ *The Athletic*, 12 July 2019, accessed 7 July 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1074093/2019/07/12/untangling-the-wnbas-kalani-brown-liz-cabbage-hair-incident-and-its-complex-aftermath/>>

<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth Cambage. Twitter Post. 28 June 2019, 8:10 pm, <<https://twitter.com/ecabbage/status/1144548683922341888>>

<sup>140</sup> Spruill, ‘Untangling the WNBA’s Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath.’

standards.<sup>141</sup> Some viewed Cambage's comments insulting Brown, a dark-skinned woman wearing extensions, through this lens.<sup>142</sup> This demonstrates the limits of exploring hair solely through the lens of the material; Cambage may have meant it that way, but hair continues to have meaning and symbolism beyond the practical implications.

It is evidently important to examine both discursive signifiers and the material, practical impact of hair, which we can see when considering an incident at the 2000 Olympics between Lisa Leslie and Lauren Jackson, in which Jackson pulled out Leslie's fake ponytail during the Gold medal game. As discussed earlier, Leslie's hair was significant to her as a symbol of her femininity and respectability, and the incident could certainly be read through that lens. Indeed, that was how Jackson saw the incident, particularly in light of Leslie's well-publicised femininity, saying 'Lisa Leslie, she's this model, she's so beautiful ... but it's all fake.'<sup>143</sup> However, Leslie described her reasoning as to wearing the ponytail:

I had been wearing French Braids throughout the Olympics. It took about four to six hours to get my hair done in French braids and about two hours to take them down. Since our team was going to fly home after the gold medal game, Nikki McCray and I decided that we would take our braids down prior to Team USA's showdown with Australia. Once the braids were down, we got some hairpins and attached fake ponytails to our hair. It was simple and we were ready for the game. Postgame would be more convenient for us as well, because we would not have any hair issues to deal with while we were preparing to leave Sydney.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Spruill, 'Untangling the WNBA's Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath.'

Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, p. 121.

<sup>142</sup> Spruill, 'Untangling the WNBA's Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath.'

<sup>143</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald. 'Sworn Enemies Don't Give a Rat's,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 2002, accessed 27 July 2020,

<<https://www.smh.com.au/sport/basketball/sworn-enemies-dont-give-a-rats-20020907-gdfm46.html>>

<sup>144</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 187-188.

Leslie's decisions were based on material concerns in addition to aesthetic ones, and throughout her autobiography she references the realities of dealing with her hair while playing basketball, having to balance the time it takes to wash and straighten her hair with getting sweaty playing basketball.<sup>145</sup> Similarly, Kalani Brown pointed out that one of the reasons she was wearing extensions was to protect her hair and to avoid having to manage her hair every day after sweating.<sup>146</sup> Brown was making both an aesthetic choice—she likes having 'long dramatic hair'—and a practical choice.<sup>147</sup>

Moreover, Jackson maintained that she did not know that Leslie was wearing a hair extension and that pulling out her hair was not intentional.<sup>148</sup> Leslie disputes this, but it is worth pointing out, as Bordo does, white people, like Jackson, are often unfamiliar when 'it comes to the concrete, practical ways in which "race matters."' <sup>149</sup> Similarly, Boylorn argues 'white folk don't understand Blackgirl hair, the way it grows up and out, or down and long, how it swells with sweat and shrinks in heat—our hair was not meant to be tame.'<sup>150</sup> I contend that this reinforces the value of autobiography in allowing Black women to present themselves and their bodies in their own terms, and providing a space for Black women to theorise their embodiment in 'unexpected locations.'<sup>151</sup> It is evident through their writing the great importance that Black players place on their hair; Ruthy Hebard (2020-present), for example, wrote a piece for *The Players' Tribune* describing her white, adopted mother's struggle to learn to braid her hair and how much the effort meant to her,<sup>152</sup> while Candace Parker made sure her baby hairs made it into the NBA2K video game.<sup>153</sup> They conceive of the position of their

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<sup>145</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>146</sup> Spruill, 'Untangling the WNBA's Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath.'

<sup>147</sup> Spruill, 'Untangling the WNBA's Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath.'

<sup>148</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 73.

<sup>149</sup> Susan Bordo. 'Cassie's Hair.' In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 410.

<sup>150</sup> Boylorn, 'Baby Hair: For Gabby, Blue Ivey, Tiana, and Me,' p. 117.

<sup>151</sup> Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, p. 21.

<sup>152</sup> Ruthy Hebard. 'My Mom Still Braids My Hair,' *The Players' Tribune*, 9 May 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/ruthy-hebard-my-mom-still-braids-my-hair-wnba-chicago-sky>>

<sup>153</sup> Candace Parker. Twitter Post, 9 July 2020, 9:40 am, <[https://twitter.com/Candace\\_Parker/status/1281010186447138818](https://twitter.com/Candace_Parker/status/1281010186447138818)>



hair as a part of being a Black woman in America, with A'ja Wilson ending her piece discussing the way she has been shaped by the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism by saying, 'if somebody asks you, "Can I touch your hair?" The answer is no. *HeIIIIIIII no.*'<sup>154</sup> The result of this is, as Spruill argued, 'the black women of the league are showcasing, in dramatic ways, the diversity of black hair.'<sup>155</sup>

Historically the WNBA and its players had generally positioned themselves through a colour-blind framing, which Brüning argues results in a situation in which the 'visibility of the Black post-feminist subject...is paradoxically contingent on the concurrent invisibility of Black women's experiences and Black feminist concerns.'<sup>156</sup> This changed dramatically during the 2016 season. Spurred on by the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, players from the Minnesota Lynx, including Maya Moore, held a pre-game press conference to speak out against the murders, wearing shirts that said 'Change Starts With Us: Justice & Accountability' on the front and 'Black Lives Matter' on the back. They also included the names of Castile and Sterling, and the Dallas Police shield to honour an attack on Dallas police officers that had resulted in five dead.<sup>157</sup> The protest caused four Minneapolis police officers that were working the game as security to walk out, and the head of the Police Union, Bob Kroll, jeered that 'they only have four officers working the event because the Lynx have such a pathetic draw.'<sup>158</sup> The Lynx were quickly followed by the Liberty, Mercury, Mystics, and Fever, who wore black t-shirts in support of Black Lives Matter instead of their team-issued warm-up tops.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> A'ja Wilson. 'Dear Black Girls,' *The Players' Tribune*, 21 July 2020, accessed 22 July 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/aja-wilson-dear-black-girls>>

<sup>155</sup> Spruill, 'Untangling the WNBA's Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage Hair Incident and its Complex Aftermath.'

<sup>156</sup> Brüning, 'Olivia Pope: A Black Post-Feminist Subject? Analyzing *Scandal's* Intersecting Post-Feminist and Colorblind Discourses,' p. 465.

<sup>157</sup> Katie Barnes. 'Inside WNBA Legend Maya Moore's Extraordinary Quest For Justice,' *ESPN.com*, 18 June 2020, accessed 7 July 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/29315369/inside-wnba-legend-maya-moore-extraordinary-quest-justice](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/29315369/inside-wnba-legend-maya-moore-extraordinary-quest-justice)>

<sup>158</sup> Matt Ellentuck. '4 Minneapolis Cops Leave Minnesota Lynx Security Posts After Players Call For Justice and Peace,' *SB Nation*, 12 July 2016, accessed 3 August 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/2016/7/12/12160566/minneapolis-police-minnesota-lynx-wnba-protest>>

<sup>159</sup> Tom Ziller and Mike Prada. 'The WNBA has Been At the Forefront of Protesting Racial Injustice,' *SB Nation*, 24 September 2017, accessed 3 August 2020,

Kelsey Bone (2013-2018) joined Colin Kaepernick in kneeling for the National Anthem before every game,<sup>160</sup> while the entire Indiana Fever knelt before a playoff game.<sup>161</sup> In doing so, WNBA players were drawing on a long history of Black athlete protest, yet they also became leaders in kickstarting the current moment of athlete activism. While historically Black female athletes, with few exceptions, had been marginalised in athlete movements, the platform given by the WNBA enabled the players to take a leading role and encourage other athletes to speak out.<sup>162</sup> This is essential because, as Kroll's comments indicate, racism and sexism are inextricably intertwined, and when Black women's voices are excluded the importance of this intersection is lost.

This was clearly personal for the players, and they made explicit the way that police brutality affected their lives; Tierra Ruffin-Pratt (2013-present), who organised the Black Lives Matter T-shirts for the Mystics, made the Mystics roster in 2013 on the same day her cousin was murdered by an off-duty police officer. She told reporters 'this whole situation has just been something close to my heart, so being part of the change is something that I want to do.'<sup>163</sup> Jamieson and Choi argue that these post-game press conferences are part of the 'brown commons,' a 'shared resistance and active refusal of the violences and indignations of the quotidian for/with/among brown subjects.'<sup>164</sup> The players are taking a sporting space and transforming it into a site where they can bring to light the discrimination and violence they face as Black women.

Though the WNBA has been indispensable in providing a platform for its athletes, the league itself has struggled with how to deal with protests surrounding race. Following

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<<https://www.sbnation.com/2017/9/24/16357206/national-anthem-protest-wnba-history-donald-trump>>

<sup>160</sup> Lindsey Gibbs. 'The First WNBA Player to Join Kaepernick's Protest Refuses to Stop Kneeling,' *ThinkProgress*, 22 June 2018, accessed 8 June 2020,

<<https://thinkprogress.org/the-first-wnba-player-to-join-kaepernicks-protest-refuses-to-stop-kneeling-6b6e01d3ab2c/>>

<sup>161</sup> Ziller and Prada, *The WNBA has Been At the Forefront of Protesting Racial Injustice.*

<sup>162</sup> Louis Moore. *We Will Win the Day: The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Athlete, and the Quest for Equality.* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017), p. 194.

<sup>163</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. 'The WNBA Has Dropped the Ball,' *Power Plays*, 6 June 2020, accessed 27 July 2020, <<https://www.powerplays.news/p/the-wnba-has-dropped-the-ball>>

<sup>164</sup> Katherine M. Jamieson and Yeomi Choi. 'Lorena "La Reina" Ochoa.' In *Race, Gender and Sport: The Politics of Ethnic 'Other' Girls and Women*, edited by Aarti Ratna and Samaya Farooq Samie. (New York Routledge, 2018) p. 175.

the initial protests, the WNBA fined the players \$500 for breaching the uniform policy.<sup>165</sup> In response, the players held a media black-out, refusing to answer questions that were not about police brutality. The players were angry that the league supported other social movements but not Black Lives Matter, with Natasha Cloud contending that ‘we would like a little support. The league was quick to jump on the Orlando [Pulse nightclub] thing, and we fully supported that, but we’re kind of frustrated that we’re picking and choosing which events we want to support and which we don’t.’<sup>166</sup> The WNBA quickly rescinded the fines, however had lost the trust of many of its players and continued to struggle with how to engage with racial justice issues.<sup>167</sup> In 2018, for example, they launched the “Take a Seat, Take a Stand” campaign, which contributed a portion of ticket sales to organisations that benefitted women, such as Planned Parenthood, yet received pushback for not consulting with players and not choosing any anti-police brutality organisations.<sup>168</sup> Though this occurred under the purview of the previous WNBA President Lisa Borders, Ruffin-Pratt remained suspicious of the league, saying ‘that’s always in the back of our minds, like this is the league we’re playing for, 80 percent black, but how can you fine us for standing up for something that’s a part of us?’<sup>169</sup> The WNBA’s attempts to engage with racial justice have been almost entirely driven by the players, while the league has struggled to view social justice and gender equality through an intersectional lens that includes racism.

The activism of the WNBA did not stop after the initial flurry in 2016. Most prominently, as discussed earlier, was Maya Moore’s decision to step away from the league and fight for Jonathan Irons and prison reform, however other players such as Natasha Cloud and Essence Carson worked on issues including gun violence and inequality.<sup>170</sup> This

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<sup>165</sup> Ziller and Prada, *The WNBA has Been At the Forefront of Protesting Racial Injustice.*

<sup>166</sup> Gibbs, ‘The WNBA Has Dropped the Ball.’

<sup>167</sup> Gibbs, ‘The WNBA Has Dropped the Ball.’

<sup>168</sup> Gibbs, ‘The WNBA Has Dropped the Ball.’

<sup>169</sup> Gibbs, ‘The WNBA Has Dropped the Ball.’

<sup>170</sup> Fred Katz. ‘Mystics Guard Natasha Cloud: “It’s Not Safe to Be Black in America Right Now,”’ *The Athletic*, 7 June 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1858146/2020/06/07/mystics-guard-natasha-cloud-its-not-safe-to-be-black-in-america-right-now/>>

Essence Carson. ‘The Iso: Essence Carson,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 29 March 2020, accessed 30 April 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/the-iso-essence-carson-phoenix-mercury>>

activism reached another peak with the worldwide protests following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as WNBA players led protests and demanded that the WNBA respond beyond platitudes.<sup>171</sup> Natasha Cloud and Renee Montgomery (2009-2019) joined Moore in sitting out the season to continue their activist work, while players demanded that the 2020 season be dedicated to Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name, and getting justice for Breonna Taylor, wearing her name on the back of their jerseys all season.<sup>172</sup> Cloud published an impassioned article for *The Players' Tribune* titled 'Your Silence is a Knee on My Neck' in which she called for all athletes to step up:

Because there's no room for any of that silence or "neutrality" in the athlete community either. Those old excuses about not wanting to lose sponsorships, or not wanting to alienate certain types of fans, or how "racists buy sneakers too" or whatever?? *We don't have time for that.* Not when lives are being lost.<sup>173</sup>

Again, it was evident how personal and important these protests were for players, because, as Cloud pointed out 'being black in America is a weight on your chest and your shoulders right now.'<sup>174</sup>

The players drew particular attention to Black women who had been killed by police, each week talking about a different woman during on-court interviews and pre- and post-game press conferences, answering any basketball questions by drawing attention back to social justice. The Black players wore t-shirts saying, 'We Are Breonna Taylor,' while others wore 'Say Her Name' or 'Black Lives Matter' shirts,<sup>175</sup> emphasising the

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<sup>171</sup> Gibbs, 'The WNBA Has Dropped the Ball.'

<sup>172</sup> Jordan Ligon. "'Say Her Name': The WNBA Wants to Make a Statement When it Returns,' *The Ringer*, 21 July 2020, accessed 6 August 2020, <<https://www.theringer.com/2020/7/21/21331822/say-her-name-wnba-wants-to-make-statement-when-it-returns>>

<sup>173</sup> Natasha Cloud. 'Your Silence is a Knee on My Neck,' *The Players' Tribune*, 30 May 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/natasha-cloud-your-silence-is-a-knee-on-my-neck-george-floyd>>

<sup>174</sup> Katz, 'Mystics Guard Natasha Cloud: "It's Not Safe to Be Black in America Right Now."'

<sup>175</sup> Dave Yapkowicz. 'Breonna Taylor at the Forefront of Sparks Opening Day Win,' *The Next*, 27 July 2020, accessed 6 August 2020, <<https://thenext.substack.com/p/breonna-taylor-at-the-forefront-of>>

Black players' positioning as, to quote A'ja Wilson, 'a double minority. It's like the world is constantly reminding us.... You're a girl. Oh! *And* you're a Black girl.'<sup>176</sup> While moving the focus onto racial justice, they continued to argue for an intersectional approach, recognising that police brutality against Black women is often under-publicised and that both their gender and race contribute to their oppression.<sup>177</sup> Clarendon took this one step further by adding sexuality and gender presentation to the matrix of oppression:

I would love to not have to ask myself questions like, *Is that person following me around the store because I'm black? Or, Is that guy staring at me because I'm holding my wife's hand? Is it because they don't know my gender?...* part of being black and queer is having to navigate a world that has a layered, palpable threat of violence.<sup>178</sup>

Similarly, Amanda Zahui B (2015-present) wore a t-shirt post-game professing 'Black Trans Lives Matter,' highlighting the silence that often surrounds the murder of Black Trans people.<sup>179</sup> Clarendon's experience highlights the need to examine female masculinity through an intersectional lens, as to ignore this is to ignore the physical danger that individuals like Clarendon are placed in.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, though there is always concern that when corporations become involved in activism the message becomes co-opted, I argue that this risk is lessened by the personal connection the players have, and it was them that pushed the league to act. The players are uniquely positioned as activists, Nneka Ogwumike and Sue Bird argued, because 'by simply existing in spaces that weren't built for us, women athletes are doing something revolutionary.'<sup>181</sup>

Like the athlete activists before them, who drew on the Civil Rights movement to

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<sup>176</sup> Wilson, 'Dear Black Girls.'

<sup>177</sup> Layshia Clarendon. 'It's Time To Think Bigger,' *The Players' Tribune*, 27 June 2020, accessed 7 July 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/layshia-clarendon-wnba-racial-injustice>>

<sup>178</sup> Clarendon, 'It's Time To Think Bigger.'

<sup>179</sup> Erica L. Ayala. Twitter Post. 30 July 2020, 12:47 pm, <<https://twitter.com/elindsay08/status/1288667479003279360/photo/1>>

<sup>180</sup> Mignon R. Moore. 'Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2006), p. 130.

<sup>181</sup> Ogwumike and Bird, 'WNBA Players Nneka Ogwumike and Sue Bird: This Moment is So Much Bigger Than Sports. We Need Your Support.'

facilitate their activism, the work of the Black Lives Matter movement has enabled the current outpouring of WNBA activism.<sup>182</sup> Smith and Watson argue that autobiographical subjects can only be written with the cultural vocabulary that is available to them at the time and this is certainly evident if we look at the early WNBA players' evolution to be more vocal about racial issues. Leslie for one largely obscured race in her 2008 autobiography, and mostly only talked about gender issues from the perspective of being a role model, however in 2020 published a piece for *The Players' Tribune* in which she spoke out strongly against systemic racism, highlighting her position as a sports star and a Black woman, saying, 'you want us to *love* you on the grand stage of the Olympics, but you give us no peace or justice at home.'<sup>183</sup> Interestingly, this also became a way of further reframing Black motherhood away from its traditional implications, moving the focus towards the effect of racism in the players' relationships with their children. Leslie discussed the 'uncomfortable conversations' she had to have with her children after they saw George Floyd's murder, and that she had to begin having those conversations with her son at age seven.<sup>184</sup> Bria Hartley revealed similar conversations, saying 'when you're raising a kid, you teach him to love everything. But then you need to teach him how someone could look at him, at the color of his skin, and view him as a threat.'<sup>185</sup> For Hartley, her son was her main motivation for protesting, and similarly, DeWanna Bonner got involved in prison reform after visiting Estrella Jail and realising that, like her, many of the inmates had just recently had children.<sup>186</sup> Though the WNBA had created an image of the successful working mother, these experiences emphasise that Black women cannot unproblematically fill this cultural role without having to worry about racism, and indeed when it comes to motherhood, the 'very entitlements that appear to be rooted in female anatomy can be

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<sup>182</sup> Moore, *We Will Win the Day: The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Athlete, and the Quest for Equality*, p. 193.

<sup>183</sup> Lisa Leslie. 'Dear America,' *The Players' Tribune*, 7 June 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/lisa-leslie-dear-america-racism>>

<sup>184</sup> Leslie, 'Dear America.'

<sup>185</sup> Gina Mizeli. 'By Peacefully Protesting in Minneapolis, Bria Hartley Seeks Better World For Son,' *The Athletic*, 3 June 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1850990/>>

<sup>186</sup> Natalie Heavren. 'DeWanna Bonner Joined NBA Together Virtual Roundtable,' *High Post Hoops*, 7 May 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://highposthoops.com/2020/05/07/dewanna-bonner-joined-nba-together-virtual-roundtables/>>

shown to emerge from the grounds of race and class, heterosexual orientation and physical ability.’<sup>187</sup>

Though, as we can see, many of the restrictions placed on WNBA players surrounding race, gender, and sexuality may have lessened, what remains pertinent is that players continue to present themselves as role models, which tends to bring with it an understanding of a certain kind of propriety. Of course, this is not necessarily a negative and showing women in sporting roles is essential in changing attitudes; at one game I attended a young male fan remarked with admiration that the players’ voices made them sound so strong. Furthermore, who can be a role model has shifted, with queer or masculine players like Tamera Young voicing her desire to ‘be an example to not just young girls but women everywhere.’<sup>188</sup> However, the role model remains one of the categories that women athletes have traditionally been forced into, and we can see some of the tension in this positioning in newer sponsorship materials. For example, Elena Delle Donne’s recent Nike commercial, ‘Carry Me,’ furthers her image as the nurturing “girl-next-door” type. The commercial involves no images of Delle Donne playing basketball but instead focuses on her relationship with her disabled sister Lizzie.<sup>189</sup> However, while in some ways this could be seen as reinforcing the worst tendencies of women in sporting advertising, it is also quite revolutionary in that it depicts a disabled woman who is “carrying” Delle Donne emotionally. Lizzie is not presented as a burden but as a vital part of Delle Donne’s life, which is unusual for media involving disabled people, particularly those that are non-verbal.<sup>190</sup> Additionally, the commercial is for the Nike Air Zoom UNVRS which have technology designed specifically for disabled people; Lizzie is not there solely to generate an emotional response in the audience, but there is an actual material benefit to the product.

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<sup>187</sup> Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury, ‘Introduction,’ p. 5.

<sup>188</sup> Young, ‘Style Confidence.’

<sup>189</sup> Nike. ‘Carry Me,’ *YouTube* Video, 1:00, 27 November 2019, accessed 4 August 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga1bnOxvGdQ>>

<sup>190</sup> Ella Houston. ‘Featuring Disabled Women in Advertisements: The Commodification of Diversity?’ In *The Routledge Companion to Disability and Media*, edited by Katie Ellis, Gerard Goggin, Beth Haller and Rosemary Curtis. (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 51.

Furthermore, though this is not a signature shoe for Delle Donne, it has become rare for WNBA players to have high-profile commercials like this one. As Ravens assistant coach and ex-player Erica pointed out, when the league first started:

We also had Nike who was a big, big sponsor who had us our own commercials, who exposed us a ton when I started, and it helped. And now not so much, you know, it's a combination of sports. If you see us in commercials, you're combined with soccer and volleyball and all of that.

The Nike 'Dream Crazier' commercial, for instance, calls out sexism and double standards in sport, but includes Sue Bird along with a variety of athletes from different sports, and ignores the double standards that Nike itself has among its basketball athletes.<sup>191</sup> As a consequence, some WNBA players have moved outside the realm of the dominant basketball shoe companies—Nike, Adidas, and to a lesser extent Under Armour—and have found alternative options for sponsorship. Diggins-Smith, Katie Lou Samuelson (2019-present), and Jackie Young (2019-present) signed with Puma, who had eschewed basketball since signing Vince Carter in 1998,<sup>192</sup> while Natasha Cloud signed with Converse, the first women's basketball player to do so.<sup>193</sup> These companies often align better with their values or are willing to embrace the players' social justice messaging; Converse was in full support of Cloud's outspokenness and even paid her 2020 salary when she sat out the season to fight for social justice.<sup>194</sup>

The WNBA's change from a league that promoted a largely colour-blind form of

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<sup>191</sup> Nike. 'Dream Crazier,' *YouTube* Video, 1:30, posted by Campaigns of the World, 11 January 2020, accessed 4 August 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWfX5jeF6k4>>

<sup>192</sup> Aaron Dodson. 'Skylar Diggins-Smith on Puma's Return to Basketball: "It's Just the Beginning,"' *The Undefeated*, 2 August 2019, accessed 4 August 2020, <<https://theundefeated.com/features/skylar-diggins-smith-on-pumas-return-to-basketball-its-just-the-beginning/>>

<sup>193</sup> Kareem Copeland. 'Mystics' Natasha Cloud Gets Shoe Deal From Converse, For Her Activism as Much as Her Play,' *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2020, accessed 4 August 2020, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/06/08/natasha-cloud-converse-deal/>>

<sup>194</sup> Tyler Byrum. 'Converse Will Pay Natasha Cloud Her Forfeited WNBA Salary By Opting-Out of 2020 Season,' *NBC Sports*, 30 June 2020, accessed 4 August 2020, <<https://www.nbcsports.com/washington/mystics/converse-will-pay-natasha-cloud-her-forfeited-wnba-salary-opting-out-2020-season>>



femininity to a league that embraces a diverse range of women and is viewed as a leader in racial justice seems dramatic but is the result of the persistent demands and questions of its players. This change has come in fits and starts, and players like Griner have often borne the brunt of being a trailblazer. And of course, the players still must rely on the league and the media to help represent them, and they do not always meet the standards players have set. A recent study by Risa F. Isard and E. Nicole Melton found that even controlling for performance, Black players received significantly less media coverage than white players.<sup>195</sup> This study took place in the 2020 season, a season that was dedicated to Black Lives Matter, and this result was despite the WNBA's own press releases being unbiased. Similarly, a spate of incorrect pronunciations of player names by broadcasters and announcers caused players like Nneka Ogwumike and Arike Ogunbowale (2019-present) to express their frustration and to point out that it only seemed to be the names of Black women that were mispronounced.<sup>196</sup> To ensure the WNBA continues to progress, the players will have to continue to push and prod the league and the media to interrogate how they represent the players of the WNBA.

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<sup>195</sup> Risa Isard and E. Nicole Melton. 'Make This the Season We End Discriminatory Sports Coverage,' *Sports Business Journal*, 24 May 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, <<https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/SB-Blogs/COVID19-OpEds/2021/05/24-IsardMelton.aspx>>

<sup>196</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. 'Racism's Central Role in WNBA Coverage,' *Power Plays*, 9 June 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, <<https://www.powerplays.news/p/racisms-central-role-in-wnba-coverage>>

## **Chapter Five: Playing “Like a Guy”: Game Style, Physicality and Embodiment**

Do men and women play basketball differently? In basketball circles, this seems to be an accepted truth. To quote Lauren Jackson, ‘women’s basketball is a different game from men’s, it’s more about strategy and skill, and tends to be a much more tactical game as a result.’<sup>1</sup> Indeed, women’s basketball is generally seen as more “pure”—that is, team orientated, less individualistic, and with a greater emphasis on passing.<sup>2</sup>

For Jackson, the difference in style of play is a result of women’s inferior athleticism. However, I contend that the history of women’s basketball reveals how the gatekeepers of women’s basketball consciously constructed this mode of embodiment. Berenson’s adapted game was designed deliberately to ensure teamwork and limit physicality, and indeed Berenson believed that without restriction women would behave in ‘unwomanly’ ways, abandoning ‘themselves more readily to impulse than men.’<sup>3</sup> This suggests that cooperation was not innate, and was instead purposefully built into the game from its earliest days. For nearly eighty years women played with some variation of these rules that served to limit individual play, and this legacy has persisted in how women’s basketball is perceived and how female players interpret their games, because, as Ian Wellard maintains, ‘social constructions of gender contribute to the “way” that sport and physical activities are experienced.’<sup>4</sup>

WNBA players’ perceptions of their own embodiment and playing style reveals a somewhat contradictory and confusing understanding of what it means to play “like a woman” or “like a guy,” and, whether striving to be more like the men is a positive. They simultaneously insist on the value of their own style of play, while viewing “like a

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Women's Basketball Coaches Association. *The Women's Basketball Drill Book*. (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2007), p. 77.

Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball*, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> Berenson, ‘The Significance of Basket Ball for Women,’ quoted in Chepko. ‘The Domestication of Basketball,’ p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Wellard, ‘Gendered Performances in Sport: An Embodied Approach,’ p. 5.

guy” as a fraught compliment and mostly pushing to make the league more like the NBA, though this is not without debate. This chapter explores the gendered and racialised meanings of embodiment, and how players have responded to the competing pressures that influence the way they play basketball. I suggest that WNBA players, though the best in the world, continue to be limited by gendered discourses that constrain their bodily possibilities and result in a somewhat ambivalent relationship with what it means to play basketball like a woman.

Firstly, it is essential to examine what exactly people mean when they say women’s basketball is different, and how accurate their characterisations are. The game is no longer as dramatically different as it was in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, however there are some rule differences between the NBA and WNBA; the three-point line is shorter, the basketball is smaller, and they play ten-minute quarters as opposed to twelve. Yet most WNBA players argue that the differences go beyond rule differences and are more related to the style with which they play. What seems consistent is the belief that female basketball players compensate for their lesser athletic ability with a greater understanding of the game—what Seimone Augustus calls a ‘cerebral approach’— and a more fundamental skillset.<sup>5</sup> Ravens player Chloe revealed this understanding:

We rely on our skillset more than our athletic ability; you know what I’m saying? So, we are more x’s and o’s, we’re more thinkers of the game. Not saying they don’t think of the game, but a lot of the men that are in the NBA have an exceptional physical ability that allows them to just do things that make up for lack of you know what I’m saying? Like strategy or whatever.

Ravens assistant coach Holly maintained that the two main differences between the NBA and WNBA were that women play ‘below the rim,’ while the men dunk more, and that women play ‘team basketball,’ as opposed to the ‘iso’ (one-on-one) style play of the men. At a Ravens scouting meeting, the coaches were sure to note that their opponents were ‘one-on-one players,’ suggesting the rarity of this and arguing that it would make

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<sup>5</sup> Kim Tingley. “The W.N.B.A Is Putting on Some of the Best Pro Basketball in America: Why Aren’t More Fans Showing Up?” *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 September 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/magazine/wnba-atlanta-dream.html>>

them easier to defend. While by viewing games and talking to players, there does seem to be a dearth of isolation play, the WNBA lacks some of the publicly available advanced data that the NBA has, including data that tracks “play-type,” thus it is difficult to empirically verify that there are fewer isolation plays in WNBA games.<sup>6</sup> Of course, some of this rhetoric is simply a way to defend women’s basketball from its detractors; Nneka Ogwumike called out those that degrade women’s basketball as not truly valuing ‘basketball for how it began and how we play it: for raw skills and fundamentals.’<sup>7</sup> It becomes a way to avoid the athletic comparisons to men that pervade women’s basketball and argue for the value of the women’s game. This is a common tactic in women’s sport, as female players in sports such as rugby and ice-hockey also argue that it is a smarter game.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, while Chloe was quick to point out that NBA players are also strategic thinkers, by pitting the two styles of play against each other it inevitably downplays both the athletic ability of WNBA players and the intelligence of NBA players. Furthermore, there is also a racial dynamic to the notion of the WNBA as a team-oriented league. As discussed in Chapter Three, the WNBA was founded in the 1990s, during the height of the racialised fears surrounding the NBA, and was thus ‘positioned against the backdrop of the image of the rich, spoiled, violent, highly sexualised, and very black boys of the NBA.’<sup>9</sup> Stars were perceived as individuals only out for themselves and their money, ignoring what was best for the team, and being paid too early to handle their success.<sup>10</sup> This narrative was infused with a paternalism that suggested a fear of Black success and reflected mainstream white America’s nostalgic perception of the moralism of teamwork, scrappiness, and amateurism. The WNBA thus served as a counter-balance, as players’

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<sup>6</sup> Positive Residual. ‘Estimated Contributions in the WNBA,’ *PositiveResidual.com*, 20 July 2020, accessed 2 September 2020, <<https://positiveresidual.com/analysis/estimated-contributions-in-the-wnba/>>

<sup>7</sup> Katie Barnes. ‘A Higher Calling,’ *ESPNW*, 25 March 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<http://www.espn.com/espnw/feature/26309764/fran-belibi-dunking-dilemma>>

<sup>8</sup> Pirkko Markula and Richard Pringle. *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 124.

Nancy Theberge. “‘It’s Part of the Game’: Physicality and the Production of Gender in Women’s Hockey.’ *Gender and Society* 11, no. 1 (1997), p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> Flores, Ashcraft, and Marafiotte, ‘We Got Game: Race, Masculinity, and Civilization in Professional Team Sport,’ p. 418.

maturity and “feminine” cooperative nature were stressed.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the team-oriented, strategic version of basketball that the WNBA emphasised is contrasted with the “showboating” of the NBA, an individualistic style that is closely linked with “street-ball”; the essentialist idea of women as innately cooperative intersects with the racialised criticism of NBA players to create a WNBA ecosystem where individualistic, iso-heavy star players are discouraged.

Yet it is the NBA’s stars that have made it so successful, as stars not only generate controversy and off-court intrigue, but also dominate games and provide the kind of “display behaviour” on-court that makes basketball a performance worth watching for many.<sup>12</sup> Gerald R. Gems argues that this style of play emanated from the Black, segregated urban culture of Northern cities like Chicago, a style Gems argues included ‘powerful dunks and joyous expressions of physicality,’ including ‘speed, intricate passing, and clever ballhandling.’<sup>13</sup> As the NBA integrated, this style soon predominated, particularly due to the influence of Bob Cousy. Sportswriter Leonard Koppett describes it thus:

Cousy did so much to establish, in the American imagination, the status of pro basketball. Black players were still few, so it was Cousy who displayed a truth that was already a cultural norm among the blacks and would be, eventually throughout the game: that in basketball, style is as important to the fan as sheer result.<sup>14</sup>

The embrace of this style of play was not straightforward, and indeed the NCAA banned dunking from 1967-76, something Kareem Abdul-Jabbar viewed as ‘discrimination,’ as ‘most of the people who dunk are black athletes.’<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the WNBA’s dismissal of

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<sup>11</sup> Banet-Weiser, ‘Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender,’ p. 416.

<sup>12</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 335.

<sup>13</sup> Gems, ‘Blocked Shot: The Development of Basketball in the African-American Community of Chicago,’ pp. 147-148.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard Koppett, *The Essence of the Game is Deception: Thinking About Basketball* (1973) quoted in David George Surdam. *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Wulf. ‘Athletes and Activism: The Long, Defiant History of Sports Protests,’ *The Undefeated*, 30 January 2019, accessed 8 June 2020,

isolation play could be viewed in this lineage, as well as being the heritage of Berenson's middle-class values. This style of play has persisted in the men's game, and indeed, NBA coach Rick Carlisle argued that the predominance of social media and highlight clips has resulted in further pressure for stars to produce entertaining plays.<sup>16</sup>

The tension surrounding display behaviour is felt throughout some of the WNBA players' autobiographies, and in particular Chamique Holdsclaw and Shannon Bobbitt's description of their dribbling prowess reflects both a street-ball sensibility and a "masculine" embodiment. Holdsclaw described playing on the "hoop circuit" against boys' teams:

I could dribble like a guy; inside out moves, behind the back, between the legs and probably with better handles than most point guards. My rebounding ability was uncanny. I could leap and grab the ball out of the air right off of the rim. I guess it came from playing with the boys.<sup>17</sup>

Bobbitt described playing against other women, and their surprise at seeing her execute a dribble move that women typically do not do.<sup>18</sup> Bobbitt eventually faded out of the WNBA, and her reasoning was that 'I just wasn't sure if the other players were ready for my kind of street ball play,' and she labelled the WNBA's games as 'boring.'<sup>19</sup> Of course, Bobbitt's comments could be perceived as simply bitterness at her failure, however the link between success, display behaviour, and playing 'like a guy' is prevalent even in other players' accounts. Alana Beard (2004-2019), for instance, described Cappie Pondexter (2006-2018) as being one of the hardest players to guard, as she is 'just so smooth---and in a way you don't often see in female athletes.'<sup>20</sup> Bobbitt, Holdsclaw, and

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<<https://theundefeated.com/features/athletes-and-activism-the-long-defiant-history-of-sports-protests/>>

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Mutoni. 'Rick Carlisle: Social Media Pressure on "Guys Like Luka to Generate Highlights,'" *Slam*, 21 November 2019, accessed 28 April 2020,

<<https://www.slamonline.com/nba/rick-carlisle-social-media-pressure-on-guys-like-luka-to-generate-highlights/>>

<sup>17</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>18</sup> Bobbitt, *Bobbitt: 5'2" Giant Handling the Odds*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Bobbitt, *Bobbitt: 5'2" Giant Handling the Odds*, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> Alana Beard. 'Five Toughest To Guard,' *The Players' Tribune*, 2 September 2017, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/alana-beard-wnba-five-toughest-to-guard>>

Pondexter are confronted with competing discourses, between ideas of feminine cooperation and the cultural norm that Cousy inspired—the importance of style and performance in creating a game that people want to watch.

Furthermore, while the WNBA is conceived of as a team-first game, some WNBA players, such as Tamika Catchings, felt tension ‘between playing as a team and asserting yourself as the go-to player.’<sup>21</sup> Likewise, both Elena Delle Donne and Sue Bird told stories of being reprimanded for passing too much.<sup>22</sup> These players all needed to play more “selfishly” for the team to succeed, and there is evidently a rift between the kind of basketball women supposedly play, and the kind that is necessary to be dominant players. Additionally, while the pass-first basketball is lauded in theory, Catchings’ experience playing at the University of Tennessee suggests that the media and public desire a transformed game:

We had a reputation for creating a new kind of women’s basketball—fast and physical. The *New York Times* would write, “Beyond Tennessee’s statistical dominance lies an aggressive, attacking style that has redefined the women’s game and offered the sharpest departure to date from the stationary days when women relied mostly on set shots.”<sup>23</sup>

For Tennessee to be successful they had to put the ball in Catchings’ hands, and she needed to be the star.

While WNBA teams do tend to rely less on isolation play, there are other style variations between the NBA and WNBA that are unrelated to the differing athleticism of men and women. For instance, assistant coach Holly pointed out that WNBA players shoot fewer three-pointers than NBA players. In 2019, the Washington Mystics shot the highest percentage of their shots from the three-point line in the WNBA, at 36.4 percent, while

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<sup>21</sup> Tamika Catchings and Ken Petersen. *Catch a Star: Shining through Adversity to Become a Champion*. (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2016), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 209. Bird and Brown, *Be Yourself*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Catchings and Petersen, *Catch a Star: Shining through Adversity to Become a Champion*, p. 143.

the Las Vegas Aces shot the lowest percentage at 21.3 percent.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, in the 2019-20 NBA season the Houston Rockets shot 50.1 percent of their shots from three, while even the lowest-ranked Indiana Pacers shot 31.7 percent of their shots from three.<sup>25</sup> Why this is seems unclear, and Holly expected that WNBA teams would further embrace the three-point shot in the future. Perhaps a more long-lasting trend that separates the NBA and WNBA is the greater importance of the centre and power-forward position in the WNBA. The centre (denoted by the number 5) and power-forward (4) are generally the two tallest players on the team and traditionally have played close to the basket and relied on post-ups. These positions have become devalued in the modern NBA, as the most valuable players tend to be wings or point-guards and post-ups have declined.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, many of the best WNBA players are centres and power-forwards, including the first five vote-getters for the 2019 MVP and the first four in 2018.<sup>27</sup> Holly revealed the difference in mindset:

You have very good guards but everybody's trying to feed that, post it and get those easy points down low... So, I do think we look into the post quite a bit, but I also think we have a lot of very good fours and fives in our league that are all stars and lead our league in scoring. So, it would be nice to see a little bit, you know, where the guards are scoring a little bit more.

Interestingly, while WNBA teams utilise the post-up play more than NBA teams, it was a WNBA player, Lauren Jackson, who was one of the first in either league to redefine the

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<sup>24</sup> WNBA. 'WNBA Advanced Stats,' *WNBA.com*, 2019, accessed 25 August 2020, <[https://stats.wnba.com/teams/scoring/?sort=PCT\\_FGA\\_3PT&dir=-1&Season=2019&SeasonType=Regular%20Season](https://stats.wnba.com/teams/scoring/?sort=PCT_FGA_3PT&dir=-1&Season=2019&SeasonType=Regular%20Season)>

<sup>25</sup> NBA. 'NBA Advanced Stats,' *NBA.com*, 2019-20, accessed 25 August 2020, <[https://stats.nba.com/teams/scoring/?sort=PCT\\_FGA\\_3PT&dir=-1&Season=2019-20&SeasonType=Regular%20Season](https://stats.nba.com/teams/scoring/?sort=PCT_FGA_3PT&dir=-1&Season=2019-20&SeasonType=Regular%20Season)>

<sup>26</sup> Tom Ziller. 'The Center Position in the NBA is Dying,' *SB Nation*, 17 July 2017, accessed 25 August 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/2017/7/17/15981266/nba-center-position-bad-free-agents>>

<sup>27</sup> NBA. 'Elena Delle Donne Named 2019 WNBA Most Valuable Player,' *NBA.com*, 19 September 2019, accessed 25 August 2020, <<https://www.nba.com/article/2019/09/19/wnba-elena-delle-donne-mvp-2019-official-release>>

WNBA. 'Seattle's Breanna Stewart Named 2018 Most Valuable Player,' *WNBA.com*, 26 August 2018, accessed 25 August 2020, <<https://www.wnba.com/news/seattles-breanna-stewart-named-2018-most-valuable-player/>>



centre position with her combination of three-point shooting, post-up play and defensive skills.<sup>28</sup> Many of the current power-forwards and centres, particularly players like Breanna Stewart (2016-present) and Elena Delle Donne, continue this legacy with their versatile play, which perhaps explains the position's continued relevance.<sup>29</sup> Some of the differences between the NBA and WNBA do seem to be overstated; one of the disparities that critics of the WNBA fall back on is lower scoring games, however this is largely explained by the shorter game length. By looking at offensive rating statistics—points per hundred possessions—we can see that at least the best WNBA teams score at similar rates to their NBA counterparts; The 2019 Washington Mystics' 112.9 offensive rating would have ranked fourth amongst NBA teams in the 2019-20 season.<sup>30</sup>

While the tension between individual star power and team-oriented cooperation may be distinctly pertinent to the unique history of women's basketball, the issue of physicality and violence is one that has permeated debate surrounding women's sport more generally. As Genevieve Rail discovered in her phenomenological study of female basketball players, 'violent contact is part of the repertoire of physical actions present in the women basketball players' current mode of attachment to the world.'<sup>31</sup> Through the history of women's sport, physical educators and some feminist researchers have discounted the joy that competitiveness, physicality and contact bring to women, and like the college students that resisted the imposition of "play days" in the 1930s, WNBA players continue to reveal the pleasure of physicality in sport; as Lauren Jackson described, 'I would finish games covered in bruises, but I loved it, it made me feel alive.'<sup>32</sup> Basketball players are not alone in this, as research suggests similar feelings

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<sup>28</sup> Kevin Pelton. 'Appreciating LJ's dominance -- and wondering what might have been,' *ESPN.com*, 31 March 2016, accessed 25 August 2020, <[http://www.espn.com.au/womens-college-basketball/story/\\_/id/15101787/lauren-jackson-retires-incredible-legacy](http://www.espn.com.au/womens-college-basketball/story/_/id/15101787/lauren-jackson-retires-incredible-legacy)>

<sup>29</sup> Andi Cwieka. 'Positionless Basketball is Forcing WNBA Veterans to Adapt,' *SB Nation*, 12 May 2017, accessed 25 August 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/a/wnba-preview-2017/veteran-evolution>>

<sup>30</sup> WNBA, 'WNBA Advanced Stats.'  
NBA, 'NBA Advanced Stats.'

<sup>31</sup> Genevieve Rail. 'Physical Contact in Women's Basketball: A Phenomenological Construction and Contextualization.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 27, no. 1 (1992), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 92.

among female ice-hockey<sup>33</sup> and rugby<sup>34</sup> players, while research by Young and White found no significant difference between men and women athletes in their understanding of pain.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly true at the highest level of the sport, the WNBA, as international players Amanda Zahui B and Lauren Jackson both discussed the increased physicality and aggressiveness compared to other leagues.<sup>36</sup> Zahui B talked about having to unlearn the constraining European style of play, and instead had to learn to use her body to ‘push back in the right way.’ This is a fairly new development, as Ravens assistant coach and ex-player Erica revealed that when the WNBA started, she had to make a transition from the more physical European leagues, where she was ‘playing with brute strength,’ to the new WNBA where she had to play with ‘finesse.’ Erica believed that there is a more balanced mix between Europe and the WNBA now. Indeed, the athleticism of WNBA players is extremely obvious in person, and in particular the overt physicality of the Dallas Wings had a visceral impact on me as a spectator.

The athletic body, and consequently the ability to absorb and dole out contact, is not a natural occurrence, but rather the result of hard work and body discipline.<sup>37</sup> Ravens rookie Natalie came into the league not strong enough, which was acceptable in college basketball, but in the WNBA, she highlighted, ‘everyone’s tall, everyone’s athletic, everyone’s a talented, skilled player.’ Consequently, Natalie was not playing many minutes and did extra sessions which she used to ‘get in the weight room, get really, really strong.’ Similarly, early in her career Lauren Jackson realised she was not strong enough to compete with players like Sylvia Fowles (2008-present), and she began lifting

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<sup>33</sup> Theberge, ‘“It’s Part of the Game”’: Physicality and the Production of Gender in Women’s Hockey,’ p. 74.

<sup>34</sup> Michael M.L. Chu, Sarah I. Leberman, Bruce L. Howe, and Dan G. Bachor. ‘The Black Ferns: The Experiences of New Zealand Elite Women Rugby Players.’ *Journal of Sport Behavior* 26, no. 2 (2003), p. 113.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Young and Philip White. ‘Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury: The Experiences of Elite Women Athletes.’ *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 19, no. 1 (1995), p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Amanda Zahui B. ‘Life in Transition,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 5 May 2015, accessed 19 November 2018, < <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/amanda-zahui-b-wnba-draft-tulsa-shock> >

Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 90.

<sup>37</sup> Markula and Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self*, p. 100.

more weights, as well as ‘started drinking protein shakes and eating a lot of protein.’<sup>38</sup> This kind of weight training persists throughout WNBA players’ careers, and veterans like Ravens player Chloe continued to prioritise it, even as it becomes difficult to fit when ‘games come so quickly.’ Markula points out that muscularity is complicated for women, who often want their bodies to conform to a specific athletic ideal, yet fear large, bulky arm muscles.<sup>39</sup> However, Markula’s research suggests that sportswomen tend to care less about the appearance of those muscles, but rather their functionality.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, WNBA players talk about muscularity in terms of function; Jackson linked her weight training to the need ‘to dominate the key.’<sup>41</sup> This growth in muscularity then needs to be paired with physical training; Ravens players at training were practising layups with an assistant coach holding a blocking pad to simulate the kind of contact one might get in a game. Furthermore, some, like Chloe, felt pleasure through the process of weight training, telling me, ‘I like lifting,’ which encouraged her to maintain diligence. WNBA players could be conceived as part of a broader trend, best encapsulated by UFC fighter Ronda Rousey, which celebrates athleticism and sport-specific muscularity in contrast to what Rousey calls the ‘Do-Nothing-Bitch’ whose thin body is designed only to appeal to men.<sup>42</sup> Similarly to Rousey, Jackson defended her choice to pose naked by saying ‘we do it the right way; we don’t starve ourselves.’<sup>43</sup> However, while offering an image of an alternative—and muscular—body type is important, it continues to privilege ‘a small and implausible array of somatotypes,’<sup>44</sup> and the women that meet the requirements and are valorised tend to be white.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 101

<sup>39</sup> Markula, ‘Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,’ p. 436.

<sup>40</sup> Markula, ‘Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,’ p. 438.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 101

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer McClearen. ‘Don’t Be a Do-Nothing-Bitch: Popular Feminism and Women’s Physical Empowerment in the UFC.’ In *New Sporting Femininities: Embodied Politics in Postfeminist Times*, edited by Kim Toffoletti, Holly Thorpe and Jessica Francombe-Webb, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> Bruce, ‘New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave,’ p. 370.

<sup>44</sup> Miller, *Sportsex*, p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> McClearen, ‘Don’t Be a Do-Nothing-Bitch: Popular Feminism and Women’s Physical Empowerment in the UFC,’ p. 59.

The fine line between enjoyable physical contact and contact that risks injury comes to the fore in the arguments surrounding fouls, that is, illegal contact that is determined by a referee and results in free throws if the player is shooting. In 2019, various players and coaches expressed frustration that the referees were not protecting the players and calling enough fouls. Liz Cambage opined that ‘the referees let undersized post players, guards do whatever they want to us,’<sup>46</sup> while Ravens assistant coach Holly suggested that ‘getting to the free throw line is a lot harder because it’s a little bit more physical this year.’ An investigation by Calvin Wetzel at *Her Hoop Stats* found that the players were correct—foul calls were down in 2019—and there was no reason they could determine besides the referees letting more contact go.<sup>47</sup> This highlights that the distinction between acceptable contact and illegal, unacceptable contact is fluid and determined largely by referees, and players will continue to try to get away with whatever contact they can. Nancy Theberge’s work on women’s ice hockey found a similar issue, as when players became stronger and more skilful, they were ‘routinely pushing the limits of rules on contact.’<sup>48</sup> The referees thus play a key role in defining the gendered construction of women’s basketball. Moreover, whether they are sick of leaving games covered in ‘slaps’ and ‘bruises,’<sup>49</sup> or are simply irritated by the lack of fairness in referees’ calls—a constant concern in all sports—at least some WNBA players seem to have reached their limit as to the enjoyability of contact and physicality.

Contrary to my expectations, and notwithstanding the traditional limitations placed on women in sport, Ravens assistant coach Erica argued that ‘I really do think that they protect the men more than they do the women, which it should be reversed, you know?’ Though historically limiting women’s contact in sport has been paramount—and in Erica’s quote we can see this more traditional understanding of women’s physicality, as she argued that women needed to be protected more—the WNBA is at least perceived

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<sup>46</sup> Calvin Wetzel. ‘Where’s the Whistle? The Numbers Behind the WNBA’s Lack of Fouls,’ *Her Hoop Stats*, 16 August 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://medium.com/her-hoop-stats/wheres-the-whistle-the-numbers-behind-the-wnba-s-lack-of-fouls-571690b7c5c5>>

<sup>47</sup> Wetzel, ‘Where’s the Whistle? The Numbers Behind the WNBA’s Lack of Fouls.’

<sup>48</sup> Theberge, ‘“It’s Part of the Game”: Physicality and the Production of Gender in Women’s Hockey,’ pp. 76-77.

<sup>49</sup> Wetzel, ‘Where’s the Whistle? The Numbers Behind the WNBA’s Lack of Fouls.’

as allowing more contact than the NBA. This is contrary to other research on women's contact sports, such as ice hockey, where a 'paternalistic' notion of protection remains.<sup>50</sup> Whether Erica's claim is true is difficult to parse, again due to the limited publicly available statistics, though one indication, the number of free throws per minute, does suggest fewer free throws in the WNBA, supporting Erica's claim.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, this is contrary to the public perception that WNBA referees are quicker to call technical fouls, which are called for overly animated appeals to the referees or verbal or physical non-basketball conflict between players.<sup>52</sup> This suggests that the desire to police emotion is higher than the desire to police physical play, noteworthy in that it reflects one of the original concerns about women in sport—that they would abandon themselves to passion—but not the worry over roughness. Moreover, Erica suggested that the lack of foul calls is born out of a desire to keep the game moving, rather than stopping to shoot free throws, because otherwise 'people will get bored,' taking an apologetic tone as to the quality of women's basketball.

In her famous essay 'Throwing Like a Girl,' Iris Marion Young writes that women historically have not been encouraged to use their full physical capabilities, moving in ways that suggest a constraining force surrounding them, not engaging their entire body in movement or utilising the space around them. Even in European leagues, Sparks player Amanda Zahui B argued, women can be seen as 'too big or too strong or too aggressive.'<sup>53</sup> Zahui B suggested that the WNBA offers a place for women to use their

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<sup>50</sup> Carly Adams and Stacey Leavitt. "'It's Just Girls' Hockey": Troubling Progress Narratives in Girls' and Women's Sport.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 53, no. 2 (2018), p. 164.

<sup>51</sup> Basketball Reference. 'NBA League Averages-Per Game,' *BasketballReference.com*, accessed 25 August 2020, <[https://www.basketball-reference.com/leagues/NBA\\_stats\\_per\\_game.html](https://www.basketball-reference.com/leagues/NBA_stats_per_game.html)>

Basketball Reference. '2019 WNBA Season Summary,' *BasketballReference.com*, accessed 25 August 2020, <<https://www.basketball-reference.com/wnba/years/2019.html>>

<sup>52</sup> Ben Dull and Aryeh Schwartz. Lynx Over Sun, Again; a Controversial Finish; Sparks Come Up Short After Slow Start. *WInsidr Daily* Podcast. 2 August 2020, <<https://winsidrdaily.transistor.fm/episodes/lynx-over-sun-again-a-controversial-finish-sparks-come-up-short-after-slow-start-8-1>>

<sup>53</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 143.  
Zahui B, 'Life in Transition.'

full bodily potential, however by returning to the differing accounts of Lisa Leslie and Brittney Griner, it is apparent that this is not available to all and is intimately linked to their presentation of femininity. Both Griner and Leslie recount stories of becoming physically violent beyond the expected bounds of the game, including punching other players, yet the reaction to them was very different. Griner received mass condemnation after punching a player in a college game at Texas Tech, and reacted by limiting her physicality on the court:

Ever since my freshman season, when I punched Jordan Barncastle, I had been careful about keeping my emotions in check on the court. Too careful at times. I didn't always play with the kind of fire I'm capable of—didn't demand the ball or get more physical when opponents pushed me around—because I was worried about crossing the line again. That's not something male players have to think about the way women do. We're judged by a different standard, as if there's something wrong with us if we lose our temper during the heat of competition.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast, Leslie described multiple incidents against other players, yet not only does she not describe a similar need to restrict her emotions and physically, but she was even regarded by many as 'soft' and not physical or strong enough.<sup>55</sup> Leslie was aware that this was linked to her feminine appearance, telling an opponent 'don't let this lipstick fool you? I will knock you out!'<sup>56</sup> Leslie's feminine performance means that a specific embodiment is assumed, and thus she has the freedom to escape gendered confines and incorporate "masculine" expressions of physicality into her game, whilst Griner's masculine presentation disrupts 'the grid of cultural intelligibility,' and thus her employment of physicality creates anxiety.<sup>57</sup> Someone like Leslie may be able to play 'like a guy,' but for Griner to do so throws doubt on her gender identity. It is apparent that for Griner the debate surrounding her has affected her corporeal embodiment and

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<sup>54</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 173.

<sup>55</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 191.

<sup>56</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 191.

<sup>57</sup> Scraton et al, 'It's Still a Man's Game?: The Experiences of Top Level European Women Footballers,' p. 107.

Kristi Tredway. 'Judith Butler, Feminism, and the Sociology of Sport.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 421.

demonstrates the way discourses and ideas shape materiality. While Griner is aware of how this has affected her game, embodiment is not always an intellectual process, but rather, as Woodward argues, a result of routine habits that are 'effected through embodied practice.'<sup>58</sup> If female basketball players are repeatedly subject to a discourse that suggests they are less violent and aggressive, they are less likely to use the full extent of their bodily potential, and hence their game will be limited.

Brittney Griner's thoughtful discussion of her physical capabilities and restrictions offers a good opportunity to explore the continuing relevance of Young's notion of female bodily comportment. Griner's capacity to dunk the ball puts her in a special category even amongst WNBA players, and her level of athleticism is unprecedented. Yet, despite the heights she has reached, her comportment continues to display a level of restriction, and in particular a sense of being perceived as an object, as being "looked at."<sup>59</sup> Describing a decision to dunk, she fretted 'I think at other times in my career, I wouldn't have been as forceful in my decision. I might have pump-faked, or turned and tried a little hook shot, because I sometimes worried about looking so powerful.'<sup>60</sup> The decision to dunk is not an unconscious one, but rather displays a level of inhibited intentionality, what Young describes as a pull between the desire to act and the underlying thought that "I cannot."<sup>61</sup> This difference, however, in Griner's case, is that it is not "I cannot," but instead "I should not." Griner is perfectly comfortable in her capabilities but says she was '*afraid to dunk this ball because people might think I'm too strong*.'<sup>62</sup> The result is the same, however, as the constant concern over how her body is perceived results in an uneasiness in movement that limits her full potential.<sup>63</sup> It is clear that she recognised that this is gendered, lamenting, 'you think guys ever worry about that stuff... I can't imagine LeBron James ever has those thoughts in his head.'<sup>64</sup> It is

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<sup>58</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 106.

<sup>59</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 148.

<sup>60</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>61</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' p. 146.

<sup>62</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> Jansen and Wehrle, 'The Normal Body: Female Bodies in Changing Contexts of Normalisation and Optimization,' p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 168.

precisely because Griner does not embody femininity in other ways that she feels judged and constrained; as Young suggests ‘the person experiences herself as looked at in certain ways, described in her physical being in certain ways, she experiences the bodily reactions of others to her, and she reacts to them.’<sup>65</sup> Griner hears and internalises the critiques of her body and sexuality, and it affects her ability to act. Moreover, this sensation of being consistently looked at and judged is heightened among non-white people such as Griner through what Fanon calls an ‘historico-racial schema,’<sup>66</sup> and indeed, the response to her punching Barncastle, a white woman, included racist as well as misogynist jokes.<sup>67</sup> As Weiss points out, the ability to be viewed as a ‘normal subject’ is a privilege of white, able bodies—to this Griner adds traditional gender presentation—and those outside this matrix are acutely aware of their own body and its experience of not “fitting” into the world.<sup>68</sup> Weiss and Garland-Thomson draw on the disability studies idea of “misfitting” to describe this experience, expanding it to other marginalised groups’ understanding of when the ‘world fails flesh in the environment one encounters.’<sup>69</sup> This allows for a more intersectional expansion of Young’s notions of comportment that explains why Griner may be affected more than other WNBA players.

Griner’s perspective highlights the continuing significance of Young’s work and shows the limits of Dianne Chisholm’s more positive conceptions of women’s free movement.<sup>70</sup> Chisholm’s exploration of rock climbing offers an alternative modality of women’s movement, providing an updated understanding of embodiment in an age where women are more encouraged to play sport. Challenging Iris Marion Young, Chisholm

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<sup>65</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) quoted in Weiss, ‘The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies,’ p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> Christine M. Hopkins. “I Know Who I Am”: Brittney Griner’s Radical Existence,’ *Swish Appeal*, 29 June 2018, accessed 25 June 2020,

<<https://www.swishappeal.com/2018/6/29/17508976/wnba-2018-book-review-in-my-skin-i-know-who-i-am-brittney-griners-radical-existence-pride-lgbtq>>

<sup>68</sup> Weiss, ‘The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies,’ p. 86.

<sup>69</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ‘Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,’ (2011) quoted in Weiss, ‘The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies,’ p. 92

<sup>70</sup> Chisholm, ‘Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology.’



suggests that climbing “like a girl” involves flow and preconscious movement that is developed through training, and while it may be different to the way men climb, it is not lesser in skill.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Preston argues that Young is not describing feminine comportment, but simply an *untrained body*.<sup>72</sup>

Griner contradicts both Preston and Chisholm; she is well-versed in dunking and has developed her skills over many years, yet she continues to be constrained. The supposed flow of female athletes that the climber in Chisholm’s account has developed is interrupted. Additionally, the importance of how one completes a task may not matter in rock-climbing, but basketball is a spectator sport, and when gender norms prevent spectacles such as dunking from occurring it has a potentially negative impact. Certainly, Chisholm’s description retains value, particularly in what it offers for elite sportswomen, and Young in a follow-up essay admits that women do not all experience physical limitations in the same way.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, these constraints are not static, and women’s capacity and confidence can change over time. The partiality of Young’s account does not negate its usefulness, however different theories of embodiment must fill the theoretical holes.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps a way of accounting for changes to physicality is to draw on Coffey’s model of embodiment as an assemblage, where the material body is entwined with the affective power of gender norms and appearance pressures at any given time, as well as other norms, technologies, institutions, and discourses.<sup>75</sup> For Coffey, embodiment is complex and happening constantly, a process rather than a static form.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the assemblage that Griner’s body is caught up in may form in different ways and perhaps only temporarily; for instance, her willingness to dunk and be physical is different in the relatively welcoming WNBA, compared with the conservative Baylor University. Indeed, in the 2021 WNBA season, Griner made a concerted effort to

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<sup>71</sup> Chisholm, ‘Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology,’ pp. 25-26.

<sup>72</sup> Preston, ‘Merleau-Ponty and Feminine Embodied Existence,’ p. 168.

<sup>73</sup> Young, ‘“Throwing Like a Girl”: Twenty Years Later,’ p. 290.

<sup>74</sup> Young, ‘“Throwing Like a Girl”: Twenty Years Later,’ p. 290.

<sup>75</sup> Coffey, ‘Creating Distance from Body Issues: Exploring New Materialist Feminist Possibilities for Renegotiating Gendered Embodiment,’ p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> Coffey, ‘Creating Distance from Body Issues: Exploring New Materialist Feminist Possibilities for Renegotiating Gendered Embodiment,’ p. 84.

dunk more, saying 'I'm just thinking about it a hell of a lot more and not caring.'<sup>77</sup> The mental aspect was key to her ability to dunk.

As the importance placed on it in this chapter might suggest, for many sports fans, the difference between men's and women's basketball can be summed up by one thing: dunking. Ravens player Chloe expressed frustration that 'people always want to come in and say, oh men are dunking, they're doing this and this and this.' Women's supposed inability to dunk has dominated critiques of the game, considered evidence that women's basketball is "boring" and "unathletic." As such, the women that can dunk are a media sensation, and yet are largely seen as an aberration. As Lisa Leslie—the first to dunk in a WNBA game—put it:

The dunk brought with it a burning question: When are you going to do it again? The ball had barely dropped through the net but I could not escape this question. People also speculated about what the dunk might mean for the future of women's basketball. Would there be more interest? Would there be more respect? Those questions are not easily answered. Even after the dunk, it seemed like women still had to do so much to feel validated on the court. And the dunk did little to quiet the talk about differences between men's and women's style of play. It is an ongoing battle.<sup>78</sup>

For some critics of women's basketball, Leslie, Candace Parker, or Griner dunking is simply an anomaly, or in the case of Griner, further evidence of her "abnormal," masculine embodiment.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, critics will move the goal posts, suggesting that women can dunk, but not with the same flair as men. Dunking is viewed as a masculine body performance, and for a woman to dunk does not correspond with "expected" sporting behaviour.<sup>80</sup> Thus, critics must perform "ideological repair work," shaping

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<sup>77</sup> Josh Weinfuss. '2021 WNBA Playoffs: Brittney Griner Owns the WNBA Dunking Record—and is Coming for More,' *ESPN.com*, 23 September 2021, accessed 1 October 2021, <[https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/32258450/2021-wnba-playoffs-brittney-griner-owns-wnba-dunking-record-coming-more](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/32258450/2021-wnba-playoffs-brittney-griner-owns-wnba-dunking-record-coming-more)>

<sup>78</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 214.

<sup>79</sup> Katherine L. Lavelle. "'Plays Like a Guy": A Rhetorical Analysis of Brittney Griner in Sports Media.' *Journal of Sports media* 9 no. 2 (2014), p. 123.

<sup>80</sup> Wellard, 'Gendered Performances in Sport: An Embodied Approach,' p. 4.

their vision of women's basketball performance to their preconceived assumptions about sporting ability.<sup>81</sup>

However, despite the difficult politics and discourses surrounding dunking, it is apparent that there is a level of embodied pleasure embedded within dunking for these women, and in particular in performing for a crowd. Griner described dunking as being 'like turning the volume way up on a good song,' while Chamique Holdsclaw recounted the way in which 'the whole crowd went crazy' at an attempted dunk.<sup>82</sup> As Kath Woodward contends, 'sensations, sensibilities and sensuality are all implicated in sporting embodied practices,' and hence dunking is an assemblage of the discursive practices surrounding it and the embodied pleasures that challenging the body can provide.<sup>83</sup> This discovered pleasure has affective potential, opening up the bodily possibilities of the female body, further claiming the basketball court as a place where women deserve to be watched and cheered for.<sup>84</sup> Dunking is best seen as a form of 'display behaviour,' a way of appealing to the crowd, and as Overman argues, 'one can dunk a basketball as a way of putting the ball into the basket and scoring, or dunk the ball as a performance.'<sup>85</sup> Supporting this, Ravens assistant coach Holly pointed out that there are no set plays for dunks for female players, and unlike in the men's game where there may be a practical reason to dunk, any dunks in the women's game are generally to appeal to the crowd. This was particularly evident in the All-Star Game, a game designed purely for spectacle. Griner set a record by dunking three times during the game, as well as once during the lay-up section of the skills challenge, and every time the crowd went wild with excitement. Griner told WNBA.com afterwards:

I think everybody would have killed me, honestly, if I didn't dunk, so the whole week everybody was like, dunk, dunk, make sure you dunk. So I was just trying

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<sup>81</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 51. Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 54.

<sup>83</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 5, 149.

<sup>84</sup> Simone Fullagar. 'Diffracting Mind-Body Relations: Feminist Materialism and the Entanglement of Physical Culture in Women's Recovery from Depression.' In *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies*, edited by Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe and David L. Andrews, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 186.

<sup>85</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 335.

to think about it a little bit more and was able to throw a couple down today. Didn't get hung. That was my goal. Don't get hung, don't fall.<sup>86</sup>

Griner made it clear that her dunks were intended to produce a reaction in the audience, and that the All-Star game was a special event. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the relations and affects that circulate in distinct event assemblages, as the carnivalesque atmosphere of the All-Star game is greatly heightened compared to a regular season game, contributing to Griner's embodied actions.<sup>87</sup> What this does reveal is that any dunks in a game, regular or All-Star, are not practical or part of the natural flow of the game, but rather are for spectacle and to appeal to the audience.

This also partially explains the dearth of dunking in regular games. Diamond DeShields (2018-present) highlighted that 'the dunk is just added flavor... A lot of us can dunk, but in a game situation, two points are two points,' while Breanna Stewart pointed out that 'it's not the easiest thing to do while I'm in a game...After exerting energy doing other things, it's not my main priority to dunk.'<sup>88</sup> Additionally, Griner's quote emphasises the physical difficulty and danger of dunking, and Griner attributed some of her reluctance to dunk in the past to being 'super aware' of where other players were, lest she risk injury.<sup>89</sup> Certainly style and performance, as discussed earlier, are essential in creating the kind of game that people want to watch, however it would be a mistake to suggest that an unwillingness to dunk means that WNBA players do not exhibit display behaviour or try to appeal to the crowd, however they do so in distinct ways. Perhaps the best exemplar is the role of dancing among WNBA players, a way of expressing personality and attracting fans. For instance, in 2017 after a leaking roof caused a game

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<sup>86</sup> WNBA, 'AT&T WNBA All-Star 2019: Post Game Quotes—Team Delle Donne,' *WNBA.com*, 27 July 2019, accessed 4 September 2020, <<https://www.wnba.com/news/att-wnba-all-star-2019-postgame-quotes-team-delle-donne/>>

<sup>87</sup> Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred. *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 2017), p. 45.

<sup>88</sup> Barnes, 'A Higher Calling.'

<sup>89</sup> Weinfuss, '2021 WNBA Playoffs: Brittney Griner Owns the WNBA Dunking Record—and is Coming for More.'

between the Mystics and Fever to be delayed, the teams held an impromptu dance-off.<sup>90</sup> A'ja Wilson in particular is well-known for her dancing, to the extent that her team, the Las Vegas Aces, have a quarter-time entertainment called the "Dance Cam," in which fans dance alongside a pre-recorded video of Wilson dancing. This behaviour can also be more spontaneous, as occurred at a Ravens training I attended, when following a half-court shooting competition, the winner began dancing. This supports Majors and Billson's description of dancing as 'a form of nonverbal expression that exudes freedom, creativity, spontaneity, and improvisation,'<sup>91</sup> and I would argue that this creativity extends to dunking and other display behaviour such as fancy dribble moves.

It is essential to understand that creativity in one's embodiment is not inherent but is a learned skill that develops over time. Noble and Watkins argue that 'the notion of "being in the zone" is what athletes use to describe the flow state which is not pure unconsciousness, but the controlled concentration achieved through 'overlearning' necessary to make things feel automatic.'<sup>92</sup> Certainly, intense skill development is essential in establishing the automaticity necessary for high levels of play, however, while Noble and Watkins were discussing tennis, the free-flowing nature of basketball requires a slightly different way of conceiving this. Supporting this, Candace Parker argued that Dawn Staley was 'creative because she played, she wasn't with a trainer all the time, dictating moves at cones. She was creative because she played, she freelanced, she did things like that.'<sup>93</sup> It is important for basketball players to develop this kind of freedom and lack of rigidity that comes from playing and experimenting, rather than simply skill development. Thangaraj's research on Asian American men's basketball leagues reinforces this, as he found that among a group of people who have been conceived of as a subordinated masculinity, they reconceived masculinity as creativity

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<sup>90</sup> Matt Ellentuck. 'WNBA Players Had a Dance-Off After Roof Leak Caused Game Delay,' *SB Nation*, 13 August 2017, accessed 4 September 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/lookit/2017/8/13/16140258/mystics-fever-dance-party-capital-one-arena-dc-rain>>

<sup>91</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Bilson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992) quoted in Linsay M. Cramer. 'Cam Newton and Russell Westbrook's Symbolic Resistance to Whiteness in the NFL and NBA.' *Howard Journal of Communications* 30, no. 1 (2019), p. 63.

<sup>92</sup> Greg Noble and Megan Watkins. 'So, How Did Bourdieu Learn to Play Tennis? Habitus, Consciousness and Habituation.' *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3-4 (2003), p. 533.

<sup>93</sup> Robinson, *Girls of Color Title IX: An Unfulfilled Promise*.

rather than physicality, defining creativity as ‘fanciful dribbling and sharp passes,’ which they developed through playing.<sup>94</sup> Though this creativity does not necessarily need to be defined as masculine in a women’s basketball setting, women and girls often do not even have the opportunity to develop these skills, as open gyms and pick-up games are often unofficially gender segregated. Parker wanted ‘more young girls at open gyms and things like that, and have an all-female run,’<sup>95</sup> to encourage creativity and free-flowing play. Between the emphasis on team basketball and the lack of options to develop creativity, there is a specific way that girls are taught to play basketball that can be limiting.

For young girls, the limited options for playing team sport growing up means that many WNBA players developed their skills by playing against men. While both the WNBA and basketball at lower levels are segregated along the lines of gender, it is apparent that most WNBA players have played against men at some point in their life, whether as training partners, opponents and teammates growing up, or as men at the local gym who view themselves as superior to WNBA players. For most players, this was a crucial part of their development, making them stronger, tougher, and more skilled.<sup>96</sup>

Holdscraw, for instance, credited her rebounding acumen to playing with boys, as ‘if I didn’t get rebounds playing with them I might not get the ball at all.’<sup>97</sup> This is a common theme not just amongst WNBA players, but with female athletes in general, who often identify their talents in relation to their ability to approximate the playing style of men, and who desire to enter into the male world of sport.<sup>98</sup> WNBA teams practice against men, having a set of regular practise players that they train with, often players trying to make it into professional leagues internationally or the NBA G-League.<sup>99</sup> At Ravens

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<sup>94</sup> Stanley Thangaraj. ‘Competing Masculinities: South Asian American Identity Formation in Asian American Basketball Leagues.’ In *Physical Culture, Ethnography and the Body: Theory, Method and Praxis*, edited by Michael D. Giardina and Michele K. Donnelly, (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 221-222.

<sup>95</sup> Robinson, *Girls of Color Title IX: An Unfulfilled Promise*.

<sup>96</sup> Wright, ‘The Way In.’

<sup>97</sup> Holdscraw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 40.

<sup>98</sup> Heinecken, ‘Gender and Jockography: Post-Feminism and Resistance in Female Sports Autobiographies,’ p. 332.

<sup>99</sup> Matthew Giles. “You Will Get Beat Down”: The Men Who Practice With The WNBA,’ *Vice*, 19 September 2015, accessed 28 April 2020,

training, players were practising post moves against their practise players, with the assistant coaches explaining how to best leverage their strength. Playing in the post is one of the more physical movements a player does and practicing against men is a way to develop physicality, quickness, and toughness. However, as Stephen Duncan, a New York Liberty practice player, says ‘my guys quickly learn how physical the women are by the screens they set,’ revealing the physicality WNBA players already play with. Furthermore, the practice player experience reveals the high intellectual level that WNBA players are operating at, dispelling the notion that any man could compete. Male players may be physically competent but often ‘don’t know how to ICE, or show, on a screen. They are still in pick-up mode.’<sup>100</sup> Having what Ravens player Kayla called ‘a good set of practice guys’ is crucial.

While male practice players grow to respect WNBA players, women are not always welcome in “male” spaces, and men will protect their belief that they are physically superior to women, with force if necessary. WNBA players repeatedly tell stories of how in their initial forays into playing with boys, the boys would refuse to pass them the ball.<sup>101</sup> Holdsclaw tells the story of when she tried to play on a boys’ team, the coach refused, causing her to lament that ‘it wasn’t my fault that I was better than half the boys on his team.’<sup>102</sup> When they realised that the girls were skilled, some boys would be more welcoming; Cynthia Cooper understood her game was getting better when men let her play with them, because ‘guys will never let a girl play in their game unless she can hold her own.’<sup>103</sup> Others, like the boys Diggins-Smith played against at age nine, became more physical ‘because they do not want to be embarrassed or outplayed by her.’<sup>104</sup> Devereaux Peters (2012-2018) highlighted her exhaustion with men who ‘think they are better than’ her and would continually challenge her to play one-on-one, and who, when they realised they were outmatched, resorted to ‘hacking’:

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<[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xyjeek/you-will-get-beat-down-the-men-who-practice-with-the-wnba](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xyjeek/you-will-get-beat-down-the-men-who-practice-with-the-wnba)>

<sup>100</sup> Giles, “You Will Get Beat Down”: The Men Who Practice With The WNBA.’

<sup>101</sup> Diggins and Jensen, *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*, p. 36.

Leslie and Burnett, *Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 30.

<sup>102</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 37.

<sup>103</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 41.

<sup>104</sup> Diggins and Jensen, *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*, p. 79.

They would elbow, undercut and even throw me into the pads under the basket — passing out real bruises to match their bruised egos. There was no way they were letting this woman beat them in front of their friends. I took the hits, made my shots, and walked away battered but victorious.<sup>105</sup>

Peters pointed out that as a professional athlete she was risking her livelihood by trying to prove something to these men, and that while she was willing to be physical in the WNBA, when she was getting paid, she was disinclined to do so ‘when Basic Bobby feels the need to prove (most often unsuccessfully) that he can beat a professional women’s basketball player.’<sup>106</sup> These men are deeply invested in maintaining an essentialist view of masculinity and male superiority, yet as Banet-Weiser contends, ‘contemporary masculinities, characterised by fragility, need to be sutured consistently.’<sup>107</sup> This physical violence is a response to female strength, a way of containing it, as misogynistic acts and force work to secure masculinity.<sup>108</sup> It is mostly men who have not played at a high level that fail to respect WNBA players, as NBA players are mostly very supportive.<sup>109</sup> NBA players have reached the height of sporting success, and thus do not feel the need to belittle WNBA players to guarantee their masculinity, whereas male fans rely on symbolic association with NBA players to prove male superiority, what Sara Crawley labels ‘vicarious masculinity.’<sup>110</sup> The very existence of WNBA players challenges professional sport as a male space, and hence something else must be done to ensure the notion of a gender hierarchy is maintained.

It is not only men who are invested in propping up this essentialist view of gender norms. Cynthia Cooper’s mother insisted on her letting her younger brother beat her

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<sup>105</sup> Devereaux Peters. ‘I’m a WNBA Player. Men Won’t Stop Challenging Me to Play One-on-One,’ *The Washington Post*, 2 August 2018, accessed 1 October 2018, <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/im-a-wnba-player-men-wont-stop-challenging-me-to-play-one-on-one/2018/08/02/2deabeb2-8f6b-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.725e233e16dc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/im-a-wnba-player-men-wont-stop-challenging-me-to-play-one-on-one/2018/08/02/2deabeb2-8f6b-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.725e233e16dc)>

<sup>106</sup> Peters, ‘I’m a WNBA Player. Men Won’t Stop Challenging Me to Play One-on-One.’

<sup>107</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 158.

<sup>108</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 38.

<sup>109</sup> Peters, ‘I’m a WNBA Player. Men Won’t Stop Challenging Me to Play One-on-One.’

<sup>110</sup> Sara L. Crawley, ‘Visible Bodies, Vicarious Masculinity and the “Gender Revolution”: A Comment on England,’ (2011) quoted in Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women’s Professional Soccer*, p. 7.



when they played one-on-one, which Cooper recognised as having ‘something to do with male pride and ego,’ while Sheryl Swoopes’ mother suggested that she should ‘stay inside and play with your dolls.’<sup>111</sup> The notion that basketball is a men’s game, and that women are simply ‘space invaders’ is one that has permeated society.<sup>112</sup> Certainly, some players acknowledged that there reached a certain age where playing against men, at least in non-organised settings, became too difficult. Holdsclaw gave up in senior year of high school when ‘the boys had started to physically develop and it was too hard on [her] body trying to keep up with them.’<sup>113</sup> However, Diggins-Smith’s mother stopped her playing against boys when she was just nine, telling her ‘it’s unsafe now.’<sup>114</sup> As a two-year-old, her mother criticised her father for playing rough with her because ‘she’s not a boy!’<sup>115</sup> Even at an age where the physical differences between boys and girls are limited, there is an investment in the notion that girls are weaker and more in need of protection. As there were no girl’s teams nearby for Diggins-Smith, her stepdad started a team for her to play on. This case highlights that even since the explosion in women’s sports post-Title IX, there is still limited access for girls to play sport, relying heavily on family investment, and for most women playing against boys and men remains a crucial part of their development. Their success, Shakib argues, is dependent on their capacity to negotiate access and acceptance in a male-dominated context, where the majority of opportunities to play sports lie.<sup>116</sup>

The only biography that complicates the link between success and playing against boys is Elena Delle Donne’s, who attended an all-girls school:

The nice thing about all-girls schools is that there are no boys to compare yourself to...I’m talking about the fact that girls can really shine when boys aren’t around. At Ursuline, pep rallies were for all of us. Our basketball squad

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<sup>111</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 41.

Swoopes and Brown, *Bounce Back*, p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown. ‘Sporting Space Invaders: Elite Bodies in Track and Field, a South African Context.’ *South African Review of Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>113</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 59.

<sup>114</sup> Diggins and Jensen, *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*, p. 79.

<sup>115</sup> Diggins and Jensen, *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins*, p. 10.

<sup>116</sup> Sohaila Shakib. ‘Female Basketball Participation: Negotiating the Conflation of Peer Status and Gender Status from Childhood through Puberty.’ *American Behavioural Scientist* 46, no. 10 (2003), p. 1406.

was called the Raiders, not the “Lady Raiders.” Playing sport at an all-girls school doesn’t brand you as too tough or not girly enough. Instead you’re powerful and respected. You’re showing your friends and classmates that girls can be strong—and they don’t need boys to tell them that.<sup>117</sup>

Delle Donne’s school was able to carve out a space where girls were able to challenge gender ideals, and they did not need to judge their talents by comparing them to male standards. Delle Donne is unique in this perspective and in her limited discussion of playing against men, and not only among WNBA players but all sportswomen.<sup>118</sup> This perhaps explains Delle Donne’s willingness to embrace more radical changes to women’s basketball rules, such as lowering the hoop. In 2016, Delle Donne suggested lowering the hoop from its usual height of 10 feet in order to enable more women to dunk, a suggestion that others, such as UConn coach Geno Auriemma, had previously voiced.<sup>119</sup> Other players dismissed this as insulting and ghettoising, most soundly Diana Taurasi, who said, ‘might as well put us in skirts and back in the kitchen.’<sup>120</sup> While Delle Donne pointed out that other sports, such as tennis or golf, play with modified rules, this has often served to delegitimise these sports and infantilise female athletes.<sup>121</sup> In sports with modified rules, such have tennis, where women play three sets as opposed to five, the ‘difference is commonly interpreted as evidence of their weakness compared to men,’ rather than recognising that the difference is a result of the historical legacy of the fear of women overexerting themselves.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 17.

<sup>118</sup> Heineken, ‘Gender and Jockography: Post-Feminism and Resistance in Female Sports Autobiographies,’ p. 332.

<sup>119</sup> Kate Fagan. ‘Why Lowering the Rings is a Flawed Strategy for Women’s Basketball,’ *ESPN.com*, 30 March 2016, accessed 14 September 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/espnw/voices/story/\\_/id/15090920/fagan-why-lower-rims-women-basketball-flawed](https://www.espn.com/espnw/voices/story/_/id/15090920/fagan-why-lower-rims-women-basketball-flawed)>

<sup>120</sup> Fagan, ‘Why Lowering the Rings is a Flawed Strategy for Women’s Basketball.’

<sup>121</sup> See for example:

Charlene Weaving and Samuel Roberts. ‘Checking In: An Analysis of the (Lack of) Body Checking in Women’s Ice Hockey.’ *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 83, no. 3 (2012), p. 740.

Jason Laurendeau and Nancy Sharara. “Women Could Be Every Bit as Good as Guys”: Reproductive and Resistant Agency in Two “Action” Sports.’ *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 32, no. 1 (2008), p. 35.

<sup>122</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women’s Professional Soccer*, p. 12.

Changing the rules of the game has been used as a form of ideological repair work, as if women do not compete at the same game, they cannot challenge perceived male superiority.<sup>123</sup> This is even the case with the limited modified rules of the WNBA, as shooting success is often dismissed by critics because of the smaller ball the WNBA plays with; Delle Donne being the best free throw shooter, male or female, can then be dismissed as simply a consequence of the different ball.<sup>124</sup> This is despite the fact that there is no evidence that the smaller ball is easier to shoot with, and some players, such as Devereaux Peters, say the bigger ball is easier.<sup>125</sup> On a practical level, lowering the hoop would take away opportunities for men and women to train and play together, which has been crucial for the development of most WNBA players, and would make it even harder for women to gain access to courts with the lowered hoop, which, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, can be a major issue for even professional players. Candace Parker's response to Delle Donne was to post a video of her dunking and saying '10 feet, 8 feet, it don't matter.'<sup>126</sup> Parker's video emphasises perhaps the biggest flaw in Delle Donne's idea—WNBA players already do dunk, yet it is easily dismissed as unimpressive.<sup>127</sup> I would argue that it seems likely that lowering the hoop would simply be another reason to dismiss any athletic feat for those that are already looking for a reason to cast women's sport as inferior.

Underlying this discussion about embodiment and debates over style of play is of course the important question: do the women of the WNBA want to play basketball like men? Players generally agree that the game is changing to become more like the men's game. Some of the change in game style is a consequence of players simply getting bigger and stronger, whereas some changes are deliberate rule innovations by the WNBA. Ravens guard Isabella highlighted both:

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<sup>123</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 9.

<sup>124</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 199.

<sup>125</sup> Nadja Podmenik, Bojan Leskošek, and Frane Erčulj. 'The Effect of Introducing a Smaller and Lighter Basketball on Female Basketball Players' Shot Accuracy.' *Journal of Human Kinetics* 31 (2012), p. 136.

Devereaux Peters. Twitter Post. 26 August 2020, 2:00 pm,

<<https://twitter.com/MsPeters14/status/1298470376457019392>>

<sup>126</sup> Nina Mandell. 'Candace Parker Weighs in on Debate Over Lowering the Rim by Slamming Down a Dunk,' *For the Win*, 1 April 2016, accessed 14 September 2020, <<https://ftw.usatoday.com/2016/04/candace-parker-rim-lowering>>

<sup>127</sup> Fagan, 'Why Lowering the Rings is a Flawed Strategy for Women's Basketball.'

I think size, there's so many bigger post players now. Even the guards actually, cause you know, when I first entered there was like maybe three, four people like six-four and up. And now there's, like I don't even know a lot, probably over 10... and one of the rules that has changed is the three seconds defensive. Three seconds. Yeah. So that whole purpose was just to open up the paint and allow people to drive and to make the game more exciting for the fans. So that came into play a few years ago, which just changed the game a lot.

Similarly, coach and former player Heather argued that the 'amount of good players' has increased since her time in the league, as athleticism and 'physical bodies of certain players' have improved. A combination of the rule changes and improved athleticism has resulted in a move towards a more isolation heavy offence, Essence Carson argued, in which 'it just means you gotta be able to make things happen. You have to be a playmaker... Nowadays everybody on the floor is a threat, so you need to make sure you are, too.'<sup>128</sup> Younger players in the league, like Arike Ogunbowale, are more likely to be individual offensive players, although this is still rare enough that Ogunbowale's distinct individualistic play was commented on in a Ravens film session.

This move to play more like the men is further complicated by the fact that the NBA—and what it means to play “like a guy”—is changing, and this offers possible opportunities for WNBA players and stardom. As Allie Quigley identified:

I'm a huge Steph Curry fan — just ask any of my teammates. And one of the biggest lessons that I've really taken to heart, since the Warriors started on this amazing run of theirs ... it's this idea that, you know, shooting the lights out from three — that doesn't have to be just some specialist thing, or just a role-player thing. It can be a star thing, too. I think Steph — and Klay, and Coach Kerr, and this entire era — has really proven to people how, if you have a high enough caliber of shooter... I mean, they can dictate *how the entire game is played*.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Carson, 'The Iso: Essence Carson.'

<sup>129</sup> Allie Quigley. 'The 7 Best Shooters in the WNBA Playoffs. Period.' *The Players' Tribune*, 22 August 2018, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/wnba-allie-quigley-7-best-shooters-period>>

For players like Curry, the appeal to fans is not athletic dunks but skill-based shooting displays, and players like Quigley or Kelsey Mitchell (2018-present) are well-positioned to take advantage of that, while the three-point shooting off-the-dribble of Diana Taurasi predates the NBA's shooting explosion. While the NBA currently shoots more three-pointers, Ravens coach Holly believes that though the WNBA is 'always a couple of years behind what the NBA is doing,' she 'can see our league going in that direction as far as shooting more threes.'

Though there is consensus that the WNBA is changing, there seems to be a divergence among WNBA players as to the benefits of this, that is, is it preferable to strive to play like men, or should women protect the distinctiveness of their game. Isabella saw it as a positive, particularly the increased pace of the game, telling me:

Nobody goes to a basketball game to watch defence. So, you know, you want it to be exciting, you want it to be high scoring, you want to see people making baskets. Which is what the NBA does. Of course, we don't dunk, but they score a lot of points, they score like a hundred, 120 some nights, 130 points. So, we tried to do that.

In contrast, ex-player and coach Erica believed that with the increase in athleticism has come a decline in basketball intelligence, which she argued means that 'you don't see as much execution as you did when [I played], so to me, I think that's why people enjoy the women's game because of the execution.' Erica preferred the distinctive, team-based style of the early WNBA, and believed that moving to be more like the NBA would involve 'just running him down and shooting the ball and dunking,' with none of the execution and intelligence that makes women's basketball special. Though Isabella and Erica were quite clear with their position, as this chapter has shown, other players' arguments are more convoluted, with players simultaneously defending the quality and distinctiveness of the women's game while recognising the superior athleticism of NBA players and striving to play more in that style.

Connected to this is the continual use of playing "like a guy" as a compliment. Players, fans, and reporters, such as women's basketball legend Ann Meyers-Drysdale, have consistently believed that 'the highest compliment in the women's game still is "She

plays like a guy.”<sup>130</sup> Diana Taurasi, a player who is commonly described as playing like a guy, used to respond by saying, ‘Well, yeah, that’s a compliment, because guys are so good.’<sup>131</sup> Notre Dame coach Muffet McGraw described Brittney Griner as ‘one of a kind... like a guy playing with women,’ which Griner took as a compliment, though some saw it as malicious.<sup>132</sup> More recently, players have recognised how fraught this comparison can be, with Maya Moore saying:

Oftentimes, when our players are paid a compliment, it’s some variation of “she plays like a guy.” We get what that means, and take it for the compliment that it is. But as a league, we play the game differently, and many dismiss our version as “less than.”<sup>133</sup>

While simply playing a masculine coded sport does challenge gender stereotypes, by holding up the men’s game as the gold standard, it also continues to reinforce notions of female inferiority.<sup>134</sup> In addition, as this discussion has revealed, what it means to play “like a guy” or “like a woman” is contested and is linked to the historical construction of femininity and even the rules of basketball. Who has access to physicality and individualist play is intimately entwined with issues of race, sexuality, and gender presentation. Someone like Taurasi may have access to the ability to “play like a guy,” but for Griner it throws doubt on her gender identity. Players may strive to play in the style of men, but they continue to emphasise the value of their own playing style and challenge the idea that playing “like a guy” is the ultimate compliment.

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<sup>130</sup> Associated Press. ‘Mercury’s Taurasi Named MVP,’ *ESPN.com*, 29 September 2009, accessed 20 September 2020,

<<https://www.espn.co.uk/wnba/news/story?id=4514867>>

<sup>131</sup> Mechelle Voepel. ‘Taurasi a Rookie Again, But Still a Role Model,’ *ESPN.com*, 8 April 2004, accessed 20 September 2020,

<<https://www.espn.com.au/ncw/ncaatourney04/columns/story?id=1777518>>

<sup>132</sup> Michelle Smith. ‘Muffet McGraw Clears Up Comments,’ *ESPN W*, 4 April 2012, accessed 20 September 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/womens-college-basketball/tournament/2012/story?id=7773669&\\_slug\\_=notre-dame-fighting-irish-muffet-mcgraw-clarifies-comment-brittney-griner-playing-ability](https://www.espn.com/womens-college-basketball/tournament/2012/story?id=7773669&_slug_=notre-dame-fighting-irish-muffet-mcgraw-clarifies-comment-brittney-griner-playing-ability)>

<sup>133</sup> Maya Moore. ‘(in)Visibility.’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 30 April 2015, accessed 19 November 2018, <[http://www.theplayerstribune.com/maya-moore-wnba-visibility/?xrs=RebelMouse\\_tw](http://www.theplayerstribune.com/maya-moore-wnba-visibility/?xrs=RebelMouse_tw)>

<sup>134</sup> Scraton et al, ‘It’s Still a Man’s Game?: The Experiences of Top Level European Women Footballers,’ p. 108.

## **Chapter Six: “It’s My Job”: Building a Professional League**

For all the talk of how big college sports have gotten, there’s still a distinction between collegiate and the pros. Something is either a job or it’s not. And playing basketball at the professional level, at the end of the day, is a job. It’s its own world with its own set of demands and expectations. If you don’t meet them, you lose your job. That takes getting used to.

- Diana Taurasi<sup>1</sup>

The WNBA differs from other professional women’s sports leagues primarily because of its relationship with a successful, wealthy, and established male sports league, the NBA. This relationship enabled the WNBA to achieve a level of prominence and professionalism right from the beginning. The WNBA was launched in 1997 with a \$15 million ‘We Got Next’ marketing campaign, as well as television deals with *ESPN* and *Lifetime*, and publicity during NBA games.<sup>2</sup> This gave the league a significant advantage over its competitor, the ABL. As Lisa Leslie recalled, the high level of professionalism surprised players:

I had played summer league basketball in Los Angeles before, so I figured the WNBA would be a bunch of small gyms, reversible jerseys, and very few fans. I thought they might sell a few boxes of popcorn to defray costs, and that was okay. I was on board, but I was not expecting anything big. After all, it was just a summer league.<sup>3</sup>

Leslie was shocked to find they would be playing at the same arenas as NBA teams, with high quality uniforms, ticket sales, and a heavy promotional push.<sup>4</sup> The WNBA was not a small summer league, but a highly professional sport. This raises an important question:

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Taurasi. ‘Just a Kid From Chino,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 3 September 2015, accessed 19 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/just-a-kid-from-chino>>

<sup>2</sup> Wearden and Creedon, ‘“We Got Next”: Images of Women in Television Commercials During the Inaugural WNBA Season,’ p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie and Burnett, *Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool You*, p. 162.

how does professionalism operate within the WNBA context and how do the players respond to the unique pressures of professional sport?

The debate between professional sport and amateurism continues to dominate the American sporting landscape, with amateur college sport representing a supposedly ideal form of sport, where values of fair play, sportsmanship, and “love of the game” can flourish.<sup>5</sup> This ideal has been challenged in recent years, as the NCAA’s corruption and the necessity of paying players has become a common mainstream argument.<sup>6</sup> There has been a number of lawsuits against the NCAA from various sports that argue that players should be paid, and in 2021, facing pressure from state legislatures and the Supreme Court, the NCAA allowed athletes to make money from endorsements.<sup>7</sup> A recent case includes as a plaintiff Oregon State women’s basketball player Sedona Prince, who is expected to be drafted into the WNBA after graduation.<sup>8</sup> WNBA players have joined in on calling out the way the NCAA and colleges profit off players’ likeness, while the players receive nothing. Diana Taurasi pointed out that her college, UConn, still sells her jersey even though she graduated in 2004, as well as the jerseys of other luminaries such as Rebecca Lobo and Sue Bird.<sup>9</sup> Historically, class was the key division,

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Smart. *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity*. (London: SAGE Publications, 2005) p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> For example:

Dave McMenamin. ‘LeBron James Calls NCAA “Corrupt” in Wake of Scandals,’ *ESPN.com*, 28 February 2018, accessed 20 October 2020, <[https://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/\\_/id/22596036/lebron-james-calls-ncaa-corrupt-says-nba-give-alternative](https://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/_/id/22596036/lebron-james-calls-ncaa-corrupt-says-nba-give-alternative)>

<sup>7</sup> Lester Munson. ‘NCAA Athletes Get Their Day in Court,’ *ESPN.com*, 7 June 2014, accessed 30 November 2020, <[https://www.espn.com.au/espn/otl/story/\\_/id/11045682/ed-obannon-lawsuit-ncaa-paying-players-set-begin](https://www.espn.com.au/espn/otl/story/_/id/11045682/ed-obannon-lawsuit-ncaa-paying-players-set-begin)>

Matthew Reagan. ‘Supreme Court, NCAA Decisions Embolden Advocates For College Athlete Compensation in California,’ *CBS8.com*, 2 July 2021, accessed 8 October 2021, <<https://www.cbs8.com/article/news/local/california/calmatters/supreme-court-ncaa-decisions-embolden-advocates-for-college-athlete-compensation-in-california-calmatters/509-55869607-512f-4760-ab93-1a12923fcc2e>>

<sup>8</sup> Dan Murphy. ‘Oregon Women’s Basketball Player, Arizona State Swimmer File Suit Against NCAA, Power 5 Conferences,’ *ESPN.com*, 16 June 2020, accessed 30 November 2020, <[https://www.espn.com.au/college-sports/story/\\_/id/29314631/oregon-women-basketball-player-arizona-state-swimmer-file-suit-ncaa-power-five-conferences](https://www.espn.com.au/college-sports/story/_/id/29314631/oregon-women-basketball-player-arizona-state-swimmer-file-suit-ncaa-power-five-conferences)>

<sup>9</sup> Elliott C. McLaughlin. ‘California Wants its College Athletes to Get Paid, But the NCAA is Likely To Put Up Hurdles,’ *CNN*, 2 October 2019, accessed 30 November 2020,



as working-class sports were quick to professionalise, whilst “country club” sports retained their amateurism. Indeed, when it came to amateurism, it is very clear that ‘what was really at stake was control by a social elite.’<sup>10</sup> Among the working class, the values of competition and competitiveness came to dominate sport, as opposed to sportsmanship, and it quickly became evident that individualism and competition were the key features that appealed to the American populace.<sup>11</sup>

This class divide can also be seen in the history of women’s basketball: while college play sought to limit competition and tactics that would encourage male spectators, working-class women played in industrial leagues that strongly embraced the need to attract an audience.<sup>12</sup> Along with an emphasis on competition, the ethic that came to characterise American sport was work. As Overman reveals, early American society was one in which a strong work ethic was esteemed, and thus this mindset inevitably seeped into leisure cultures. Consequently, organised sport came to closely resemble the workplace, incorporating ‘performance standards within the same technocratic frame of reference as work.’<sup>13</sup> Modern sport has continued this trend, with players judged and monitored through analytics and fitness testing, while the intervention of experts has proliferated. Fitness coaches, nutritionists, physiotherapists, sports psychologists, and sports scientists have joined the traditional coach, whilst technology has enabled the tracking of player fitness, health, and skill development.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between sports leagues, sponsors, and the media has grown and become increasingly

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<<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/01/us/california-sb206-ncaa-fair-pay-to-play-act/index.html>>

<sup>10</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 239.

Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, p. 196.

Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> Ikard, *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women’s Basketball*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Bente Ovèdie Skogvang. ‘Players’ and Coaches’ Experiences with the Gendered Sport/Media Complex in Elite Football.’ In *Gender and Sport: Changes and Challenges*, edited by Gertrud Pfister and Mari Kristin Sisjord. (Münster: Waxmann, 2013), p. 104.

Will Carroll. ‘The NBA’s Wonderful New Toys: The Technology Used in NBA Training Rooms,’ *Bleacher Report*, 21 November 2013, accessed 15 October 2020,

<<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1857081-nbas-wonderful-toys-the-technology-used-in-nba-training-rooms>>

interconnected, to the extent that it is now labelled the “Sport/Media Complex.”<sup>15</sup> All these factors contribute to the professionalisation of sport; Professionalisation is not just paying the players, and indeed college sport resembles professional sport in many ways despite being ostensibly amateur. However, the autobiographies of WNBA players and my experience with the Ravens suggest that there is something unique about playing professionally, as opposed to college basketball. WNBA players are professional athletes and see themselves as such, and while the WNBA as a league is trying to ape the professional standards of the NBA, it falls short in many ways, and it falls to the players to push for the league to meet them on their level.

In 2018, her first season in the WNBA, Gabby Williams (2018-present) wrote a rookie diary for ESPN, and the various entries are very revealing for what it shows about the difference between college and the WNBA. In particular, the notion that the WNBA is a business is repeated throughout. The eye-opening moment for Williams came during training camp, when the team ‘had two players get waived yesterday (Amber Harris and Makayla Epps), and I think that's when it hit everyone: This is a business. It's not college anymore. There are no second chances here.’<sup>16</sup> Players in the WNBA are replaceable, and spots are limited; with only 12 teams and 12 players per team, a roster spot in the WNBA is one of the most difficult to achieve and hold of any sports league.<sup>17</sup> As Williams pointed out:

In college, you have a four-year contract and there are a lot more teams, so the talent is spread out. You don't expect your spot to be taken. Now it can happen tomorrow, it can happen at any time. People are waiting to take your spot.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Skogvang, ‘Players’ and Coaches’ Experiences with the Gendered Sport/Media Complex in Elite Football,’ p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Gabby Williams and Sean Hurd. ‘View From the Sky,’ *espnW*, 8 May 2018, accessed 1 October 2019, <[http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/23432937/view-chicago-sky-gabby-williams-wnba-rookie-diary](http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/23432937/view-chicago-sky-gabby-williams-wnba-rookie-diary)>

<sup>17</sup> Eli Horowitz. ‘Welcome To The W.N.B.A.: Good Luck Finding a Job,’ *The New York Times*, 5 May 2018, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/05/sports/wnba-los-angeles-sparks.html>>

<sup>18</sup> Gabby Williams and Sean Hurd. ‘In the WNBA “People are Waiting to Take Your Spot,”’ *espnW*, 4 July 2018, accessed 1 October 2018, <[http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/23986126/chicago-sky-rookie-gabby-williams-fights-make-sure-irreplaceable-wnba](http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/23986126/chicago-sky-rookie-gabby-williams-fights-make-sure-irreplaceable-wnba)>

Williams glossed over the fact that college players can and do lose scholarships, both for performance and non-performance related reasons, such as pregnancy or injury.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, she is incorrect in calling her college scholarship a four-year commitment, as scholarships are actually renewed each year.<sup>20</sup> However, especially for a player as highly-recruited and talented as Williams, there was more security in college than in the WNBA, where she became just one of many talented players. This certainly has an impact on team chemistry, because, as Ravens player Natalie elucidated, players are constantly 'coming in and out' and 'they've got other things they need to worry about too,' making the team more individualistic than other non-professional leagues that she had played in. Ravens player Isabella further outlined the stress this puts on some players, saying 'it's hard to deal with and some people can't deal with it, and they quit basketball, it ends a lot of people's careers.' However, she also pointed out 'if you stick with it, you know, there's always a chance' and indeed some players work and play overseas for many years to achieve a spot in the league, such as Yvonne Turner (2017-2019) or Shey Peddy (2020-present) who became rookies at age twenty-nine and thirty respectively.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, when it comes to transactions, players are treated as assets that can be traded to different teams at any time. Increasingly, following the growing prominence of

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<sup>19</sup> Jerry Bembry. 'NCCU Offers to Pay For Education of Women's Basketball Players Who Lost Scholarships,' *The Undeclared*, 4 April 2018, accessed 8 October 2020 <<https://theundefeated.com/features/nccu-offers-to-pay-for-education-of-womens-basketball-players-who-lost-scholarships/>>

Lindsay Rovegno. 'Athletes Often Forced Into Heartbreaking Decisions,' *ESPN.com*, 12 May 2007, accessed 8 October 2020, <<https://www.espn.com.au/college-sports/news/story?id=2865230>>

<sup>20</sup> Hayden Bird. 'NCAA Scholarship Rules Expose Yet Another Hypocrisy in College Sports,' *Bleacher Report*, 1 April 2011, accessed 8 October 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/650884-ncaa-scholarship-rules-expose-yet-another-hypocrisy-in-college-sports>>

<sup>21</sup> Ava Wallace. 'Shey Peddy, a Mystics Rookie at Age 30, is Finally Making Her WNBA Dreams Come True,' *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2019, accessed 1 October 2020, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2019/07/15/shey-peddy-mystics-rookie-age-is-finally-making-her-wnba-dreams-come-true/>>

Alexis Mansanaraz, 'Yvonne Turner, the Mercury's "Old Rookie," is Just Getting Started,' *The Athletic*, 1 August 2019, accessed 1 October 2020, <<https://theathletic.co.uk/1109420/2019/08/01/yvonne-turner-the-mercurys-old-rookie-is-just-getting-started/>>

analytics in most sports, headlined by Billy Beane and the “Moneyball” statistical movement in baseball and Daryl Morey in the NBA, players are even referred to as assets and viewed as positive or negative contracts.<sup>22</sup> Swin Cash, for example, was traded from the Seattle Storm to the Chicago Sky in 2012, despite having won a championship in Seattle and having laid down roots. Cash reflected:

This move reminded me once again about the business of basketball. It was a business move. It’s about personnel; it’s not personal and they didn’t treat it that way. So I didn’t receive a call from the coach, I received a call from my agent.<sup>23</sup>

Players in the WNBA have much less control over their playing destination compared with NBA players; unlike in the NBA, players can be designated as “core players,” preventing other teams from signing them as free agents.<sup>24</sup> As a result, there is much less player movement in the WNBA, and players have tended to stay with the team that drafted them. Players are drafted out of college or their national team, and the team that drafted them retains sole rights, although the team is not required to give the player a guaranteed spot.<sup>25</sup> This lack of freedom clearly irks some, such as Elena Delle Donne, who reflected on the draft process, saying, ‘what did bug me a little, though, was that for the first time in my basketball career, I wasn’t in control of where I’d play.’<sup>26</sup> Delle Donne became one of the few to force a trade to a different team, a possibility almost solely reserved for stars such as herself or Liz Cambage, however as Delle Donne

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Lewis. *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2003)

Tyler Conway. ‘Andrew Wiggins Left in Unfair Limbo as Cavaliers Make All-In Push For Kevin Love,’ *Bleacher Report*, 25 July 2014, accessed 26 November 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2140799-andrew-wiggins-left-in-unfair-limbo-as-cavaliers-make-all-in-push-for-kevin-love>>

Grant Hughes. ‘NBA’s Biggest Free-Agent Decisions Prove Players Are More Than “Assets,”’ *Bleacher Report*, 23 July 2014, accessed 26 November 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2137617-nbas-biggest-free-agent-decisions-prove-players-are-more-than-assets>>

<sup>23</sup> Cash, *Humble Journey: More Precious Than Gold*, p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> WNBA. ‘Core Players, Reserved Players, Restricted Free Agents and Unrestricted Free Agents,’ *WNBA.com*, 15 January 2018, accessed 1 October 2020, <<https://www.wnba.com/core-reserved-restricted-unrestricted-2018/>>

<sup>25</sup> Horowitz, ‘Welcome To The W.N.B.A.: Good Luck Finding a Job.’

<sup>26</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 121.

indicated, WNBA culture has generally frowned on this.<sup>27</sup>

There are games on in the WNBA every day, and teams play every few days and even back-to-back games. Williams found this is a shock coming from college:

The quick turnarounds between games in the WNBA have been the biggest surprise. There are days when I have to pack when I haven't even unpacked from the trip before. Once you're done with one game you have to forget about it and move on to the next.<sup>28</sup>

This is especially difficult because, as Ravens rookie Kayla highlighted, it is a 'really quick transition' from the end of the college season to the WNBA season and 'everything is just really fast paced.' The schedule is incredibly punishing on the body and the mind and hitting the "rookie wall" is common. With only 34 games, there is limited time to learn and grow, and there is very little practice time.<sup>29</sup> Coach Heather told me that the Ravens did not 'have much of a long training camp [preseason] really,' and they do not practice much during the season, particularly towards the end as 'it's all about rest. Getting ready for the next one and hopefully we've got the legs to go out there and compete.' This makes it difficult to prepare for games, with only short shoot-arounds to run through the opposing team's offence. Before one game against Dallas, the Ravens decided to implement a zone defence, to 'junk it up a bit,' though Heather admitted it would be 'tricky' as they only had one day to learn it.

The condensed schedule is not only difficult physically, but mentally, as A'ja Wilson elucidated:

Scouting, man, it's so different up here in the W. Because in college, we'd have all of this time between games. So we'd spend so much time scouting each opponent. But then in the WNBA, it's nothing like that, because the schedule is

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<sup>27</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> Williams and Hurd, 'In the WNBA "People are Waiting to Take Your Spot."'

<sup>29</sup> Gabby Williams and Sean Hurd. 'Focused on "Getting Through the Wall,"' *espnW*, 5 June 2018, accessed 1 October 2018, <[http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/23694487/chicago-sky-rookie-gabby-williams-continues-adjust-wnba](http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/23694487/chicago-sky-rookie-gabby-williams-continues-adjust-wnba)>

moving too fast. And you probably just have a shootaround, or maybe one practice, to go over the next team y'all are gonna play.<sup>30</sup>

During a Ravens film session, I was shocked at the speed at which they went through the short scouting clips of the opponent players' tendencies and team plays—a much faster pace than my own team's film sessions. For young players, assistant coach Erica contended, 'it's a lot thrown at them at such a short amount of time' and a high basketball IQ and the ability to absorb information quickly is crucial. Erica, as a former player and long-time coach, saw her role as teaching young players the mental aspects of being a WNBA player. She argued that 'they come in not paying attention to the scouts, knowing the tendencies of other players. All of those things are crucial to stay in this league,' thus she focuses on teaching 'preparation for the game.' Teaira McCowan (2019-present) echoed this sentiment as a rookie, saying 'this is two notches faster, everything is coming at you so fast. And in training camp, you can't really stop and break anything down.'<sup>31</sup> Learning to deal with the schedule, both physically and mentally, is an important part of becoming a professional basketball player.

In college everything is organised and scheduled for the players and understanding how to cope with the relative freedom of the WNBA is difficult.<sup>32</sup> Ravens player Taylor said this when asked what the biggest difference between college and the WNBA was:

You get a lot more freedom. you don't have to, there's not a lot of strict rules. So, when you're a professional, the coaches, the coaching staff expect you to do what you have to do to be ready to play in games and to be, you're able to perform at practices and stuff versus in college, everything is a learning experience and a teaching tool. So, like you have people there who are telling you what you have to do, who are putting you through workouts. Whereas here

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<sup>30</sup> A'ja Wilson. 'The 7 Best Young Guns in the WNBA. Period.' *The Players' Tribune*, 22 August 2018, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/wnba-aja-wilson-7-best-young-guns-period>>

<sup>31</sup> Lyndsey D'Arcangelo. "'Control What You Can Control": The Realities of the WNBA Rookie Transition,' *The Athletic*, 26 September 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1243369/2019/09/26/control-what-you-can-control-the-realities-of-the-wnba-rookie-transition/>>

<sup>32</sup> Wright, 'The Way In.'

we practice and then after practice we have our free time to do as we please.

Ravens player Kayla also mentioned this, and pointed out that aside from team trainings, ‘everything else is up to you to do independently.’ One area where this difficulty manifests itself is in the struggle that Chelsea Gray (2014-present) experienced in maintaining her fitness:

The biggest issue, to be honest, was my weight. See, in college, nearly your entire day is planned out, from sunrise to sunset. You don’t have a lot of free time, even in the off-season. But in the pros, you have *so much time* to yourself. That was new to me. I had to find ways to fill that time and, unfortunately for me, I filled it with food.<sup>33</sup>

Chamique Holdsclaw had a similar dilemma, and even returned to her college program in the offseason to lose weight and get in shape.<sup>34</sup> Diana Taurasi, when asked what she would tell her eighteen-year-old self, replied ‘I would tell her fat ass to stop eating for one. I mean, Baby Fat Baller.’<sup>35</sup> The flip side of this is Amanda Zahui B’s experience coming from Europe, as the WNBA provided her with access to strength and conditioning coaches that eclipsed her previous training, enabling her to build muscle and lose weight.<sup>36</sup>

Playing in the WNBA is dramatically different to college, and as such, learning to be a professional basketball player is a process all WNBA players must go through. Lisa Leslie, for instance, had to learn ‘when to rest, to show up early, to get shots up, to stay late, to do homework.’<sup>37</sup> While Leslie, as one of the pioneers of the WNBA, had to learn this for herself, future generations of WNBA players have relied on veteran players to

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<sup>33</sup> Chelsea Gray. ‘Off the Bench,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 22 July 2017, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/chelsea-gray-los-angeles-sparks-wnba>>

<sup>34</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, p. 190.

<sup>35</sup> Isabel Albee. ‘The Most Memorable Lines From Megan Rapinoe, Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, and Penny Taylor During Their 4-Hour Instagram Live Showdown,’ *Medium*, 28 April 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://medium.com/@isabelcalbee/the-most-memorable-lines-by-megan-rapinoe-sue-bird-diana-taurasi-and-penny-taylor-from-their-b829da9bde60>>

<sup>36</sup> Zahui B, ‘Life in Transition.’

<sup>37</sup> Leslie, ‘Who Got Next?’

help them with the transition, teaching them how to be a professional. Doing extra work is expected of professional players, and as Ravens player Taylor argued 'my job is only to be here for an hour and a half, max three hours and that's way better than an eight to five job. So, I feel like it's my job to come in and do a little bit more work outside of practice.' How to do this, however, is something younger players need to learn outside of the confines of the college system. Brittany Boyd (2015-present) described training with veteran Tina Charles, saying 'she'll take 100 shots and on the 101st shot, her work ethic and form is just as good as on the first shot. I'm like, *That's what a professional looks like at practice.*'<sup>38</sup> Part of this is veterans teaching younger players the skills and techniques of the game, such as at Ravens practice where Jasmine was teaching Taylor how to set a screen successfully.

Another aspect is learning how to cope with what Tamika Catchings described as 'the speed, the physicality, the wear and tear on the body'<sup>39</sup> that is a step up from college, particularly as players age. Ravens player Chloe, for example, was a veteran and she had a well organised routine to maintain her body and strength over a long season. She pointed out that it is very hard to 'maintain strength during the season because our games come so quickly, you know, it's a quick turnaround all the time,' thus she utilised tricks such as doing a weights session after an early game, giving herself the whole next day to recover. It was important for her to continue strength work during the season to prevent injuries, saying 'you just got to find a way to fit them in when you can.' One of the hallmarks of professional sports, Howe argues, is the increased emphasis on injury prevention as injury becomes a financial burden.<sup>40</sup> This is achieved through preventative measures such as the prehab strength programs that Chloe outlined, massage therapy, and technological recovery tools such as recovery boots and massage guns. The injury prevention program the Ravens implemented supports Howe's contention that professional teams are dictating more closely the way in which players

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<sup>38</sup> Brittany Boyd. 'Growing Up,' *The Players' Tribune*, 22 September 2015, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/brittany-boyd-wnba-liberty>>

<sup>39</sup> Tamika Catchings. 'The Iso: Tamika Catchings,' *The Players' Tribune*, 18 April 2020, accessed 30 April 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/the-iso-tamika-catchings-indiana-fever>>

<sup>40</sup> P. David Howe. *Sport, Professionalism and Pain: Ethnographies of Injury and Risk*. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 20.



prepare for games, as both pre-game and pre-training players were expected to undergo a warm-up prehab routine involving foam rollers and therabands.<sup>41</sup> However, amongst the Ravens there was still some level of self-direction, as some players clearly completed the exercises more diligently, and took advantage of other recovery options such as massage or recovery boots, Chloe included, whereas others were more blasé and left immediately following training without doing recovery work.

Learning to be a professional is not exclusive to on-court games and practice, but also dealing with the media. Elena Delle Donne described her learning process when it came to professional skills:

These veterans weren't just going to teach me lessons on the court, either. Every WNBA game was televised, and after every single one, many of us would have to speak to reporters, so I was going to have to learn to be professional in front of the camera.<sup>42</sup>

Professionalism for WNBA players, then, can be all-encompassing: it can be something as small as changing a Twitter handle to something recognisable, ensuring that they are presenting themselves appropriately and that they are accessible across the media spectrum.<sup>43</sup> As Skogvang suggests, the "Sport/Media Complex" is characteristic of professional sport, thus there is a level of scrutiny that WNBA players are put under by the media.<sup>44</sup> Tanisha Wright argued that this can be overwhelming for young players:

You're a kid when you come into the league. When you're a professional, so many different things are thrown at you. You listen to all of the noise — the fans, the media. When they write on the blogs that you're trash, you listen to

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<sup>41</sup> Howe, *Sport, Professionalism and Pain: Ethnographies of Injury and Risk*, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 136.

<sup>43</sup> Gabby Williams and Sean Hurd. 'Learning to Play Through the Ups and Downs,' *espnW*, 19 June 2018, accessed 1 October 2018, <[http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/23840165/rookie-gabby-williams-learning-play-chicago-sky-ups-downs](http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/23840165/rookie-gabby-williams-learning-play-chicago-sky-ups-downs)>

<sup>44</sup> Skogvang, 'Players' and Coaches' Experiences with the Gendered Sport/Media Complex in Elite Football,' p. 107.

that. And because you're not yet experienced enough — in the league or in life — to know yourself or your worth, you believe it.<sup>45</sup>

This media attention is an important aspect of growing the league and ensuring money-making potential.

As Diana Taurasi pointed out, when compared to college players, WNBA players 'are grown-ass women that are just stronger than you, smarter than you, better than you.'<sup>46</sup> Most WNBA players come from high schools and college programs where they are the best player on the team, and they rarely lose. They are then drafted onto WNBA teams where not only are they not the best player, but they might struggle to even make the roster. If they are a top draft pick, it is likely that they are on a team that lost a lot the previous year. This is a shock for many rookie players; Gabby Williams described her rookie year in Chicago, where they finished with a 13-21 record:

I don't think I've lost three games in a row since playing AAU. That's as many games that I lost at Connecticut over four years. I don't want it to be a thing. Even if that's what happens in the WNBA or whatever, I don't want to accept that as normal.<sup>47</sup>

Rookies often come into the league with a lot of hype and excitement surrounding them, having just played in the NCAA tournament which gets significant coverage. Veterans want to prove to them that they still have a lot to learn. Diana Taurasi told Sue Bird on an *Instagram Live*, 'now, looking back on it, every time you play rookies, you just want to fucking kill 'em...Like, "oh you had such a great senior year, I'm about to bust your ass right now."<sup>48</sup> While the top draft picks may be the star of their new team, for those drafted to veteran successful teams, it is a significant adjustment. For Chelsea Gray adjusting to a new role was a considerable struggle:

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<sup>45</sup> Wright, 'The Way In.'

<sup>46</sup> Taurasi, 'Just a Kid From Chino.'

<sup>47</sup> Williams and Hurd, 'Focused on "Getting Through the Wall."'

<sup>48</sup> Albee, 'The Most Memorable Lines From Megan Rapinoe, Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, and Penny Taylor During Their 4-Hour Instagram Live Showdown.'

When I wasn't injured at Duke, I was one of the main players on the team. In Connecticut, I was coming off the bench, playing a lot less than I would like. It really took a toll on my confidence.<sup>49</sup>

Ravens player Natalie told me something similar, saying:

By my senior year [in college], I was the main player...I played close to forty minutes a game and then coming into the WNBA as a rookie, especially on this particular team too, with a strong history of really, really good veterans, I've gone to like next to no minutes.

This was a struggle for Natalie who found it difficult not knowing whether she would play, and when she did, she was 'thrown in for a few minutes here or there,' and was expected to perform. Sitting on the bench, for Natalie, meant that 'you don't have that feel for the game. You've just been watching. You haven't been playing.' Even international players like Lauren Jackson and Amanda Zahui B who did not play college basketball were shocked by the physicality and speed of the WNBA game.<sup>50</sup> It takes some time to adapt to the style of play, and requires embracing the strength and conditioning system in the WNBA to gain the strength necessary to succeed.<sup>51</sup> Part of being a professional WNBA player is being able to embrace a different role, and to gain professional work habits to get better and secure a spot in the league.

Furthermore, Chamique Holdsclaw suggested this freedom is evident in the style of coaching in the WNBA:

Pro basketball is not just about x's and o's but also about managing personalities...pro coaches get us as women and so we're a little more opinionated and outspoken, which comes from living and making decisions.<sup>52</sup>

This is an intense transition from college basketball, where coaches are viewed as disciplinarians and are to some extent the "star" of the team. Ravens coach Heather

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<sup>49</sup> Gray, 'Off the Bench.'

<sup>50</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 90.

Zahui B, 'Life in Transition.'

<sup>51</sup> Zahui B, 'Life in Transition.'

<sup>52</sup> Holdsclaw, *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds Shot after Shot*, pp. 175-176.

recognised this dynamic and tried to make her coaching style 'a collaborative effort because you want buy in from everyone,' though she would 'always make the final decision.' Assistant coach Erica was slightly more negative, saying that she mostly focuses on younger players because the older ones are 'opinionated. They're set in their ways...as far as trying to develop them you can't do it.' Star players in particular tend to get special treatment and more leeway from the coaches. I asked Natalie if she thought different players got different treatment and she responded:

Yes, but it's like deserved because you've got like [veterans] playing a lot of minutes. And so they need a little bit more attention, let's say for like treatments and stuff. So yeah. That kind of thing. And like as a rookie you're treated differently. This is your first year in the WNBA you definitely get treated differently.

I saw some evidence of this during a game in which one of the Ravens star players got into foul trouble, and Heather sent Natalie to the scorer's table to replace her. However, the star player waved off Heather and refused to come out of the game, so Natalie was waved back to the bench. At the next stoppage Natalie replaced her anyway, so the battle of wills did not last long, yet this demonstrates the behaviour star players can get away with. Of course, this privilege comes with it the responsibility of being the best players on the team, and assistant coach Holly argued that you see this in their work ethic and professionalism:

They are the first ones in the gym, last ones to leave. So, the hardest working in practice. So, you realize, okay, well that's why they're so much better than everybody else. They really put in the time. It's just not this natural given talent that they never show up to the gym and they're just good.

Most people in the WNBA see the star position as an earned one and do not begrudge them their privileges.

In terms of having to learn what being a professional means, most of the players' autobiographical work suggests a significant jump between college basketball and the WNBA. However, this is not necessarily reflected in the facilities of teams or the level of media coverage. Maya Moore offered this perspective, revealing that she felt a

significant drop in the level of media coverage and excitement after she was drafted into the WNBA:

There's this unnatural break in exposure for the highest level of women's basketball in the world. *Wait, what happened here?* That's a question we as WNBA players ask ourselves. We go from amazing AAU experiences to high school All-American games to the excitement and significant platform of the collegiate level to... this. All of that visibility to...this. Less coverage. Empty seats. Fewer eyeballs. In college, your coaches tell you to stay focused on your team and the game — not the media attention. But you know you're on national television. You know people are following you. You can feel the excitement. And then as a professional, all of that momentum, all of that passion, all of that support — the ball of momentum is deflating before my eyes.<sup>53</sup>

College teams have a built-in fanbase of students and alumni and decades of history that makes it an easier sell than the relatively new WNBA. Furthermore, players live and study at the college where they play, and this closed-off campus world means the likelihood that they will be recognised and celebrated is heightened. This is amplified by the fact that many of the more prominent women's teams, including UConn, South Carolina, and more recently Oregon, are more popular or prestigious than the equivalent men's basketball team on campus.<sup>54</sup> In addition to having a bigger fan base, college teams travel on chartered planes, while WNBA teams have to fly commercial, with the accompanying travel delays.<sup>55</sup> These chartered planes at colleges are often paid for by private alumni donations, although some colleges use tuition payments and taxpayer funding.<sup>56</sup> Ravens player Chloe told me of a time in which her former WNBA

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<sup>53</sup> Moore, '(in)Visibility.'

<sup>54</sup> Laine Higgins. 'Attendance at Women's College Basketball Games is Surging,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 March 2020, accessed 30 November 2020, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/attendance-at-womens-college-basketball-games-is-surging-11583421714>>

<sup>55</sup> Grace Remington. 'Mystics Players Look For Improved WNBA Travel, Calling Current Plan Trash,' *NBC Sports*, 30 June 2019, accessed 21 October 2020, <<https://www.nbcsports.com/washington/wizards/mystics-players-look-improved-wnba-travel-calling-current-plan-trash>>

<sup>56</sup> Associated Press. 'Flying Coach: Many Universities Are Using Private Planes,' *ESPN.com*, 31 August 2019, accessed 30 November 2020,

team missed a connecting flight, and as a result ‘rented cars to drive to the next city. We had three cars to put everybody. Well four cars with all our baggage. It was kind of brutal.’ WNBA players are expected to perform at the highest level while also having to contend with travel mishaps and difficulties. In 2018 the Las Vegas Aces took a stand against this, forfeiting a game against Washington citing concerns about health, after travel delays caused the trip to take 25 hours.<sup>57</sup> There has been significant research among NBA teams showing the link between travel, sleep deficits, and decreased performance and increased injury.<sup>58</sup> NBA teams fly on chartered planes, and it would seem likely that these effects would be heightened with WNBA teams flying commercial.

The training facilities can often be a step down from college, particularly those of the bigger, more prestigious college programs. Ravens player Natalie’s college, for instance, ‘put a lot of money into the athletics program too, so everything was the top of the top in terms of facilities.’ Training facilities have always been ‘sexed spaces,’ as historically women’s gyms have been inferior to men’s, with less space and inadequate equipment, hindering women’s ability to improve and marking women’s sports as less than.<sup>59</sup> This is particularly evident in the differing facilities of WNBA teams, as unlike colleges, who theoretically must adhere to Title IX requirements, they are only limited by what the team owner is willing to spend. Teams that are aligned with NBA teams and share their facilities have a big advantage over independent teams that are forced to find alternative training courts, which can be expensive. While most of the players considered themselves lucky with the Ravens, as they were able to share facilities with

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<[https://www.espn.com.au/college-sports/story/\\_/id/18724734/many-universities-using-private-planes](https://www.espn.com.au/college-sports/story/_/id/18724734/many-universities-using-private-planes)>

<sup>57</sup> Associated Press. ‘Las Vegas Aces Will Forfeit Cancelled Game, W.N.B.A Says,’ *The New York Times*, 7 August 2018, accessed 9 October 2020,

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/07/sports/wnba-las-vegas-aces-forfeit.html>>

<sup>58</sup> Baxter Holmes. ‘NBA Exec: It’s the Dirty Little Secret That Everybody Knows About,’ *ESPN.com*, 14 October 2019, accessed 9 October 2020

<[https://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/\\_/id/27767289/dirty-little-secret-everybody-knows-about](https://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/_/id/27767289/dirty-little-secret-everybody-knows-about)>

Thomas Huyghe, Aaron T Scanlan, Vincent J Dalbo, and Julio Callega-González. ‘The Negative Influence of Air Travel on Health and Performance in the National Basketball Association: A Narrative Review.’ *Sports* 6, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>59</sup> Patricia Vertinsky. ‘Locating a “Sense of Place”: Space, Place and Gender in the Gymnasium.’ In *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, edited by Patricia Vertinsky and John Bale, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 21.

the men and had a training court and gym attached to the arena, this had some drawbacks as Natalie pointed out:

This is an events arena, so like right now there's a concert on tonight. So, you have to work around that schedule too. And we share the practice courts with the men's team as well. So, in my experience, my college facilities were a little bit better than what we've got right now.

This is also dependent on how supportive the NBA team was; Coach Cheryl Reeve described her experience with the now defunct Charlotte Sting:

We had minimal operations staff. There was hardly anyone promoting the team. The salaries of the players was very modest. Not every WNBA team was run this way. It was frustrating...Sometimes we weren't even allowed in our own training facilities. If the Hornets were practicing, we couldn't be in the building. We were told it was "too distracting" to have women around the gym.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, in 2018 the New York Liberty moved from Madison Square Garden to the smaller Westchester County Center, whose locker room facilities are, as Aces coach Bill Laimbeer put it, 'terrible,' and resemble high school locker rooms.<sup>61</sup> James Dolan, owner of the New York Knicks, sold the Liberty in 2019, and he had consistently demonstrated his disinterest in the team leading to that point.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Cheryl Reeve. 'No Excuses,' *The Players' Tribune*, 12 April 2018, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/cheryl-reeve-gender-equality>>

<sup>61</sup> Doug Feinberg. 'Some WNBA Teams Downsizing Arenas to Help Bottom Line,' *Chicago Tribune*, 9 July 2019, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/basketball/ct-spt-wnba-downsizing-arenas-20180709-story.html>>

<sup>62</sup> WFAN Sports Radio. 'James Dolan Officially Sells New York Liberty to Nets Owner,' *WFAN.com*, 24 January 2019, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.radio.com/wfan/articles/news/james-dolan-officially-sells-new-york-liberty-nets-owner>>

Mechelle Voepel. 'Jim Dolan Parting Ways With New York Liberty Was Only a Matter of Time,' *ESPN.com*, 15 November 2017, accessed 9 October 2020, <[https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/\\_/id/21417596/jim-dolan-parting-ways-new-york-liberty-was-only-matter](https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/_/id/21417596/jim-dolan-parting-ways-new-york-liberty-was-only-matter)>

The Ravens training facilities were significantly better than some of the other teams. Ravens player Isabella singled out Connecticut as training in ‘basically sort of like a YMCA...sometimes they don’t even have a full court to practice,’ while coach Heather revealed that when she was a player in Los Angeles, they trained in three different locations including a Velodrome, where ‘the cyclists would be riding around us and we’d be in the middle...I’d be watching them going.’ These are practical, material concerns that prevent players from improving their game; the practices I watched certainly required a full court, often involving splitting into two groups and utilising both hoops, and the distraction and sounds of cyclists circling are not conducive to a good training session, particularly if it involves detailed discussion on scouting or play execution. Heather was generous, saying that as long as the court is safe it does not matter, however as Isabella pointed out even that is not always the case. In Atlanta, they train at a college in which ‘you have two or three feet from the sideline to the wall, so it can be a bit dangerous as well.’ Not having the space to land safely inhibits the players’ bodily movements, as fear of injury constrains possibilities, and thus the material body embodies the financial inequalities of women’s sport. This is further exemplified by Layshia Clarendon’s experience of offseason training, as, unable to afford access to a better gym, she was forced to use the cheaper LA fitness gym where ‘the ceilings were so low there that the basketball would hit the roof when she shot threes.’<sup>63</sup> In other words, the material reality of the training environment actually prevented or at least hindered Clarendon from improving her shooting ability. This further exhibits how ‘gendered, heteronormative power relations work rhizomatically through bodies in...sport.’<sup>64</sup>

Being associated with an NBA team has obvious benefits, however the material surroundings of both the training courts and the arena serve to mark women as ‘space invaders,’<sup>65</sup> transgressing traditional sporting boundaries and creating a place for

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<sup>63</sup> Mirin Fader. ‘Inside the WNBA’s Fight For Higher Pay,’ *Bleacher Report*, 16 April 2020, accessed 15 May 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2802759-inside-the-wnbas-fight-for-higher-pay>>

<sup>64</sup> Simone Fullagar. ‘Post-Qualitative Inquiry and the New Materialist Turn: Implications for Sport, Health and Physical Culture Research.’ *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 9, no. 2 (2017), p. 250.

<sup>65</sup> Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown. ‘Post-Colonial Feminism, Black Feminism and Sport.’ In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise



themselves within professional basketball, while simultaneously being classed as subordinate. The merchandise stores in the Ravens arena were dominated by NBA merchandise, with a small section marked out for the WNBA team. Only two players had their jerseys for sale, whereas you could buy any NBA jersey; even an All-Star calibre player did not have her jersey available. The training courts were clearly marked as being owned by the NBA team, with their logo across the floor and a large banner with their players on the wall. The Ravens had only a small section of the wall carved out for their championship banners. Moreover, the markings on the court were for the NBA, with the shorter WNBA three-point line marked in a lighter blue colour. The positioning of WNBA players as 'space invaders' is even worse for teams that share the same city as an NBA team but not the same ownership. The Atlanta Dream, for example, until 2019 played in the same arena as the Atlanta Hawks, however they only rented the venue and did not get access to all the facilities, including the Hawks locker room.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Chicago Sky player Diamond DeShields tweeted her annoyance that she could not use the Bulls training courts.<sup>67</sup> As Vertinsky argues, 'the enclosures of sporting spaces served to reinforce hierarchical boundaries between who was to count as an athlete and who was not.'<sup>68</sup> While WNBA players do count as athletes in this arrangement, it is palpably clear who matters more. The material world and the discursive understanding of gender divides in sport interact to create a sporting assemblage that further encourages the disrespect of female basketball players that already exists in American society.

Some veteran Ravens players had seen the level of professionalism improve over their tenure in the league. Each team in the WNBA is required to provide housing or a

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Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Beccy Watson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 492.

<sup>66</sup> Tingley, 'The W.N.B.A Is Putting on Some of the Best Pro Basketball in America: Why Aren't More Fans Showing Up?'

<sup>67</sup> Maggie Hendricks. 'How the Bulls Growth Could Help Further the Sky's Growth in Chicago,' *The Athletic*, 3 March 2020, accessed 12 October 2020  
<<https://theathletic.com/1650720/2020/03/03/how-the-bulls-could-help-further-the-skys-growth-in-chicago/>>

<sup>68</sup> Vertinsky, 'Locating a "Sense of Place": Space, Place and Gender in the Gymnasium,' p. 12.

housing stipend for the period of the regular season and playoffs.<sup>69</sup> This is necessary as players often do not live full time in the city they play in, staying just for the duration of the season, and can change teams often. When Isabella first entered the league, rather than housing they would live in a long-stay hotel, which she said:

Kind of sucked. I mean it was good cause they'd clean our room and that sort of thing. But it also at the same time was frustrating because there were a lot of like obviously just people that would come and stay and then they would just like bug you a lot about the season or like taking photos and it's just sometimes it gets to be a lot when you can't get away from the fans.

Now they live in apartments, which are generally well equipped with 'a gym or pool and security as well,' with the option of paying for an extra bedroom or a given a stipend if they have their own house in market. Again, Isabella mentioned that these apartments vary in quality from team to team, however 'nobody's staying in hotels.' However, before the new CBA, young players with children often could not afford the upgrade to a two-bedroom apartment, resulting in players like Bria Hartley being forced to keep her young son in the living room.<sup>70</sup>

The variation in quality between team facilities makes evident the importance of team ownership and highlights the variation between ownership models. Five WNBA teams share ownership with their NBA counterpart: the Phoenix Mercury/Sun, the Minnesota Lynx/Timberwolves, the New York Liberty/Brooklyn Nets, the Washington Mystics/Wizards and the Indiana Fever/Pacers. As seen above, sharing an ownership group can have advantages, particularly if the owner is willing to invest.

The Washington Mystics and Wizards owner Ted Leonsis, for instance, has recently been very invested in the success of the Mystics, building a new shared training facility for the Wizards and Mystics with a new arena specifically designed for the Mystics.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Women's National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Players' Association. *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, 17 January 2020, p. 98, accessed 30 November 2020, <<https://wnbpa.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WNBA-WNBPA-CBA-2020-2027.pdf>>

<sup>70</sup> Nguyen, 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms.'

<sup>71</sup> Colleen Leahey McKeegan. 'Washington Mystics Owner Ted Leonsis and Star Player Elena Delle Donne Are Plotting to Transform the WNBA,' *Marie Claire*, 22 June 2017,

Interestingly, these teams have been very successful, particularly the Mercury and Lynx, despite having owners who on the NBA side are seen as some of the worst owners in the NBA. The Suns and Mercury owner, Robert Sarver, received notoriety after bringing a goat into Suns then-general manager Ryan McDonough's office, which proceeded to defecate on the floor,<sup>72</sup> while the Minnesota Timberwolves went thirteen consecutive years without making the playoffs, during which time the Lynx won four championships.<sup>73</sup> The reason for the difference is unclear. One possible explanation is that these owners are simply less interested in their WNBA team and are willing to hire good people and let them do their job unencumbered. Robert Sarver's interventionist mentality in the running of the Suns is one of the reasons the Suns have floundered.<sup>74</sup> Another possibility is that the WNBA has a hard cap, meaning that there is a limited amount that can be spent on player salaries, whereas the NBA has a soft cap, and the amount that can be spent on players is dependent on ownerships willingness to pay a "luxury tax." Both Timberwolves/Lynx owner Glen Taylor and Pacers/Fever owner Herb Simon have historically been unwilling to pay the luxury tax.<sup>75</sup> Regardless, like all sports teams, the personality of the owner does make a difference in the success of the team.

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accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/q-and-a/a27815/elena-delle-donne-ted-leonsis-mystics-wnba/>>

<sup>72</sup> Kevin Arnovitz. 'Inside the Phoenix Suns' Messy and Dysfunctional Front Office,' *ESPN.com*, 4 March 2019, accessed 9 October 2020, <[https://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/\\_/id/26088024/inside-phoenix-suns-messy-dysfunctional-front-office](https://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/_/id/26088024/inside-phoenix-suns-messy-dysfunctional-front-office)>

<sup>73</sup> Jeff Zillgitt. 'Timberwolves Snap NBA's Longest Active Playoff Drought With Play-In Win Over Nuggets,' *USA Today*, 11 April 2018, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2018/04/11/timberwolves-snap-nba-longest-active-playoff-drought-win-over-nuggets/509550002/>>

<sup>74</sup> Arnovitz, 'Inside the Phoenix Suns' Messy and Dysfunctional Front Office.'

<sup>75</sup> Tom Ziller. 'Glen Taylor is the Biggest Reason the Timberwolves Keep Losing,' *SB Nation*, 27 August 2014, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/nba/2014/8/27/6073775/glen-taylor-timberwolves-kevin-love-trade-blame>>

Dan Feldman. 'Report: Larry Bird Resigned as Pacers President Because Team Didn't Spend Enough,' *Yahoo Sports*, 5 August 2020, accessed 9 October 2020, <[https://sports.yahoo.com/report-larry-bird-resigned-pacers-171619564.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAMJnP3a-Ll2NhUhCh\\_LYVTsmnbkSYh5dgSH2Jf9iob9xjAGu3iuwni0SYO3NzxS7mW80\\_agH5tmmfEcPm2MwqMUevxaBYE-BT701g2oxL2gJtLV-2DhjdTnvm4wfTmjfP85JZVHFbqN6\\_qY8X\\_5QOT9jO-UOdcEBDMB8TmPKwPw](https://sports.yahoo.com/report-larry-bird-resigned-pacers-171619564.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMJnP3a-Ll2NhUhCh_LYVTsmnbkSYh5dgSH2Jf9iob9xjAGu3iuwni0SYO3NzxS7mW80_agH5tmmfEcPm2MwqMUevxaBYE-BT701g2oxL2gJtLV-2DhjdTnvm4wfTmjfP85JZVHFbqN6_qY8X_5QOT9jO-UOdcEBDMB8TmPKwPw)>

Ted Leonsis believes that ‘we need more NBA owners to own WNBA teams,’<sup>76</sup> however the WNBA has moved away from that model as more teams are owned by independent groups. The Los Angeles Sparks and Lakers share an arena but are owned by different ownership groups, while the Chicago Sky, Atlanta Dream, and Dallas Wings share a market with NBA teams, but not ownership. In 2003, the Connecticut Sun became the first team independently owned—without an NBA owner—and the first team in a non-NBA city, though this now includes the Seattle Storm and the Las Vegas Aces.<sup>77</sup> This was an interesting move for the league, an attempt to capitalise on the popularity of the University of Connecticut women’s basketball team, and an indication that perhaps the success of the league lies outside the path laid by the NBA. The Connecticut Sun is owned by the Mohegan Tribe and play in the Mohegan Sun Casino, an ownership model that was followed by the Las Vegas Aces, who until 2021 were owned by MGM resorts, only to be sold to the owner of the Las Vegas Raiders NFL team Mark Davis.<sup>78</sup> Layshia Clarendon argued that this might be the way of the future for the WNBA:

It’s interesting that the casino model can be like the wave of the future, cause you have the built-in gym, the built-in ticket sales of people that visit the arena, so that was really, really interesting to experience and see all the resources they have.<sup>79</sup>

The record of independent owners is more mixed. The Storm’s ownership group has been very successful, winning three of the Storm’s four championships since buying the team in 2007, when their original partner team, the Seattle SuperSonics, was sold and moved to Oklahoma City. The all-women ownership group made explicit that buying the team was not just a financial investment, but reflective of their belief in ‘empowering women and in equal rights for everyone, no matter their gender, race, or sexuality.’<sup>80</sup> In

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<sup>76</sup> McKeegan, ‘Washington Mystics Owner Ted Leonsis and Star Player Elena Delle Donne Are Plotting to Transform the WNBA.’

<sup>77</sup> Goodman, ‘A Casino Finds Its Place in the Sun.’

<sup>78</sup> Wilton Jackson. ‘Raiders Owner Mark Davis Buys Las Vegas Aces,’ *SI.com*, 14 January 2021, accessed 8 July 2021, <<https://www.si.com/wnba/2021/01/14/mark-davis-raiders-buys-las-vegas-aces>>

<sup>79</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>80</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. ‘The Storm Way,’ *Power Plays*, 8 October 2020, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.powerplays.news/p/the-storm-way>>

contrast, the Atlanta Dream, Clarendon argued, ‘struggled a little bit more being independently owned in that market, it’s a tough market to thrive in.’<sup>81</sup> In addition to being a difficult market for both the NBA and WNBA, Atlanta ex-co-owner Senator Kelly Loeffler was strongly rebuked by her own players for her stance against Black Lives Matter and the WNBA’s activism work. WNBA players called for her to sell the team—which she did in 2021—and campaigned for her opponent in the 2020 senate race.<sup>82</sup> In all professional sports, the quality of ownership matters, but this seems particularly so in the WNBA, where the margin between being a professional level team with professional level facilities, and having inadequate facilities is so narrow.

While in many ways players experience an uptick in the level of professionalism when transitioning to the WNBA, they are also adamant that the league needs to improve. They view themselves as professional basketball players and resent that they do not receive all the benefits that should come with that. Navigating this tension between what a professional league should look like and what it does is central to the experience of being a WNBA player. Improvements in travel arrangements, access to better medical and rehab services, including in the offseason, and upgraded facilities, are some of the things that WNBA players argue they should have access to; it is not only higher salaries that the Players’ Association fought for in its recent CBA fight.<sup>83</sup> In negotiating the 2020 CBA, the executive director of the WNBPA, Terri Jackson, outlined three major areas to focus on: compensation, health and wellness, and travel.<sup>84</sup> The first, compensation, I will discuss further in the following chapter, however both health and wellbeing and

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<sup>81</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>82</sup> Sopan Deb and Kevin Draper. ‘Atlanta Dream are Sold After Players’ Revolt Against Kelly Loeffler,’ *The New York Times*, 26 February 2021, accessed 8 July 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/sports/basketball/atlanta-dream-kelly-loeffler-renee-montgomery-sale.html>>

Lindsay Gibbs. ‘How the Atlanta Dream Reclaimed Their Message,’ *Power Plays*, 13 August 2020, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.powerplays.news/p/how-the-atlanta-dream-reclaimed-their>>

<sup>83</sup> Monica Wright. ‘Why We Need Title IX Now More Than Ever,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 21 July 2017, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/monica-wright-why-we-need-title-ix>>

<sup>84</sup> Howard Megdal. ‘How the W.N.B.A Deal Got Done,’ *The New York Times*, 26 January 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/sports/basketball/wnba-collective-bargaining-agreement.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>>

travel—that is, the professionalism of the league—was a significant focus of the negotiations.

The Las Vegas Aces 25-hour trip to Washington the previous season meant that travel was at the forefront of minds, though it had clearly been an issue that players had struggled with in the past. In her *Players' Tribune* article explaining the WNBA players' decision to opt out of the previous CBA, WNBPA President Nneka Ogwumike highlighted travel as a major non-salary player experience issue:

This is not purely about salaries. This is about small changes the league can make that will impact the players. This is about a six-foot-nine superstar taking a red-eye cross-country and having to sit in an economy seat instead of an exit row. Often with delays.<sup>85</sup>

Travel was perhaps the area where the WNBPA made the most minor gains in the new CBA, with chartered flights considered a non-starter.<sup>86</sup> Instead, players have been upgraded from economy to economy plus on flights and reimbursed the \$100 fee for the Global Entry membership, which makes clearing border security and TSA screening easier.<sup>87</sup> All players now get individual hotel rooms when travelling, whereas in the past younger players had to share with a roommate.<sup>88</sup> Though a far cry from the NBA or even NCAA private planes, these changes do indicate a recognition that the previous situation was untenable for professional players. Furthermore, though private plane usage had been banned even for those teams that could have afforded it to ensure competitive balance, one of new commissioner Cathy Engelbert's first moves was to provide chartered planes for the Sparks and Aces to begin their 2019 semi-final series, recognising that the quick turnaround from the previous playoff games would make

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<sup>85</sup> Nneka Ogwumike. 'Bet on Women,' *The Players' Tribune*, 2 November 2018, accessed 30 April 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/nneka-ogwumike-wnba-cba-bet-on-women>>

<sup>86</sup> David Aldridge and Wos Lambre. Inside the WNBA CBA, Stern Memorial and The Forgotten, MLK Day. *Hoops Adjacent*. 23 January 2020, <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/60vVJcAi80quVplpgaUj4V>>

<sup>87</sup> Kelsey Trainor. 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?' *High Post Hoops*, 25 January 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://highposthoops.com/2020/01/25/wnba-collective-bargaining-agreement-actually-says/>>

<sup>88</sup> Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

commercial travel unmanageable and affect the quality of the series.<sup>89</sup> The new CBA allows for players to appeal to a Players Advisory Panel for any travel issues, and the league can provide a chartered flight in certain circumstances.<sup>90</sup> The league and the players' association have demonstrated a new willingness to work together on travel issues and improve the quality of life for players.

As discussed in Chapter Four, WNBA players like Skylar Diggins-Smith have worked to reframe motherhood as a labour issue, refusing to let the WNBA present them in a celebratory context as inspiring working mothers without providing them with the support necessary. The level of support that teams gave to players with children pre-2020 varied dramatically, with players guaranteed only 50 percent of their salary, with no guarantee of childcare, accommodation, or mental health support.<sup>91</sup> This uncertainty caused great stress for players, with some hiding their pregnancies to avoid losing money or roster spots.<sup>92</sup> This, Terri Jackson, argued was a function of a CBA that did not anticipate that players would return to playing after having a child, and did not take into account the unique position that female athletes are in, saying:

If you ever read our 2014 agreement you are left a bit with the impression that there's a whole lot missing, it borrows a lot, it borrows perhaps quite liberally from other collective bargaining agreements, in particular the NBA, NBPA agreements in the past. Switch the pronouns and then suddenly you have a CBA for us.<sup>93</sup>

By relying on the general structure of a CBA designed for men, the previous CBA did not recognise the material realities of being a WNBA player; female labour activists have long argued that women 'cannot be subsumed by the universal category "worker."' <sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Megdal, 'How the W.N.B.A Deal Got Done.'

<sup>90</sup> Spruill, "'The Time is Now For Women's Sports': Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA's Watershed CBA Deal.'

<sup>91</sup> Nguyen, 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms.'

<sup>92</sup> Nguyen, 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms.'

<sup>93</sup> Aldridge and Lambre, *Inside the WNBA CBA, Stern Memorial and The Forgotten, MLK Day.*

<sup>94</sup> Mary Margaret Fonow and Suzane Franzway. 'Women's Activism in U.S. Labor Unions.' In *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism*, edited by Holly J. McCammon, Verta Taylor, Jo Reger and Rachel L. Einwohner, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 737.

WNBA players have children at all ages and return to play, or they may have female partners who have a child, and both require support and maternity policies in place. The NBA CBA does not mention childcare or have any official paternity leave policy, highlighting the folly of relying on it in constructing a CBA for women, as well as the fact that men are not expected to be the primary caregiver to their children and their role as fathers is not even considered as a labour issue.<sup>95</sup> However Jackson, who is married to an ex-NBA player, pointed out that even 15 years ago in the NBA they had game-day childcare facilities, which some WNBA teams had but not others. Jackson thus wanted to make sure the new CBA provided consistency across the league.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Commissioner Cathy Engelbert had championed progressive maternity policies in her previous role as CEO at Deloitte, and both Jackson and Layshia Clarendon highlighted Engelbert's insistence that players would not be subject to a 'mummy-tax.'<sup>97</sup>

Diggins-Smith communicated with Ogwumike throughout the negotiating process to ensure that the needs of WNBA mothers were met, saying afterwards 'closed mouths don't get fed so I know I had to come out and speak on things that I needed,' and this resulted in a new CBA that provided the most comprehensive maternity leave policy of any US women's sport.<sup>98</sup> Players are now guaranteed their full salary while on maternity leave, as well as \$5,000 annually for childcare. Those with children under age thirteen are provided with a two-bedroom apartment, preventing a situation like Bria Hartley's from happening again.<sup>99</sup> Players also have access to up to \$60,000 for family planning costs, such as IVF, fertility treatment, adoption, or freezing eggs.<sup>100</sup> This has significance on two fronts. Firstly, it is a recognition that a WNBA career often overlaps

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<sup>95</sup> National Basketball Association and National Basketball Players Association. *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, 19 January 2017, accessed 19 October 2020, <<https://cosmic-s3.imgix.net/3c7a0a50-8e11-11e9-875d-3d44e94ae33f-2017-NBA-NBPA-Collective-Bargaining-Agreement.pdf>>

<sup>96</sup> Aldridge and Lambre, *Inside the WNBA CBA, Stern Memorial and The Forgotten, MLK Day*.

<sup>97</sup> Aldridge and Lambre, *Inside the WNBA CBA, Stern Memorial and The Forgotten, MLK Day*.

Nguyen, 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms,'

<sup>98</sup> Britni de la Cretaz. 'WNBA Players Just Got Better Maternity Benefits Than Most Women in America,' *InStyle*, 16 January 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.instyle.com/news/wnba-cba-salary-increase-maternity-leave-benefits>>

<sup>99</sup> Nguyen, 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms.'

<sup>100</sup> Nguyen, 'How the WNBA Improved Conditions for Players, Particularly the Moms.'



with the time most women have children, forcing WNBA players into a difficult decision about when it is practical to have children. Breanna Stewart and Sue Bird both talked publicly about their decision to freeze their eggs, and the possible benefits this has for their career, with Stewart saying, 'I was like, 'all right, let me do something that looks toward my future.' Now I don't have to worry about playing year-round or going overseas, getting lost in my work.'<sup>101</sup> Secondly, as Layshia Clarendon argued, it was essential that the maternity leave policy included the needs of queer women whose 'means of building a family include methods like IVF, IUI, or adoption, many of which aren't covered under typical health insurance policies.'<sup>102</sup> WNBA players followed a long tradition of female labour activists who have worked to frame 'women's rights as worker's rights or worker's rights as women's rights,'<sup>103</sup> and were able to secure a maternity leave policy beyond what many women in America have, while further expanding the definition of worker's rights to include queer women. The recent visibility of women's sport unions, including hockey and soccer, has caused some to suggest that they have become leaders in the United States labour movements.<sup>104</sup> WNBA players reflected this framing in their push for maternity league benefits, as Sue Bird argued, '[W]ho better than a league of women to be the ones pioneering all these different types of things, cause you don't really see them in a lot of jobs. Who better to be on the front lines of this than a league full of women.'<sup>105</sup> While the WNBPA can certainly be seen as leaders, their fights also build on historical work by other female dominated unions, such as the flight attendant unions, who fought to upend the

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<sup>101</sup> Scott Gleeson. 'WNBA Stars Sue Bird, Breanna Stewart Open Up About Freezing Their Eggs,' *USA Today*, 23 December 2019, accessed 19 October, <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/wnba/2019/12/23/sue-bird-breanna-stewart-wnba-freezing-eggs/2733378001/>>

<sup>102</sup> de la Cretaz, 'WNBA Players Just Got Better Maternity Benefits Than Most Women in America.'

<sup>103</sup> Silke Roth. 'Dealing with Diversity: The Coalition of Labor Union Women.' In *Identity Work in Social Movements*, edited by Jo Reger, Rachel L. Einwohner and Daniel J. Myers, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 225.

<sup>104</sup> Dave Zirin. 'Women Athletes Lead US Labor Movement as Football, Hockey Players Score Big Wins,' *Green Left*, 10 April 2017, accessed 14 October 2020, <<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/women-athletes-lead-us-labour-movement-football-hockey-players-score-big-wins>>

<sup>105</sup> Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

conception of the male as bread-winner and pushed for recognition and resources for 'people who live beyond the boundary of the traditional family.'<sup>106</sup>

The new maternity leave policy may be relatively generous, however there was not comparable improvements in the health insurance and dental plan, which remained similar to the 2014 CBA and like that of an average professional job.<sup>107</sup> Players are covered from training camp to when their contract expires, and this coverage is year-round. If a player is waived however, medical benefits only last for seven days after the contract is terminated.<sup>108</sup> This is another level of stress for fringe players struggling to make a roster, who can be cut at any time; like most people in the U.S., WNBA players' health insurance is dependent on their continued employment. Additionally, there is no mechanism to provide healthcare post-retirement. The NBA has a Health and Welfare Benefit Plan, which allows for reimbursement for healthcare costs for both current and retired athletes, yet the WNBA has no such program and even current players must pay deductibles and co-pays out-of-pocket.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, the NBA has a pension plan for retired athletes, whereas the WNBA maintains a Retirement and 401(k) Savings Plan to provide for players post-retirement.<sup>110</sup> WNBA players do have access to team doctors and trainers, and the CBA includes other new health services, including access to nutritional support, women's health experts, and mental health services.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ryan Patrick Murphy. *Deregulating Desire: Flight Attendant Activism, Family Politics, and Workplace Justice*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

<sup>108</sup> Women's National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Players' Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 89.

<sup>109</sup> National Basketball Association and National Basketball Players Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 83.

Women's National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Players' Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 89.

<sup>110</sup> National Basketball Association and National Basketball Players Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 67

Women's National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Players' Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 92.

<sup>111</sup> Spruill, "'The Time is Now For Women's Sports": Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA's Watershed CBA Deal.'

Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

Professionalism is not solely reliant on the players, but also on the arena experience, and the way in which it is constructed to facilitate a professional sporting spectacle. As Lisa Leslie's initial shock indicates, initially WNBA teams played in the same arenas as NBA teams, and this included all the trappings of American professional sport, including music, lights, a "Jumbotron" and half-time entertainment.<sup>112</sup> Unlike other American women's sporting leagues—and the now defunct, competing ABL—the WNBA was connected to a successful and established male sports league, the NBA, enabling it to achieve a level of prominence and professionalism right from the beginning. As such, the arena experience was constructed to mirror that of modern, male-dominated professional sport, relying heavily on the American public's sensory understanding of what a professional sporting event is supposed to look, feel, and sound like, drawing on this capacity to build emotion and excitement in the fans. Attending a sporting event always involves much more than just the sport itself, as the 'sensory geographies' that attendees experience implicate a wide range of feelings and emotions.<sup>113</sup> As Thrift argues, this affective response is not random, but is designed into the experience through design, lighting, music, video, and non-sporting entertainment.<sup>114</sup> Each of these components has an affective force on fans, creating a 'common sensory experience,'<sup>115</sup> with the fans in turn exerting their own powerful affects, including on the actual performance of the players, thus creating a dynamic multiplicity that forms the assemblage of the professional sporting game. Though all teams no longer play in NBA arenas they continue to utilise these same techniques to produce a professional and exciting experience.

The 'arena experience' is essential to understand, because as Fox and Alldred describe, sporting events 'are emotionally charged events that can have consequences beyond the sports world, drawing people into collective reactions to victory or defeat of elation or despondency.'<sup>116</sup> This spectacle is best understood as an assemblage that develops

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<sup>112</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 87.

<sup>113</sup> John Bale and Patricia Vertinsky. 'Introduction.' In *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, edited by Patricia Vertinsky and John Bale, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Nigel Thrift. 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect.' *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86, no. 1 (2004), p. 68.

<sup>115</sup> Chris Gaffney and John Bale. 'Sensing the Stadium.' In *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, edited by Patricia Vertinsky and John Bale, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 34.

<sup>116</sup> Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*, p. 125.

through the relationship of various material and discursive elements—the players, the fans, the stadium, the entertainment, the jumbotron, the training facilities, discourses of gender and sport—and their affective capacities. For example, at all games, the lead-up to tip-off began around ten minutes before the actual game, as the stadium dims its lights, a sign to all that something is about to happen. A video plays on the jumbotron, where players alternate between performing dribble moves and ‘mugging’ for the camera, with quick cuts increasing rapidly as loud, pump-up music blares. At the Ravens game, a mascot ran onto the court, followed by a large Ravens flag, the players running out of the locker room in its midst. A dance crew came out waving. The mood in the arena perceptively changed throughout this prelude, as fans stopped talking and stood up and cheered, their focus solely on their team and the spectacle on the court. This was a clear sign that the game was about to begin; the coaches had switched from their pre-game workout clothing into professional workwear, the players were doing their last warm-ups. Then, it was time for a performance of the National Anthem, as both teams and the crowd stood at attention, with cheers emanating from the crowd when the performer hit the high notes of the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Finally, the ‘starting-five’ of each team were introduced. The away team was announced in a bored, deadpan voice, and their names were usually accompanied by the loud boos from the crowd, with exceptions for players that had previously played for a local college team. In contrast, the home team was introduced to raucous music and applause, with the most popular player saved for last. This performance not only hyped up the crowd, but the players obviously drew on this sensory routine to build their own readiness; in one instance, the team formed a circle around one player, swaying around her while she jumped with increasing speed, boosting and pumping up her team just before the game began. This routine is repeated, game after game, in basketball stadiums across America, a routine the crowd knows how to respond to, and their cheers and boos help to create the feeling of excitement circulating the arena. As Benjamin Lisle suggests, everyone attending ‘live stadium spaces [are] embodied analysts, collecting memories and experiences of the place that become layered atop one another. Stadiums are thus material, representational and live.’<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Benjamin D. Lisle. *Modern Coliseum: Stadiums and American Culture*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 8.

The introduction to the game clearly shows how non-sporting forms of entertainment help produce enthusiasm and sensory stimulation, often even more so than the game itself, and this continues throughout the event.<sup>118</sup> Basketball is a game with many breaks, which makes it a desirable product for television as it has ample space for commercials. The WNBA rules are specifically designed with television in mind, with mandatory timeouts each quarter regardless of whether the teams need one, emphasising that the WNBA game is a commodified space.<sup>119</sup> To ensure fans in the arena remain invested, teams fill timeouts, quarter-breaks and half-time with other kinds of spectacles—games, music, dancers, and cheerleaders—to ensure the crowd is constantly invested. Sport, after all, can be seen as a highly constructed, designed, and manipulated form of constant consumption.<sup>120</sup> One WNBA game I attended had a baby race, in which babies competed to see who could crawl from parent to parent the fastest; another had a dog show. While some in the crowd left to use the amenities or browse the food options, these events generated enough interest to maintain the buzz of the crowd, producing the same feelings of competitiveness as basketball and delight at the cuteness of the babies and dogs. In contrast, feelings of pride and compassion accompanied teams honouring military members, teachers, and Special Olympics team members; Dallas would play the song *God Bless the USA*, the lyrics ‘proud to be an American’ complementing an ovation for military members.

The quality of these events varied from team to team; the Dallas Wings, a new team playing in a college arena, relied on these more traditional — and cheaper — amusements, whereas the Las Vegas Aces used the financial clout of then-owners MGM resorts to make the All-Star game a highly professional, thrilling event. Of course, the All-Star game is generally a more entertainment focused event, however the monetary influence of ownership was clear. Members of the *Blue Man Group* performed pre-game, while the player introductions were accompanied by *Cirque de Soleil* performers. Billboards advertising the All-Star game were in prime positions down the Las Vegas Strip, and Mandalay Bay Casino, which contains the Aces home arena, was dominated by

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<sup>118</sup> Lisle, *Modern Coliseum: Stadiums and American Culture*, p. 233.

<sup>119</sup> WNBA. ‘Rule No. 5: Scoring and Timing, *WNBA.com*, 2017, accessed 30 November 2020, <[https://www.wnba.com/archive/wnba/analysis/rule\\_five.html](https://www.wnba.com/archive/wnba/analysis/rule_five.html)>

<sup>120</sup> Benjamin Flowers. ‘Stadiums: Architecture and the Iconography of the Beautiful Game.’ *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 8/9 (2011), p. 1182.

WNBA advertising and merchandise. This helped create a sense of electricity and esteem amongst WNBA fans, and as the All-Star game tends to attract dedicated fans, the buzz was heightened. What tied all these arena experiences together was that invariably the event the crowd got most excited for was the t-shirt toss. A dance crew would throw free t-shirts into the crowd, in the bigger stadiums even using a t-shirt cannon or slingshots. Nearly the entire crowd stood and screamed, desperately trying to get the dance team to throw a t-shirt in their direction. One crowd member even complained post-game that the t-shirts were never thrown to her section. The material t-shirt, despite usually being of dubious quality, evidently has a high affective capacity, particularly as it is free. As a souvenir of the game, the importance of the t-shirt is both symbolic and tangible, creating a direct physical link between fan and game. This further demonstrates the importance and vitality of non-human things, as the free t-shirt produces intense emotions in the crowd.<sup>121</sup> It becomes a *de facto* sign of collective participation in the game by the fans themselves, a token that can signify investment in their team. Creating a sensory or affective response from the crowd, then, can be viewed as 'a form of landscape engineering that is gradually pulling itself into existence, producing new forms of power as it goes.'<sup>122</sup> Each of these entertainment events has their own force and power, producing energy in the arena, a rhizomic flow of affects bouncing off one another to form the assemblage of an exciting and electric professional game.

Perhaps the object with the greatest capacity to influence the crowd is the Jumbotron, the giant screen above the court displaying replays of game play, imploring the crowd to cheer louder, and during breaks filming audience members, encouraging them to dance or pose. As Benjamin Lisle suggests, the Jumbotron was one of the first major technological advancements that turned the post-war stadium into a consumption and entertainment-oriented environment in which there was 'never a dull moment.'<sup>123</sup> During timeout breaks, there are often games on the Jumbotron, such as trivia or pre-programmed electronic races in which the winning section of the arena gets a prize, at the Ravens game, some chocolate milk. The Jumbotron is also a useful advertising tool,

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<sup>121</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,' p. 68.

<sup>123</sup> Lisle, *Modern Coliseum: Stadiums and American Culture*, p. 6.

combining these games with adverts for various sponsors, thus the professionalisation of the WNBA is intertwined with the entertainment potential of the arena. The Jumbotron not only entertains the crowd during breaks, but also prompts them to react in certain ways—when it says to ‘make some noise,’ the crowd obliges with gusto. The power of the Jumbotron is not fixed, but rather is ‘*entirely contingent upon how it assembles with other relations*,’<sup>124</sup> particularly the audience, but also the other entertainment and the sport itself. This is most apparent with the ‘dance cam,’ in which crowd members are shown on the Jumbotron and implored to dance. The camera operator mostly showcases people with some skill and enthusiasm, utilising close-up shots rather than broad shots of the crowd for the greatest affective potential.<sup>125</sup> When the camera landed on an audience member they tended to react with elation and increased the intensity of their dancing; the affective power of being on the Jumbotron produces higher levels of enthusiasm, and in turn creates its own affective capacities as other crowd members react to the dancing. Thus, we see the creative potential of the ‘dance cam’ assemblage.

Different crowds respond in different ways—two of the games I attended were “Kid’s Day” games, as the arena was packed full of children from local summer camps, and as Ravens assistant coach Holly pointed out ‘it goes to another level with that, the screaming of the kids.’ The entertainment options in the arena leaned into that, replacing the dance cam with a “floss cam,” a popular dance from the video game *Fortnite*, and the exhilaration the crowd felt as various children successfully completed this dance was palpable. In particular, the children were animated when the song *Old Town Road* was played, singing along loudly and dancing. This demonstrates the affective power of music, especially in a communal setting. Lauren Jackson supported this when describing the impressive atmosphere of the Seattle Storm:

Their theme song for home games was AC/DC’s ‘Thunderstruck,’ which was perfect for an Aussie like me. They really played up that fact. Every time I landed a shot in a home game there’d be the sound of a didgeridoo playing, and

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<sup>124</sup> Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*, p. 90.

<sup>125</sup> Thrift, ‘Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,’ p. 65.

when I was warming up they'd always put on an Australian song for me.<sup>126</sup>

As Braidotti highlights, 'music increases the intensity of becoming; it is about crossing as many thresholds of intensity as the subject can sustain.'<sup>127</sup> The Kid's Day experience reveals the importance the WNBA places on appealing to families, and indeed WNBA arenas in general tend to be more "family-friendly" than NBA arenas; for example at Minnesota Lynx games the cheerleaders wear non-skimpy outfits, in direct contrast to NBA cheerleaders, and host a "Faith and Family Night" each season to appeal to a Christian fan base.<sup>128</sup> Additionally, it underscores Lisle's argument that the arena has become a place of consumption—the majority of the children did not seem particularly invested in the game, yet that did not stop them from being the loudest crowd I experienced.<sup>129</sup>

Another important part of the arena assemblage is the deliberate construction of a sense of history, as fans demonstrate 'through routine and repetitive action that one belongs to a certain place, in a certain time.'<sup>130</sup> The Ravens, as one of the original WNBA teams, imbue the fan experience with an understanding of its past, with traditional call-and-responses, events, and games that seemed ingrained and instinctive but to an outsider were somewhat confusing. For instance, during free-throws the announcer would say 'shooting-two,' and the crowd would reply 'making-two' for their team, or 'missing-two' for the opponent. This is a tradition unique to the Ravens, and it took me two games to understand what they were saying, helping infuse an appreciation of history into fan reactions. Similarly, one timeout game involved a 'train,' in which a large portion of the crowd came onto the court and formed a conga line. While much of the production of a WNBA game mirrored that of other professional basketball, this was very unique, as in NBA games fan access to the court is heavily controlled. This perhaps

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<sup>126</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 87.

<sup>127</sup> Rosi Braidotti. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 157.

<sup>128</sup> Tiffany Muller. "'Lesbian Community" in Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) Spaces.' *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, no. 1 (2007), p. 17.

<sup>129</sup> Benjamin D. Lisle. "'We Make a Big Effort to Bring out the Ladies": Visual Representations of Women in the Modern American Stadium.' *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 8-9 (2011), p. 1204.

<sup>130</sup> N.K. Nielson, 'The Stadium in the City,' (1995) quoted in Gaffney and Bale, 'Sensing the Stadium,' p. 35.



indicates the attempt to present Ravens games as a community affair, in which fans are an integral part, though it also gave the impression of being slightly less professional. Conversely, the Dallas Wings, a club that has only been in Dallas since 2016, has less of these historical traditions, and compensates for that by embracing popular culture. Actors dressed as Marvel superheroes and Disney characters wander the stadium entertaining fans, and after a missed free throw by the opposing team, they played the 'Nelson laugh' from *The Simpsons*. Rather than the fan-oriented free-throw traditions of the Ravens, Dallas draws on pre-existing cultural knowledge to create an affective response. However, Dallas fans do employ their own tactics of dress and behaviour that incorporate features of the 'carnavalesque'<sup>131</sup>; one fan, for instance, was wearing a very elaborate bird costume. Through different methods, Dallas and the Ravens orchestrate the stream of noise and feelings that circulate the arena.

The various arenas and their production values highlight the way material artifacts produce affects that influence fans, who in turn have their own affective capacities, a feedback loop in which each part of the assemblage is integral and inseparable. Additionally, an important part of the arena assemblage is the built environment, that is, the actual material arena, as sporting spaces 'diagrammatically organize corporeal and affective forces.'<sup>132</sup> The 'sport place' is instrumental in shaping the game, influencing the emotions of the audience, the bodies of the players, and popular understandings of the position of the sport in American society.<sup>133</sup> As Markula suggests, the stadium emerged as a technique to exhibit sport, facilitating the historical formation of professional sport and placing a value on spectatorship.<sup>134</sup> The bowl form of basketball arenas encourages expressions of fandom and contributes to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the game, yet this sense of camaraderie is greatly helped or hindered depending on the size and

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<sup>131</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 46.

<sup>132</sup> Alan Latham and Derek P. McCormack. 'Moving Cities: Rethinking the Materialities of Urban Geographies.' *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 6 (2004), p. 708.

<sup>133</sup> Vertinsky, 'Locating a "Sense of Place": Space, Place and Gender in the Gymnasium,' p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> Pirkko Markula. 'Contextualizing the Material, Moving Body.' In *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies*, edited by Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe and David L. Andrews, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 58.

construction of the arena.<sup>135</sup> While urban space can be designed in order to produce particular emotions or affects, WNBA teams generally play in arenas whose primary purpose is not WNBA games, rather NBA or college games, and as such, they are not always ideal in producing an optimum experience.<sup>136</sup> The Ravens share an owner with the local NBA team and therefore play in the same arena. The arena holds 18,000 people, nearly 8,000 more seats than the average attendance of a Ravens game. In contrast, the Dallas Wings play at College Park Center, the arena designed for the athletic department of The University of Texas, Arlington, which holds just 7,000 fans. Despite the fact that the Ravens average many more fans than Dallas, the size of the Dallas arena makes it feel fuller and louder, as audience members emotions play off one another helped by their physical proximity. Empty seats dot the Ravens crowd, and as an audience member you feel these gaps, however, as Holly pointed out 'I always feel like if you come to [play] the Ravens, you're always gonna play in front of a great crowd.' While the size of the stadium can facilitate the noise of the crowd, the reverse is also true, as more crowd noise makes the stadium feel fuller.<sup>137</sup> The Ravens are a successful franchise with quite a large and raucous fanbase, and as Holly told me, 'our players go to other arenas and they're like what? This is all they get?' In particular, she singled out Staples Center, the home of the Los Angeles Lakers and Sparks as being 'way too big...so it doesn't feel like a lot of people are there.' She suggested that the Connecticut Sun arena is a 'perfect size arena,' as an 8-10,000 seat arena 'would be packed, and then it'd be kind of cool if someone couldn't get a ticket into the game.'

Gaffney and Bale argue that 'seeing thousands of other people gathered together in the same place at the same time to partake in a common experience gives one a sense of extended valuation.'<sup>138</sup> A crowd that sees itself as bustling and vibrant will thus react to further that feeling. Conversely, an arena that overwhelms and swallows the crowd has a cavernous feel, limiting the ability of affective flows to circulate, as cheers cascade into emptiness, making it seem as if a WNBA game is not a desirable or fun place to be. The players can feel the drop off in intensity in these crowds; as WNBA player Maya Moore

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<sup>135</sup> Flowers, 'Stadiums: Architecture and the Iconography of the Beautiful Game,' p. 1182.

<sup>136</sup> Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,' p. 68.

<sup>137</sup> Gaffney and Bale, 'Sensing the Stadium,' p. 30.

<sup>138</sup> Gaffney and Bale, 'Sensing the Stadium,' p. 28.

elucidates, you can ‘feel the excitement’ when you know people are watching you, and in coming to the empty arenas of some WNBA teams, ‘the ball of momentum is deflating before [her] eyes.’<sup>139</sup> Additionally, the public’s knowledge of WNBA crowds is mediated by discourse and technology, such as television.<sup>140</sup> While the games I attended had vibrant and exciting crowds, they were scattered around the arena, and the parts of the crowd that are visible on television were often the most vacant, which to audiences at home furthers the notion that the WNBA is unpopular and boring. Some teams, such as the Seattle Storm, will put drapes over the upper level of the arena to force the audience to crowd into the lower bowl. This not only helps generate and sustain the energy of the crowd, but also communicates passion to the audience at home, thus the affective forces escape the arena and produce excitement among television watching fans. Teams do attempt to ‘work to get some good shots,’ according to the Atlanta Dream’s head of game operations Brennan Galloway, yet it is difficult to ‘put on an N.B.A.-style show in an N.B.A.-size arena without N.B.A.-scale resources.’<sup>141</sup> Technology, the built environment, and the material object of the drapes are all complicit in shaping the rhizomic flow of affects around the arena, which is felt by the crowd, players, and fans at home.

If many WNBA players recognise the benefits of playing in smaller stadiums, why have more teams not switched to playing in smaller stadiums? Some teams have recently made the switch; in 2021 the Atlanta Dream started playing in Gateway Center Arena, which seats 5,000, while the Washington Mystics have a new arena that holds 4,200.<sup>142</sup> However, most of the time WNBA teams have to make do with what is available and are often displaced from their home arena, even during playoff games.<sup>143</sup> Sometimes smaller arenas, like the Liberty’s Westchester County Center, do not have the facilities

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<sup>139</sup> Moore, ‘(in)Visibility.’

<sup>140</sup> Susan Hekman. ‘Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism.’ In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 109.

<sup>141</sup> Tingley, ‘The W.N.B.A Is Putting on Some of the Best Pro Basketball in America: Why Aren’t More Fans Showing Up?’

<sup>142</sup> Feinberg, ‘Some WNBA Teams Downsizing Arenas to Help Bottom Line.’

<sup>143</sup> Arash Markazi. ‘The Sparks Shouldn’t Be Forced Out of Staples Center For The WNBA Playoffs,’ *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 2019, accessed 21 October 2020, <<https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2019-09-21/arash-markazi-column>>

that a professional team would expect or are in an inconvenient location for fans.<sup>144</sup> WNBA teams and owners often do not have the financial wherewithal or political capital to invest in new arenas or upgrades. The Seattle Storm play in KeyArena, which until recently had not been upgraded since 1995, and the refusal to grant public funding for a new arena was one of the main impetuses for the move of the NBA team to Oklahoma City.<sup>145</sup> While the Storm are a successful franchise, with revenue reaching \$9 million in 2017-18, this was not enough to fund the arena renovations, let alone a new arena better sized for WNBA action.<sup>146</sup> The Seattle Arena is now being remodelled with funds from Oak View Group, in an attempt to make the arena hospitable for an NHL team and an NBA team, though it is expected that the Storm will continue to play there.<sup>147</sup> This highlights that often both corporations and local governments are willing to make infrastructure investments for men's teams, yet are unwilling to subsidise women's sports in the same way. Major League Soccer (MLS), which started the year before the WNBA, mostly plays in stadiums built specifically for them, often with tax-payer funding; between 2005 and 2018 MLS teams have received \$738 million in taxpayer subsidies.<sup>148</sup> Interestingly, the MLS gets similar television ratings to the WNBA, but is much more successful in attendance at games, which further suggests that investing in the arena experience is essential.<sup>149</sup> WNBA arenas only seem to get similar investment if

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<sup>144</sup> Feinberg, 'Some WNBA Teams Downsizing Arenas to Help Bottom Line.'

<sup>145</sup> Casey Mabbott. 'Unsolved Mysteries—The Seattle SuperSonics,' *NBC Sports*, 24 March 2018, accessed 12 October 2020, <<https://www.nbcsports.com/northwest/nba/unsolved-mysteries-seattle-supersonics>>

<sup>146</sup> Alex Coffey. 'Shelter For the Storm: Seattle's Women's Hoops Will Finally Have a Suitable Home, But Not Without Sacrifice,' *Crosscut*, 25 October 2018, accessed 28 April 2020, <[https://crosscut.com/2019/10/shelter-storm-seattle-womens-hoops-will-finally-have-suitable-home-not-without-sacrifice?utm\\_content=buffer7b1ab&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=crosscut-twitter&utm\\_campaign=buffer](https://crosscut.com/2019/10/shelter-storm-seattle-womens-hoops-will-finally-have-suitable-home-not-without-sacrifice?utm_content=buffer7b1ab&utm_medium=social&utm_source=crosscut-twitter&utm_campaign=buffer)>

<sup>147</sup> Geoff Baker. 'NHL? NBA? A Look At What Could Happen Now That Seattle Approved KeyArena Renovation,' *The Seattle Times*, 4 December 2017, accessed 12 October 2020, <<https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/nba/keyarena-mou-approved-by-seattle-city-council-will-nhl-announcement-soon-follow/>>

<sup>148</sup> Peter Keating. 'Analysis: What Equal Pay in Sports Really Means, as the Fight Goes on for U.S. Women's Soccer,' *ESPN.com*, 14 May 2020, accessed 12 October 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/espnw/story/\\_/id/28971949/analysis-equal-pay-sports-really-means-fight-goes-us-women-soccer](https://www.espn.com/espnw/story/_/id/28971949/analysis-equal-pay-sports-really-means-fight-goes-us-women-soccer)>

<sup>149</sup> Graham Ruthven. 'MLS is Pulling Fans Into Stadiums, But TV Audiences Remain Underwhelming,' *The Guardian*, 25 August 2020, accessed 12 October 2020,

they double as a facility for men's teams. Though the Washington Mystics new arena was mostly funded by the city, it is also home to the Washington Wizards practice facility and the Washington G-League team, which seemed to be the primary impetus.<sup>150</sup> This again reveals one of the benefits of being attached to an NBA team that has more political capital, as the Mystics now have a great 'home court advantage,' with 'fans on top of everybody,' according to coach Mike Thibault.<sup>151</sup> Supporting this, ex-Mystics player Kristi Toliver (2009-present) said that when playing in the new building, 'we feel like professional athletes here. We have the best facilities in the league.'<sup>152</sup>

The built environment evidently influences the crowd, impacting on the rhizomatic flow of affect, yet it can also affect the bodily capacity of its players. In terms of the arena, Ravens player Natalie described the difficulty she faced in a game in Connecticut, as 'it was freezing, it was so cold on the bench.' As a role player, Natalie plays sporadically but must be ready to play at any time, however staying warm on the bench is difficult and hence limits her ability to perform effectively. In contrast, Lauren Jackson highlighted the difference between playing in the professional WNBA and playing 'a stinking hot game in Penrith [Australia] in 40 degree Celsius heat, which was nothing like playing in an airconditioned 20 000 seat stadium in the US.'<sup>153</sup> Both Natalie and Jackson demonstrate how our embodied experiences are enmeshed with the built environment and temperature.<sup>154</sup>

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<<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/aug/25/mls-tv-audiences-viewing-figures>>

<sup>150</sup> Ashley Dejean. 'Plan For Wizards and Mystics Facility Has Some in Southeast D.C. Playing Defense,' *WAMU*, 16 May 2016, accessed 12 October 2020,

<[https://wamu.org/story/16/05/16/plan\\_for\\_pro\\_basketball\\_facility\\_has\\_some\\_in\\_southeast\\_dc\\_playing\\_defense/](https://wamu.org/story/16/05/16/plan_for_pro_basketball_facility_has_some_in_southeast_dc_playing_defense/)>

<sup>151</sup> Christine Brennan. 'Opinion: Game 1 Win in WNBA Finals for Mystics, Elena Delle Donne Makes Larger Statement,' *USA Today*, 29 September 2019, accessed 29 April 2020,

<<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/columnist/brennan/2019/09/29/wnba-finals-elena-delle-donne-leads-mystics-past-connecticut-sun/3814681002/>>

<sup>152</sup> Brennan, 'Opinion: Game 1 Win in WNBA Finals for Mystics, Elena Delle Donne Makes Larger Statement.'

<sup>153</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 113.

<sup>154</sup> Fullagar, 'Post-Qualitative Inquiry and the New Materialist Turn: Implications for Sport, Health and Physical Culture Research,' p. 253.

As intensities of feeling circulate, it is important to ask, as Fox (2013: 2) suggests, ‘*what did this emotion do?*’<sup>155</sup> How does the affect flows within the arena assemblage produce capacities in WNBA players, helping or hindering their ability to perform? It is apparent that WNBA players feed off the energy of the crowd and doing so gives them a level of embodied pleasure. This is particularly true for more difficult physical feats, such as the dunking of Brittney Griner discussed in Chapter Five. Dunking can be seen as a form of creativity, ‘an affective flow between assembled bodies, things and ideas,’<sup>156</sup> in which the reaction of the crowd, the bodily pleasure and creative desire, and the discursive assumption that women cannot dunk, all contribute. Certainly, dunking is not the only physical action in which the affective power of the crowd is implicated. Arike Ogunbowale performing an exciting dribble move in Dallas caused the crowd to be impressed and in turn encouraged her to repeat the action. In this way, the body is ‘a transformer and a relay point for the flow of energies: a surface of intensities.’<sup>157</sup> The performances of players like Ogunbowale highlight how the crowd influences the players’ physicality, and in turn the players generate affects that cause a reaction in the crowd. Indeed, ‘as matter within assemblages is affected it may acquire new capacities to itself affect; this goes on repeatedly within assemblages, in a ‘rhizomic, branching, reversing, coalescing and rupturing flow.’<sup>158</sup> The flow of affects between the crowd, the arena and the players are best viewed in this rhizomic manner, as each is inextricably entangled with the others.

Furthermore, it is essential to look at the game of basketball itself as having affective potential.<sup>159</sup> The crowd was loud in responding to the game, yelling about fouls the opposing team was committing, encouraging players to shoot as the shot clock wound down, and hurling abuse and boos at the referees. The athleticism of WNBA players is extremely obvious in person, as the sound of bodies smashing together is heightened in the arena, producing the affective force that encourages the crowd in its anger and

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<sup>155</sup> Nick J. Fox. ‘Flows of Affect in the Olympic Stadium.’ *Sociological Research Online* 18, no. 2 (2013), p. 2.

<sup>156</sup> Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*, p. 86.

<sup>157</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, p. 21.

<sup>158</sup> Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*, p. 24.

<sup>159</sup> Latham and McCormack, ‘Moving Cities: Rethinking the Materialities of Urban Geographies,’ p. 708.

disgust at a lack of foul calls. Furthermore, although I was attending the game supposedly as a neutral participant observer, such was the overall effect that I too became swept up in the emotion of the crowd, somewhat involuntarily yelling along with them, or wincing in pain alongside the players. In fact, Fox and Alldred argue that the body of the researcher is enmeshed with other elements and affective forces, what they label the 'research-assemblage.'<sup>160</sup> The researcher is implicated in the rhizomatic flows that circulate the arena. This was apparent after Erica Wheeler (2015-present) won the All-Star game Most Valuable Player award, despite being initially undrafted in the league. Her tears of happiness, projected onto the Jumbotron and vocalised over the sound system, caused me to also cry. Here, the affective power of her tears and emotions, combined with the production values of the arena and my own knowledge of her history, was entangled with my tears and the happiness of the crowd around me, and these flows of emotionality and affect generate the assemblage of the All-Star game post-show. Surrounded by other fans who also cared greatly about the WNBA and its players, it was clear to me the intense passion that the WNBA can spark in its fans, which runs counter to the mainstream framing of the WNBA as unpopular and uninteresting.

These complicated issues of professionalism for WNBA players extend beyond the WNBA, as part of being a professional women's basketball player often means playing in overseas leagues in Europe, Russia, China, Australia, and South Korea during the offseason to supplement their income. While teams especially in Russia or China often pay significantly more than WNBA teams, this is extremely tough on players who never get a chance to rest. Williams in her rookie diary fretted, 'this is really never going to end. Not only are we trying to play 40 games in three months, but I possibly have a nine-month season when this ends.'<sup>161</sup> This requires a level of dedication and professionalism because, as Candace Wiggins pointed out, 'you rarely see your family, and if you don't take impeccable care of your body, you're done.'<sup>162</sup> Ravens player Taylor echoed this, saying, 'we have to leave for eight months out of the year. Some of

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<sup>160</sup> Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*, p. 152

<sup>161</sup> Williams and Hurd, 'Focused on "Getting Through the Wall."'

<sup>162</sup> Candace Wiggins. 'Into the Sunset,' *The Players' Tribune*, 23 March 2016, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/candice-wiggins-liberty-wnba-retirement>>

my teammates, you know, they leave their kids with their nannies or with their significant others.' Playing overseas is a big sacrifice that is necessary for most WNBA players to make enough money to support themselves.

The upside of this is that European teams are often owned by rich benefactors who view the team as a status symbol, hence they can pay larger salaries and offer benefits such as private planes and fancy accommodation. Lauren Jackson spent a significant portion of her autobiography discussing her level of discomfort at playing for a Russian oligarch, Shabtai von Kalmanovich, a businessman and ex-KGB spy:

Shabtai could certainly be charming. Shabs, we called him, or Poppa. He wanted me to call him Poppa, he treated me like he would have treated his daughter, but I wasn't. There was always that level of expectation because I was paid, all of us were paid well to play, we were his... after the first contract, there was no further negotiation about what he came to us with - but the money was so good I didn't question it.<sup>163</sup>

Jackson and her American teammates Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi were provided with a big house, taken to fancy restaurants and shops, and given private concerts, a level of 'obscene wealth' beyond what Jackson had seen. Ultimately though, she was scared of Kalmanovich and felt as if she was owned by him.<sup>164</sup>

While the bigger teams can offer these perks, other teams are much less professional and do not have the facilities that the WNBA has, according to Taylor, 'depending on what country you go to.' Not all these leagues are fully professional, and sometimes while WNBA players are given big contracts, their teammates may only be semi-professional. Australian Ravens player Isabella singled out the Australian WNBL, where WNBA players often play, as a league in which players often have to work other jobs, and thus 'the overall mentality of the players is different,' compared to the WNBA. More concerningly, Isabella highlighted that European teams often did not have the best medical treatment options available, saying:

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<sup>163</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, pp. 162-164.

<sup>164</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 162.



If you get hurt in Europe, they just like spray you with this spray ice stuff. Like thanks, I feel better now. I actually needed treatment...and it's eight months, so it's a long season and then their courts are, it's usually cement under, so the courts are bad. So normally you are prone to more injuries, plus it's a longer season and then you also don't have good medical support.

Indeed, the issue of WNBA players getting injured overseas has come to a head in recent years, particularly after 2018 MVP Breanna Stewart tore her Achilles tendon while playing in Russia, causing her to miss the 2019 WNBA season.<sup>165</sup> While her Russian team, Dynamo Kursk, paid for her surgery, Stewart paid \$30,000 of her own money for rehab.<sup>166</sup> The financial implications of being torn between two teams are significant, and are particularly difficult due to the insecurity of overseas contracts, as players can easily get cut. This is exemplified by Kayla McBride, who, when playing in Hungary in 2015, broke her foot, and feared telling the team in case she got cut. McBride rushed her rehab to get back for the WNBA season and later broke her foot again.<sup>167</sup> In addition to these acute injuries, the wear and tear of playing all year round is sizable. There is no time to rest or to use the offseason to develop new skills, and this hinders the development of players. Lauren Jackson credits her 2010 MVP season with not playing overseas the previous year, due to a broken back and the death of Shabtai von Kalmanovich.<sup>168</sup> She recently remarked 'I had to play a million games a year in different countries to be paid like a professional athlete and that's where my body broke down.'<sup>169</sup> Similarly, Jewell Loyd (2015-present) found the halt in sport worldwide due

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<sup>165</sup> Matt Ellentuck. 'The WNBA's New CBA, Explained,' *SB Nation*, 14 January 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/wnba/2020/1/14/21062768/wnba-cba-player-salaries-paid-maternity-leave-revenue-sharing>>

<sup>166</sup> Meredith Cash. 'WNBA Superstar Breanna Stewart Revealed That She Spent More Than \$30,000 of Her Own Money to Rehab Her Devastating Achilles Tear, and Now She Looks Better Than Ever Before,' *Insider*, 18 August 2020, accessed 9 October 2020, <<https://www.insider.com/wnba-breanna-stewart-spent-30k-on-torn-achilles-rehab-2020-8>>

<sup>167</sup> Christopher Garcia. "'Betting on Women": A Feminist Political Economic Critique of Ideological Sports Narratives Surrounding the WNBA.' *The Political Economy of Communication* 8, no. 1 (2020), p. 35.

<sup>168</sup> Murray Wenzel. 'Jackson Reflects on "Uncomfortable" Career,' *Yahoo Sports*, 25 April 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://au.sports.yahoo.com/jackson-reflects-uncomfortable-career-220012518--spt.html>>

<sup>169</sup> Wenzel, 'Jackson Reflects on "Uncomfortable" Career.'

to Covid-19 something of a relief, having never ‘had this much time off.’<sup>170</sup> For most WNBA players it takes strange circumstances to not play overseas.

Moreover, as Diana Taurasi suggests, ‘there’s also the, you know, *you’re in Russia* aspect.’<sup>171</sup> Players do not know the language, are often the only American players, and are in Russia during the cold winter. Swin Cash echoed these concerns from her time playing in China:

I had never been to China and had no clue what China would be like. My agent tried to prepare me but I didn’t understand fully what I was getting into. Many American players try to play in China but end up coming home early because they feel too isolated.<sup>172</sup>

Taylor also emphasised these issues, pointing out ‘sometimes there’s a language barrier. And just the time difference, you gotta get used to the time difference from talking back and forth to your family, your friends from overseas, and the food’s different.’ Most players would prefer to only play in the WNBA yet feel compelled to go overseas to make enough money.<sup>173</sup> Having the financial ability to have an offseason and not play overseas was a major desire of at least two of the Ravens players I talked to, as Natalie told me:

Having to play in the off-season sucks... People are getting hurt cause they're overworked, they're fatigued cause they're playing year-round. If you could have a little bit of an off season just to let your body settle down, I think that would definitely be something that I'd want to see. Like, don't get me wrong, I love playing basketball. I would love to be able to physically play year-round, but I just, yeah, I cannot.

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<sup>170</sup> Jewell Loyd. ‘The Iso: Jewell Loyd,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 14 April 2020, accessed 30 April 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/the-iso-jewell-loyd-wnba>>

<sup>171</sup> Taurasi, ‘Just a Kid From Chino.’

<sup>172</sup> Cash, *Humble Journey: More Precious Than Gold*, p. 50.

<sup>173</sup> Spruill, ‘“The Time is Now For Women’s Sports”: Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA’s Watershed CBA Deal.’

Breanna Stewart's injury crystallised this issue and made trying to keep players in the US during the offseason a priority for both the team owners and the WNBP during the CBA negotiations.<sup>174</sup>

The new CBA encourages players to prioritise the WNBA, requiring players to report to training camp on time, whereas previously players had come late as they were fulfilling their overseas commitments. There are some exceptions to this rule, including national team commitments and players in their first two years in the WNBA.<sup>175</sup> To help make this monetarily feasible for players, in addition to increased salaries, which will be discussed in the following chapter, the league is providing career development opportunities for players. This includes basketball related roles, such as coaching, or other opportunities with the WNBA's partners.<sup>176</sup> Key to this was the so-called Toliver provision. Kristi Toliver was an assistant coach with the NBA's Washington Wizards, but because she played for the Washington Mystics, they were limited with how much they could pay her. The Mystics were limited to a \$50,000 allotment to keep players in-market and had already given \$40,000 to star player Elena Delle Donne, meaning that Toliver was paid only \$10,000 for her role as an assistant coach.<sup>177</sup> The new CBA rectifies this, allowing players to be compensated fairly for work. This was treated not only as a compensation issue, but a way to get more players into the coaching development pipeline, and increase the number of women coaches, particularly Black women.<sup>178</sup> The goal of these changes is to make it more feasible for players not to go overseas during the offseason, enabling them to be in a more prominent position to promote the league, as well as continue to work on their game and rest their bodies.

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<sup>174</sup> Natalie Weiner. 'The WNBA is at a Turning Point, and the Stakes Could Not Be Higher,' *SB Nation*, 24 May 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/2019/5/24/18637167/state-of-the-wnba-2019>>

<sup>175</sup> Spruill, "'The Time is Now For Women's Sports': Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA's Watershed CBA Deal.'

<sup>176</sup> Spruill, "'The Time is Now For Women's Sports': Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA's Watershed CBA Deal.'

<sup>177</sup> Erica Ayala. "'We Have To Get More Diversity in Those Seats': WNBA Faces Hiring Reckoning,' *The Athletic*, 5 March 2020, accessed 7 July 2020, <[https://theathletic.com/1653386/2020/03/05/we-have-to-get-more-diversity-in-those-seats-wnba-faces-hiring-reckoning/?source=user\\_shared\\_article](https://theathletic.com/1653386/2020/03/05/we-have-to-get-more-diversity-in-those-seats-wnba-faces-hiring-reckoning/?source=user_shared_article)>

<sup>178</sup> Spruill, "'The Time is Now For Women's Sports': Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA's Watershed CBA Deal.'

Whether these changes will work to limit the number of players that go overseas is yet to be seen, and players can still make more money in overseas leagues. Clarendon was optimistic, saying, 'in the scale of weighing the pros and cons of going overseas versus having family time at home resting, etc., all the things you can throw into there, it makes it a little bit more palatable...People are looking for opportunities to stay.' For the WNBA to be the high-quality, professional league that the players desire, it needs to be realistic for players to view it as their main job, without needing to go overseas.

## **Chapter Seven: “Bet on Women”: Understanding the Wage Gap**

In 2018, the WNBPA opted out of the CBA, positioning themselves with the rallying cry, ‘Bet on Women.’ The WNBPA had never opted out of the CBA before and doing so demonstrated the level of dissatisfaction with the current arrangement, as well as confidence in their ability to grow the WNBA. Nneka Ogwumike, President of the WNBPA, penned an article for *The Players’ Tribune* explaining their decision and outlining their demands, while creating a coherent argument as to why the WNBA deserves the kinds of investment necessary to create a world-class league.<sup>1</sup> Ogwumike wanted young girls to dream of playing in the WNBA and furthermore she wanted:

Them to dream about the league that I know ours can become. A league that has a fair and consistent work environment. A league that treats its players as the world-class athletes they are. A league that invests in its future. A league that believes in us as much as we believe in it.<sup>2</sup>

Though Ogwumike was careful to highlight that it was not only pay rises that players were fighting for, most of the Ravens players I talked to called increased salaries their number one priority. Prior to the 2020 CBA, the maximum salary a player could receive was \$117,500, while those on a minimum contract were paid \$41,965.<sup>3</sup> This is in sharp contrast with NBA salaries, where minimum salaries for the 2020-21 season start at \$898,310, and maximum salaries can exceed \$40 million.<sup>4</sup> Ogwumike and the WNBPA were successful in their negotiations with the WNBA, with some improvements in travel and health, as discussed in the previous chapter, as well as a significant increase in salaries. ‘Total cash compensation’ increased overall by 53 percent, including increases in minimum salaries and new bonuses, with bigger increases for players on max contracts, whose base salary increased to \$215,000.<sup>5</sup> I argue that the WNBPA’s success

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<sup>1</sup> Ogwumike, ‘Bet on Women.’

<sup>2</sup> Ogwumike, ‘Bet on Women.’

<sup>3</sup> Ellentuck, ‘The WNBA’s New CBA, Explained.’

<sup>4</sup> Luke Adams. ‘NBA Minimum Salaries For 2020/21,’ *Hoops Rumors*, 10 November 2020, accessed 18 November 2020, <<https://www.hoopsrumors.com/2020/11/nba-minimum-salaries-for-202021.html>>

<sup>5</sup> Dan Feldman. ‘New WNBA CBA Increases Average Salary to Nearly \$130K, Maximum Salary Above \$500K,’ *NBC Sports*, 14 January 2020, accessed 27 October 2020

was due to the way in which they framed the wage gap between NBA and WNBA players as a problem of investment in the respective leagues, as well as conceiving of a different way of measuring the wage gap. This chapter will examine how WNBA players gained an increase in wages and how they perceive the league itself, as well as its detractors, in fighting for a stable and successful league.

The WNBPA was formed after just the second season of the WNBA, on 6 November 1998, the first US union for female professional athletes.<sup>6</sup> Pam Wheeler, the executive director of the WNBPA from 1999 to 2004 outlined why the union was essential, as when the league started, 'there were no contract guarantees, no group marketing licensing rights, no free agencies, no maternity benefits, no revenue sharing, no year-round health care.'<sup>7</sup> Some worried that this was too soon to form a union, as the league was still in its early stages, however the players were determined, according to Coquese Washington (1998-2003), the first President of the WNBPA, to 'bargain collectively to make this venture something that could be a profession or a career, and not just a hobby you did in the side.'<sup>8</sup> They successfully negotiated a CBA that included health insurance, increases in salaries, guarantee dates on contracts, and some maternity leave benefits.<sup>9</sup>

Other CBA negotiations were much more contentious, particularly when the original CBA expired in 2003. NBA commissioner David Stern threatened to shut the WNBA down if a new deal could not be reached, saying 'we want to get a deal and work with the players...But if that's not to be, it's not to be. We'll know in the next 10 days if there

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<<https://nba.nbcsports.com/2020/01/14/new-wnba-cba-increases-average-salary-to-nearly-130k-maximum-salary-above-500k/>>

Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

<sup>6</sup> James Bowman. 'A History of the WNBA Collective Bargaining Agreement,' *Swish Appeal*, 8 February 2014, accessed 26 October 2020,

<<https://www.swishappeal.com/2014/2/8/5392956/a-history-of-the-wnba-collective-bargaining-agreement.>>

<sup>7</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. 'The WNBA Didn't Need a White Knight,' *Power Plays*, 16 January 2020, accessed 26 October 2020, <<https://www.powerplays.news/p/the-wnba-didnt-need-a-white-knight.>>

<sup>8</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. 'The WNBA Union is at a Crossroads,' *ThinkProgress*, 19 November 2018, accessed 26 October 2020, <[https://thinkprogress.org/the-wnbas-players-fight-for-their-future-687e232c7863/.](https://thinkprogress.org/the-wnbas-players-fight-for-their-future-687e232c7863/)>

<sup>9</sup> Bowman, 'A History of the WNBA Collective Bargaining Agreement.'

will be a WNBA season.’<sup>10</sup> The players union wanted modest salary increases and the implementation of free agency. Though this was not an unreasonable ask, the players were largely framed in the media as ungrateful and greedy. David Whitley at the *Orlando Sentinel*, for example, said:

When Stern issued his deadline, he said the NBA had voted an additional \$12 million to subsidize its women's league. You'd think the players would be happy their sugar daddy didn't cut them off altogether.<sup>11</sup>

Adele Pavlidis argues that this is a common refrain for women’s professional sports, ‘as they (and audiences) are ever reminded of their precarious position – they have been granted access, and hence this can be taken away – within an increasingly crowded sport-marketplace.’<sup>12</sup> The fight over money was seen as tainting their image as role models who avoided the excesses that supposedly plagued male sport. Caroline Nathan, for instance, wrote:

The WNBA was supposed to avoid all the mishaps that have befallen men’s professional sports leagues. In an age when professional athletes are overpaid, undereducated and aloof, the average WNBA player makes roughly \$50,000 during the four-month season, holds a college degree and happily signs autographs. Now, however, it seems the league has compressed all the issues that have plagued men’s sports into its short, six-year history.<sup>13</sup>

Stern did not make good on his promise to shut down the league, which according to Wheeler he regularly threatened, and the WNBPA was able to secure free agency rights, though not the salary increases they wanted.<sup>14</sup> The WNBPA tried to make the wage fight a proxy fight for women’s rights more generally, bringing in the National Organisation

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<sup>10</sup> Gibbs, ‘The WNBA Union is at a Crossroads.’

<sup>11</sup> David Whitley. ‘WNBA Has No Leg To Stand On In Labor Dispute,’ *The Orlando Sentinel*, 16 April 2003, accessed 26 October 2020, <<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2003-04-16-0304160317-story.html>>

<sup>12</sup> Adele Pavlidis. ‘Being Grateful: Materialising “Success” in Women’s Contact Sport.’ *Emotion, Space and Society* 35 (2020), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Nathan. ‘Labor Strife Threatens WNBA,’ *Yale Daily News*, 15 April 2003, accessed 26 October 2020, <<https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2003/04/15/labor-strife-threatens-wnba/>>

<sup>14</sup> Gibbs, ‘The WNBA Union is at a Crossroads.’

for Women (NOW) and the National Council of Women's Organisations to frame the issue.<sup>15</sup> There were further negotiations in 2008 and 2014 in which players were able to make marginal gains, though players were unable to make the improvements they hoped for, particularly in 2014, as the Los Angeles Sparks nearly folded, buttressing the league's constant argument that they were not making enough money.<sup>16</sup>

This is the backdrop against which the 2020 CBA negotiations took place. NBA commissioner Adam Silver regularly pointed out that the WNBA lost \$10 million annually and cast doubt over the possibility of pay rises.<sup>17</sup> Suggesting that a league is losing money is a common tactic in CBA negotiations in sport, and something that the NBA did in 2011, when they claimed two-thirds of NBA teams were losing money.<sup>18</sup> Owners in all sports are generally unwilling to reveal profits and only reveal losses when hoping to gain in labour negotiations or encourage public funding of stadiums.<sup>19</sup> WNBA teams largely do not disclose their financial earnings, though the Connecticut Sun, Minnesota Lynx, Phoenix Mercury, Indiana Fever, and Seattle Storm have all announced that they are profitable organisations.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, David Stern pointed out in 2007 that 'the NBA support for the WNBA is a rounding error of our marketing expenses overall,' and that the WNBA has a non-monetary role in promoting the NBA as a female-friendly organisation, as it is 'a serious investment in marketing to women.'<sup>21</sup>

Alleging losses may be a common negotiating tactic for sports leagues. But for a fledgling league like the WNBA that is already viewed as unprofitable, there is

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<sup>15</sup> Gibbs, 'The WNBA Union is at a Crossroads.'

<sup>16</sup> Gibbs, 'The WNBA Union is at a Crossroads.'

<sup>17</sup> Melody Hahm. 'WNBA Commissioner: "We Have a Marketing Problem,"' Yahoo Finance, 16 February 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/wnba-commissioner-cathy-engelbert-we-have-a-marketing-problem-163942681.html>>

<sup>18</sup> Derek Thompson. 'The NBA Lockout: Here's What You Need to Know,' *The Atlantic*, 30 June 2011, accessed 26 November 2020 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/06/the-nba-lockout-heres-what-you-need-to-know/241251/>>

<sup>19</sup> Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Tingley, 'The W.N.B.A Is Putting on Some of the Best Pro Basketball in America: Why Aren't More Fans Showing Up?'

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, 'Out-of-Bounds Play: The Women's National Basketball Association and the Neoliberal Imaginings of Sexuality,' p. 216.



considerable risk to reputation. The NBA in its early years obscured its financial difficulties to give the impression that the league was more successful than it was; NBA President Maurice Podoloff told owners in 1949:

We are getting some very bad publicity due to the fact that some of our team managers are just a bit too scrupulously honest in giving attendance figures to radio and newspapers. If you can avoid giving the figures out, do so. If, however, you must announce figures, a little padding will be forgiven.<sup>22</sup>

When Adam Silver repeatedly casts doubt on the future of the WNBA, it makes it easier for detractors to dismiss the league; people were sceptical in 2011 that the NBA was losing money, but they do not retain that scepticism for the WNBA, as a lack of success simply corresponds to their pre-existing beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

Nneka Ogwumike was clearly cognisant of the arguments against increased salaries when writing her letter, saying:

I'm sure there will be people out there who will judge us harshly for opting out — who will say that we should be grateful for what we already have. They'll probably tell us that our league is losing money. They'll say it's just "economics." They'll say it's just "fair." And they'll definitely, definitely tell me that they can beat me one on one.<sup>24</sup>

The WNBA is assumed to be unpopular and salaries low due to the quality of play or intractable market forces. The structural factors that prevent women's leagues from succeeding are ignored, supporting Allison's argument that 'in professional sports today, essentialism operates as an "ideology of interest" that moves responsibility for inequality from sports, media, and corporate organisations and their constituent decision makers onto sport fans.'<sup>25</sup> In other words, the onus is on individual sport fans and the players themselves to support and grow the league, ignoring the lack of

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<sup>22</sup> Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Manfred. 'NBA Owners Say They Aren't Lying About Losing That Much Money,' *Business Insider*, 7 July 2011, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://www.businessinsider.com.au/nba-losing-money-2011-7?r=US&IR=T>>

<sup>24</sup> Ogwumike, 'Bet on Women.'

<sup>25</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 138.

investment by brands or the media. *ESPN*, for instance, despite televising the WNBA rarely talks about games or shows highlights on its talk shows, assuming a lack of interest yet not doing the work to build an audience in the same way it does for other sports or even poker tournaments.<sup>26</sup> Indeed much of the early success of the WNBA in 1997 could be attributed to the large \$15 million “We Got Next” marketing campaign and the significant investment by sponsors. The WNBA has not subsequently had the same level of investment, yet acts surprised that it cannot meet the same level of popularity as the league enjoyed in its early years.<sup>27</sup> Thus the WNBPA made the argument that the league can only be successful if it is invested in, and the new CBA reflects this argument. The WNBA earmarked at least \$1 million to spend on Marketing and Promotional agreements between players and brands and announced partnerships with “Changemakers,” brands that will provide financial investment into the league, initially Deloitte, AT&T, and Nike.<sup>28</sup> WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert announced the new “Changemakers” program by saying that with this new investment, ‘we will begin to narrow the gap that exists for women sports, as only 1% of all global corporate sponsorship dollars are directed toward women’s sports.’<sup>29</sup> It is with this investment that the WNBA is able to pay for the increase in salaries; furthermore it is an attempt to demonstrate the value of investing in women’s sports more generally.

Certainly, WNBA players were realistic in their salary goals, and in opting out were careful to deflect the common refrain that they do not deserve the same money as NBA players because the league is not as popular. Prior to opting out of the CBA, made-up quotes from Skylar Diggins-Smith, Brittney Griner, and Tamera Young circulated widely on *Instagram* and *Twitter*, which suggested they were asking for the same salaries as NBA players.<sup>30</sup> Ogwumike was sure to address this in her piece, saying:

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<sup>26</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 108.

<sup>27</sup> Wearden and Creedon, “‘We Got Next’: Images of Women in Television Commercials During the Inaugural WNBA Season,” p. 191.

<sup>28</sup> Ellentuck, ‘The WNBA’s New CBA, Explained.’

Spruill, “‘The Time is Now For Women’s Sports’: Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA’s Watershed CBA Deal.’

<sup>29</sup> Spruill, “‘The Time is Now For Women’s Sports’: Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA’s Watershed CBA Deal.’

<sup>30</sup> Matt Ellentuck. ‘WNBA Players Have Become Targets of Fake Pay Disparity Quotes on Social Media. Here’s What They’re Actually Arguing For,’ *SB Nation*, 29 August 2018, accessed 27 October 2020,

Does this mean we're all walking up to the league office tomorrow, arm in arm, and demanding some LeBron Money? You have got to stop it with these wild comparisons, I swear. Get your money, LeBron, we appreciate you.<sup>31</sup>

Rather, WNBA players were united in framing the wage gap as a matter of percentage of revenue, rather than a direct comparison. In the NBA, players are guaranteed in the CBA 50 percent of Basketball-Related income (BRI). Prior to the new CBA, economist David Berri estimated that in 2014 WNBA players received at most 33 percent of BRI, though in reality the number is probably smaller, as not all revenue streams are public information.<sup>32</sup> He again estimated in 2017 that the WNBA paid just 22.8 percent of its revenue to players.<sup>33</sup> Berri, who was also a *Forbes* contributor, widely publicised his research within the WNBA community, and it became the talking point for WNBA players and proponents in the CBA negotiations. Skylar Diggins-Smith, for example, responded to the false quotes attributed to her by saying, 'before we even talk about base salary or anything like that, we don't even get paid the same percentage of the revenue that we bring in, which is kind of unbelievable.'<sup>34</sup> The success of this as a talking point deflected some of the common strategies used to diminish WNBA players push for increased pay, and in the new CBA there is a possibility to achieve a 50-50 revenue share, albeit with caveats depending on revenue growth targets and money allotted to marketing.<sup>35</sup>

The 2020 CBA in some ways marked the end of an era in which WNBA players were expected to express gratitude for the opportunity to play professional basketball at all. In her examination of Australian female AFL players, Adele Pavlidis found that many players were unwilling to challenge their low pay, even rationalising it, expressing that

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<<https://www.sbnation.com/wnba/2018/8/29/17795640/wnba-pay-gap-skylar-diggins-smith-brittney-griner>>

<sup>31</sup> Ogwumike, 'Bet on Women.'

<sup>32</sup> David Berri. 'Basketball's Gender Wage Gap is Worse Than You Think,' *Vice*, 13 August 2015, accessed 27 October 2020,

<<https://www.vice.com/en/article/wn3mmy/basketballs-gender-wage-gap-is-even-worse-than-you-think>>

<sup>33</sup> Berri, 'The Relative Success Story of the WNBA,' p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> Ellentuck, 'WNBA Players Have Become Targets of Fake Pay Disparity Quotes on Social Media. Here's What They're Actually Arguing For.'

<sup>35</sup> Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

‘they were happy just to be playing,’ and meeting substandard conditions with positivity and gratitude.<sup>36</sup> Banet-Weiser argues that in the early days of the WNBA the players operated in a similar way, operating ‘according to the “old boys” school of professional sport, where the players have a place, know that place, and are simply grateful that someone has offered them that place.’<sup>37</sup> The reactions to the 2003 CBA fight further demonstrate this belief that female athletes should show appreciation for what they have, and not fight for more money. Players regularly played in the WNBA despite making more money overseas, because they believed in the WNBA, the future of women’s basketball in the US and in their role in making it a better place for future female athletes.<sup>38</sup> As Monica Wright (2010-2016) suggested, they believed that having a professional women’s basketball league in the United States is worth making sacrifices for:

We’re playing for those who came before us, who sacrificed so that we could play this game on equal footing. We’re playing for those who will come after us, so they can enjoy the same, or maybe even better, opportunities than we currently have. I know that’s why I bring it *every single game*.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, the decision to opt out of the CBA—the first time the WNBPA had done so—demonstrates that WNBA players are done with playing in a league that does not meet their standards.<sup>40</sup> Sue Bird encapsulated this sentiment:

Money isn’t everything, but we’ve played for pride for so fucking long. All of us in the WNBA played for pride our whole career...none of us played for money, it wasn’t about that...Hopefully more money motivates [players] in a whole

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<sup>36</sup> Pavlidis, ‘Being Grateful: Materialising “Success” in Women’s Contact Sport,’ p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Banet-Weiser, ‘Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender,’ p. 417.

<sup>38</sup> Kate Fagan. ‘Diana Taurasi’s Decision to Sit Out Should Spark WNBA Salary Changes,’ *ESPN.com*, 4 February 2015, accessed 9 November 2020, <[http://espn.go.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/12272036/diana-taurasi-decision-sit-spark-wnba-salary-changes](http://espn.go.com/wnba/story/_/id/12272036/diana-taurasi-decision-sit-spark-wnba-salary-changes)>

<sup>39</sup> Wright, ‘Why We Need Title IX Now More Than Ever.’

<sup>40</sup> Aldridge and Lambre, *Inside the WNBA CBA, Stern Memorial and The Forgotten, MLK Day*.

‘nother way that we never had....That’s how it should be; I’m showing you that I’m the best, and I’m getting my value for it.’<sup>41</sup>

The gratitude model relies heavily on constructions of female athletes as role models who are not money hungry and play for the love of the game. Allison found a similar paradigm operating within women’s soccer, where ‘the player’s economic position became invisible, hidden within feel-good constructions of “good girls” who willingly sacrifice for the greater good of their sport and the young girls who play it.’<sup>42</sup> The WNBPA cleverly elided this by reformulating the position of a role model, framing their labour dispute as a way of ensuring the future of young girls. Ogwumike began her letter referring to the WNBA players of the future, saying ‘I want young female athletes to dream about playing in a vibrant and thriving WNBA. I want them to dream of having it all.’<sup>43</sup> As Swin Cash pointed out, this fight is all unpaid labour, and yet they do it because they ‘care so much about whether the league will be around for another 20 years — and more.’ For WNBA players, part of being a role model is fighting for the future of women athletes, ensuring that players are not forced to play in a precarious environment, and demanding better from the league, the media, and sponsors.

In addition, the WNBPA’s priorities signify a move away from the team-first image towards a star-driven model. A point of contention among the best players in the league was that too many players were getting a max contract, and there was limited stratification between the best players and mid-tier players. Diana Taurasi, for one, commented in 2019 ‘on a team, you could have seven players making the same amount of money. That doesn’t make sense to me.’<sup>44</sup> Consequently, while all players got a salary increase, the largest increase was for max players, whose salary increased by nearly 83 percent. Coupled with the WNBA’s hard cap, this should ensure that fewer players receive max contracts, and players’ pay better reflects their ability. Layshia Clendon,

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<sup>41</sup> Albee, ‘The Most Memorable Lines From Megan Rapinoe, Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, and Penny Taylor During Their 4-Hour Instagram Live Showdown.’

<sup>42</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> Ogwumike, ‘Bet on Women.’

<sup>44</sup> Josh Weinfuss. ‘Phoenix Mercury’s Diana Taurasi on Pay Scale: “WNBA Always Finds a Way to Mess It Up,”’ *ESPN.com*, 25 July 2019, accessed 29 April 2020, <[https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/27208574/phoenix-mercury-diana-taurasi-wnba-finds-way-mess-up](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/27208574/phoenix-mercury-diana-taurasi-wnba-finds-way-mess-up)>

Vice President of the WNPBA, confirmed that this was a focus in the negotiations, telling Sarah Spain that they aimed to:

Mak[e] sure everyone got a bump too, because our star players definitely deserve the biggest piece of the pie because they're the stars, but we couldn't do it at the sake of, you know, being truly American and giving no one anything at the bottom, exploiting the bottom.<sup>45</sup>

Star players are also more likely to make big salaries overseas and make money from endorsement deals. The exact figures on how much players make from other non-WNBA sources are difficult to obtain, as overseas teams and private companies often do not disclose that information, however it can be significantly more than WNBA salaries. UMMC Ekaterinburg, a Russian team, paid Diana Taurasi \$1.5 million per season, in addition to paying her \$1 million to sit out the 2015 WNBA season and rest,<sup>46</sup> while Brittney Griner made \$600,000 playing for Zhejiang Golden Bulls in the Women's Chinese Basketball Association.<sup>47</sup> Sabrina Ionescu's (2020-present) multi-year Nike contract is reportedly 'worth multiple times her expected WNBA salary.'<sup>48</sup> However, only the biggest stars can make this kind of money, and most rely on their WNBA and overseas salary to live; Natasha Cloud's initial reaction to the 2020 WNBA season being postponed was 'how do I support my family?'<sup>49</sup> though she soon after received a deal from Converse that enabled her to sit out the 2020 season.

The range in salaries and other money earning opportunities means that while some players may be able to retire on their savings, the majority of players have to plan for a

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<sup>45</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>46</sup> Mike Prada. 'A Russian Team Paid Diana Taurasi To Sit Out 2015 WNBA Season,' *SB Nation*, 3 February 2020, accessed 27 October 2020 <<https://www.sbnation.com/nba/2015/2/3/7973177/diana-taurasi-sit-out-wnba-season-russian-salary>>

<sup>47</sup> steven lebron. 'How Much Women's Basketball Players Make in the U.S. vs China,' *Mic*, 11 June 2014, accessed 27 October 2020, <<https://www.mic.com/articles/90845/how-much-women-s-basketball-players-make-in-the-u-s-vs-china>>

<sup>48</sup> Tom Bassam. 'Nike Signs Top WNBA Pick Sabrina Ionescu,' *SportsPro Media*, 20 April 2020, accessed 27 October 2020, <<https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/nike-sabrina-ionescu-wnba-ny-liberty>>

<sup>49</sup> Jen Hatfield. 'Natasha Cloud's Commitment to Giving Back and Speaking Out Hasn't Wavered During COVID-19,' *The Next*, 1 June 2020, accessed 8 June 2020, <<https://thenext.substack.com/p/natasha-clouds-commitment-to-giving>>

new career when they can no longer play basketball. The WNBA's age and eligibility requirements—U.S. based players must be turning twenty-two to enter the draft—mean that the vast majority of players graduate college before entering the league. A large proportion of these players—43.6 percent among players that played in 2020—studied social sciences, including sociology, psychology, human development, and cultural studies. The next most common major was journalism and communications (20.3 percent), followed by business (13.5 percent), criminal justice and labour (9 percent), interdisciplinary studies or individualised majors that focused on sports (7.5 percent), and physical sciences (6 percent).<sup>50</sup> While they are some of the most well-educated professional sportspeople, most players have little work experience outside of playing professional basketball, and as Terri Jackson pointed out 'they haven't really had the opportunity to sit down and think about what an internship might look like for them. Or what a resume is supposed to look like. Or how to interview.'<sup>51</sup> Consequently, the WNBPA has established internships in a variety of different industries, including sports administration, finance, and cosmetics companies, and works with players to write their resumes.<sup>52</sup> However, the WNBPA has only three full-time staff and a myriad of other responsibilities, and it takes some effort on the part of the players to access these resources.<sup>53</sup> The league does provide some educational courses and money to pursue study, and the new CBA expands this to include career apprenticeship programs and vocational programs.<sup>54</sup> The new CBA also requires the WNBA to obtain thirty "Off-Season Employment Opportunities" with league partners and sponsors.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jacob Mox. 'What Did WNBA Players Study in College?' *Her Hoop Stats*, 21 May 2020, accessed 19 November 2020, <<https://herhoopstats.substack.com/p/what-did-wnba-players-study-in-college>>

<sup>51</sup> Coffey, "It Could Be Over Next Year": The Tricky Balance WNBA Players Face When Preparing for Life After Basketball.'

<sup>52</sup> Coffey, "It Could Be Over Next Year": The Tricky Balance WNBA Players Face When Preparing for Life After Basketball.'

Jenna Lemoncelli. 'WNBA's Jamila Wideman & Ashley Battle Tackle Gender Stigmas In Sports: "We're The Movement,"' *Hollywood Life*, 28 March 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://hollywoodlife.com/2019/03/28/women-sports-gender-equality-wnba-jamila-wideman-ashley-battle-interview/>>

<sup>53</sup> Coffey, "It Could Be Over Next Year": The Tricky Balance WNBA Players Face When Preparing for Life After Basketball.'

<sup>54</sup> Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

<sup>55</sup> Women's National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Players' Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 191.

A major area where the WNBA has looked to improve is its post-career coaching pipelines. As of 2021, the WNBA has just five female head coaches, with only two Black women head coaches, both of whom were hired for the 2021 season.<sup>56</sup> Players argued that they do not get opportunities to pursue coaching post-career.<sup>57</sup> Taj McWilliams-Franklin (1999-2012), a very experienced WNBA player, was shocked by her difficulty in getting a coaching job, saying, 'I put in literally 60 applications as a third assistant in college. I was not offered development, or any such thing when I was done playing. That was the reality.'<sup>58</sup> To rectify this, the WNBA implemented a new policy in 2020, which allowed teams to have three assistant coaches, rather than two, provided that one was a former WNBA player.<sup>59</sup> The new Toliver provision enables players to work in the NBA during the offseason without sacrificing pay. Furthermore, McWilliams-Franklin joined the league office as a player relations and player development manager, a new role to help advise and mentor players through their career both during and after playing.<sup>60</sup>

The WNBA had previously attempted and mostly succeeded in keeping star players with the same team, a sore spot for players who wanted to control where they played. The new CBA limits the number of times the team can tag a player with a "Core Player Designation," thus enabling players to change teams earlier in their career.<sup>61</sup> Previously the only way to move teams if a player was unhappy was to force a trade, as Liz Cambage did when she requested to be traded from the Dallas Wings.<sup>62</sup> However,

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<sup>56</sup> Percy Allen. 'Noelle Quinn Knows the History, and the Honor, to Be a Black Woman Head Coach Taking Over the Storm,' *The Seattle Times*, 31 May 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, <<https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/storm/noelle-quinn-knows-the-history-and-the-honor-to-be-a-black-female-head-coach-taking-over-the-storm/>>

<sup>57</sup> Ayala, "'We Have To Get More Diversity in Those Seats': WNBA Faces Hiring Reckoning.'

<sup>58</sup> Ayala, "'We Have To Get More Diversity in Those Seats': WNBA Faces Hiring Reckoning.'

<sup>59</sup> Ayala, "'We Have To Get More Diversity in Those Seats': WNBA Faces Hiring Reckoning.'

<sup>60</sup> Ayala, "'We Have To Get More Diversity in Those Seats': WNBA Faces Hiring Reckoning.'

<sup>61</sup> Trainor, 'Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?'

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Zucker. 'Liz Cambage Requests Trade From Dallas Wings,' *Bleacher Report*, 23 January 2019, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2817093-liz-cambage-reportedly-requests-trade-from-dallas-wings>>



players had very little leverage to do so without the impending threat of free-agency. The change in the CBA generated immediate dividends, with a dramatic increase in player movement in the 2020 offseason.<sup>63</sup> Players were excited about this, as Seimone Augustus spoke to:

Players were ready to move, but were locked in contractually for a little bit longer than they wanted to be, or whatever it was. Now with the new CBA, you've got the movement that players were waiting for. They wanted to team up with different teammates or different organizations for whatever reason, and we were able to do so. We were able to make those decisions so I think that it felt good for a lot of players, just speaking to some of them that made those moves in the offseason.<sup>64</sup>

The establishment of free agency was the major impetus for the formation of other sports unions like the NBPA, and achieving it in the 2003 negotiations was a major win for the union.<sup>65</sup> This new rule enables a truer free agency, especially for star players who were more likely to be cored, and allows them to leave situations in which they are unhappy. It reflects the WNBA's move to a player empowerment model that NBA players have embraced, in which star players have recognised the power that they have to create their own ideal situation.<sup>66</sup> Certainly, this has some downsides, as fans can be saddened to see their favourite players leave their team. However, for the league this negative is offset by the quantity of news generated in the offseason—a normally dead period for WNBA coverage—and the excitement that free agency brings. Indeed, in the

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<sup>63</sup> Matt Ellentuck. 'Grading Every Team in WNBA's Chaotic 2020 Offseason,' *SB Nation*, 29 February 2020, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/wnba/2020/2/18/21142299/wnba-free-agency-offseason-signings-mystics-lynx-dream-sparks-wings-aces-fever>>

<sup>64</sup> Howard Megdal. 'For Seimone Augustus, It's Business As Unusual With Los Angeles Sparks,' *Forbes*, 28 April 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/howardmegdal/2020/04/28/for-seimone-augustus-its-business-as-unusual-with-los-angeles-sparks/#7ac07f89164f>>

<sup>65</sup> Scott Bukstein. *Collective Bargaining in Professional Sports: Player Salaries, Free Agency, Team Ownership, League Organizational Structures and the Power of Commissioners*. (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Murphy. 'Player Empowerment on the Rise in NBA,' *Boston Herald*, 17 February 2019, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://www.bostonherald.com/2019/02/17/player-empowerment-on-the-rise-in-nba/>>

NBA there is often more coverage and interest in the offseason than the games themselves.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, it puts pressure on teams to meet the needs of their players, because if they do not, a player will leave for a better situation.

The slogan “Bet on Women” was not just a call for better salaries and conditions, but a bet that if the league invested in its players and marketing, the WNBA would grow and reward that investment. In addition to the investment by “Changemakers,” the players committed to being in a partnership with the WNBA to promote the league. Players are now required to use their social media accounts for content creation for the WNBA or their team, such as providing fans with behind-the-scenes access. Players also must wear microphones for practices and games that can be used for “mic’d up” segments on television.<sup>68</sup> Players can theoretically be subject to fines or suspensions for failing to comply with reasonable requests, though it is as yet unclear the degree to which players must comply with these media commitments.<sup>69</sup> Teams now have more money to employ players to stay home during the offseason and continue to promote the WNBA, ensuring the WNBA would continue to, according to Clarendon, ‘spotlight WNBA players, the game, our off-the-court interests (and) passions in a major way all year-round.’<sup>70</sup> Of course, while the new CBA enshrines this commitment by the league and players, the pressure has long been on WNBA players to promote the league, often through unpaid exposure and civic engagements, what Chicago Sky President Adam Fox called ‘shaking hands and kissing babies.’<sup>71</sup>

This kind of invisible labour is compounded with the growth of social media, where players are now compelled to share parts of their life with fans and perform what

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<sup>67</sup> Marc Stein. ‘Does the N.B.A. Peak During the Finals or Free Agency?’ *The New York Times*, 30 May 2019, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/reader-center/nba-finals-free-agency-kevin-durant-kawhi-leonard.html>>

<sup>68</sup> Trainor, ‘Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?’

<sup>69</sup> Women’s National Basketball Association and Women’s National Basketball Players’ Association, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*, p. 120.

Trainor, ‘Analysis of the Full WNBA CBA. What Does it Really Say?’

<sup>70</sup> Jeff Greer. ‘What Does Sports Pause Mean For the WNBA’s CBA,’ *The Athletic*, 27 April 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1593291/>>

<sup>71</sup> Tingley, ‘The W.N.B.A Is Putting on Some of the Best Pro Basketball in America: Why Aren’t More Fans Showing Up?’

Toffoletti and Thorpe argue is the ‘athletic labour of femininity,’ the aesthetic work necessary to brand oneself online.<sup>72</sup> Jewell Loyd gives an example of how this operated during a quarantine period in 2020, when there were no games on, saying:

I’ve been posting my workouts on social media. I normally post a lot of videos of myself and things like that on my account, but I’m taking this time to give people a sneak peak at my inside scoop. So a lot of the workouts that I’ve posted are things I’ve been doing for months and years, actually. The Seattle Storm have done a great job making sure that we are keeping kids active and posting videos daily to interact with our fans and kind of give them something to do.<sup>73</sup>

It is primarily through the body that women in particular are visible in digital spaces, yet it is not simply bodily display that is required, but the ability to present oneself as authentic and empowered.<sup>74</sup> Toffoletti and Thorpe’s exploration of the *Instagram* accounts of elite sportswomen found that their presentation takes ‘the form of emphasising self-love, exhibiting entrepreneurial capacity, celebrating hetero-sexiness and revealing personal intimacies as part of crafting a feminine sporting persona.’<sup>75</sup> Certainly, WNBA players *Instagram* accounts conform to some of these; Elena Delle Donne, for instance, regularly highlights her design company and posts videos of her domestic life.<sup>76</sup> Where WNBA players differ from Toffoletti and Thorpe’s subjects is that hetero-sexiness and authenticity do not always align, and, as discussed in Chapter Four, players like Tamera Young and Courtney Williams embrace their masculine appearance in crafting an online persona. Nonetheless, as Toffoletti and Thorpe outline, there is still a level of labour required, as:

They must be available to appear in photographs, to demonstrate empowerment through body display, inhabit an affective register of optimism and inspiration... pose in ways that imply that their photographs are candid and

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<sup>72</sup> Toffoletti and Thorpe, ‘The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram,’ p. 299.

<sup>73</sup> Loyd, ‘The Iso: Jewell Loyd.’

<sup>74</sup> Toffoletti and Thorpe, ‘The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram,’ p. 303.

<sup>75</sup> Toffoletti and Thorpe, ‘The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram,’ p. 306.

<sup>76</sup> Elena Delle Donne. Instagram Profile Page @de11edonne.  
<<https://www.instagram.com/de11edonne/?hl=en>>

informal, and approve content that is reflective of the overall image they wish to cultivate.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, there is labour involved in constantly putting pressure on media and organisations to promote the WNBA to the best of their ability. Ravens player Chloe explained to me the work she did to ensure her teams were treated the same as their NBA counterpart:

I personally, especially when I was in Indy, I always made it a point to like take trips upstairs and talk to our marketing people, just so they can have a face and create relationships, so they know who they're working with. And I understand the NBA season is really long and it's a grind for everybody. And so when that season's over, I know they want a break, but like, hey, we need you to work for us. You know, like we see we need you to eat and put in just as much work as you were...for the Fever as you were for the Pacers and you know, if you develop those relationships and they see you and how hard you're working, you know, they're more up to work hard for you.

While male athletes also work to grow their brand online and perform civic engagement activities, Cathy Engelbert argued there is less pressure on them to grow the league through individualistic action and non-sporting labour, as media and sponsorships can fill that role.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, looking at *The Players' Tribune* articles for MLS players—a reasonable comparison to the WNBA—you do not see the same emphasis placed on growing the league by individual players or the same concern by players about the direction of the MLS. One former MLS player, Geoff Cameron, even advocated for the best MLS players to play overseas instead.<sup>79</sup> As Diana Taurasi contended, 'when you talk about marketing men's basketball players or men's athletes in general, I think their play comes first and everything else comes second, where in women's sports, it's

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<sup>77</sup> Toffoletti and Thorpe, 'The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram,' p. 307.

<sup>78</sup> Hahm, 'WNBA Commissioner: "We Have a Marketing Problem."'

<sup>79</sup> Geoff Cameron. 'What Must Change in U.S. Soccer,' *The Players' Tribune*, 9 February 2018, accessed 1 December 2020, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/geoff-cameron-what-must-change-in-u-s-soccer>>

usually the other way around... I just wanted to play basketball.’<sup>80</sup> The burden of growing newer men’s professional sports like the MLS is placed not on individual players, but on structural factors, such as merchandising, advertising, and media coverage.<sup>81</sup>

This pressure to grow the league can be immense for some players, particularly star players. Almost since the league’s inception, various players were considered “saviours” of the league, destined to transform women’s basketball and turn around the WNBA’s flagging popularity. When Chamique Holdsclaw was drafted in 1999, then-president of the WNBA, Val Ackerman, compared her to Michael Jordan and, according to Holdsclaw’s former agent Lon Babby, said that ‘she was not only to be the savior for the Washington Mystics but for the league as a whole.’<sup>82</sup> Though Holdsclaw had a largely successful career, she failed to live up to these impossible expectations. Similarly, when entering the WNBA, Griner was seen as being potentially revolutionary, with the ability to change the perception of women’s basketball as unathletic and inferior. Yet, Griner’s early play was less successful than anticipated, and she was overshadowed by Elena Delle Donne, causing her to lament that ‘everyone expected me to come in and take over, but I wasn’t taking over. I didn’t want people to think, *Oh, she’s a flop*. I really struggled with that.’<sup>83</sup> Most recently, Sabrina Ionescu has been promoted as the player that will transform the WNBA into a powerhouse league.<sup>84</sup> Nneka Ogwumike argued that the WNBA has a ‘saviour complex,’ believing that one player can change the

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<sup>80</sup> Tingley, ‘The W.N.B.A Is Putting on Some of the Best Pro Basketball in America: Why Aren’t More Fans Showing Up?’

<sup>81</sup> Juan Carlos Salas. ‘10 Things the MLS Can Do to Get Bigger,’ *Bleacher Report*, 10 February 2012, accessed 1 December 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1059026-10-things-the-mls-can-do-to-get-bigger>>

<sup>82</sup> Nina Mandell. ‘4 Years After Hitting Rock Bottom, Chamique Holdsclaw Has a New Mission Outside of Basketball,’ *For The Win*, 4 May 2016, accessed 5 June 2020, <<https://ftw.usatoday.com/2016/05/4-years-after-hitting-rock-bottom-chamique-holdsclaw-has-a-new-mission-outside-of-basketball>>

<sup>83</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 208.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Bushnell. ‘Sabrina Ionescu’s Unique Rise To Fame Is About To Revolutionize Basketball,’ *Yahoo Sports*, 10 April 2020, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://au.sports.yahoo.com/sabrina-ionescus-organic-unprecedented-fame-130003614.html>>

fortunes of the league and convince detractors that the WNBA is worth watching.<sup>85</sup> Certainly, creating star players is essential for the growth of the WNBA, and is one of the reasons for the NBA's success.<sup>86</sup> However, by putting the pressure on one rookie to revolutionise the league, it devalues the stars that are already in the league and hinders the emergence of other star players. Furthermore, if the player does not live up to their potential, or suffers an injury, it ruins an entire marketing strategy, and as Griner attests to, it can be very difficult for players to cope with. Ogwumike argued that the league needs to develop multiple different storylines to tell throughout a season, as 'we can't bet on having this amazing God-save-us player...We have the best athletes in the world. It's not just one person. It's many different people.'<sup>87</sup>

Of course, greatly hindering the marketing success of the WNBA is the way it is has been positioned in mainstream American culture, as it is constantly met with misogynistic, racist, and homophobic comments, jokes, and trolling. WNBA players are acutely aware of the way they are perceived and the misogynistic responses they engender. They are repeatedly faced with a barrage of sexist content, both through online trolls and mainstream media outlets, disparaging their achievements and attempting to "put them in their place." The online trolling they receive is so persistent and so repetitive in its content that it even becomes something of a joke. For example, Sue Bird quipped, 'So whether you're an open-hearted sports fan, or a Man Online obsessed with his life's work of proving that the backup center for his DIII college team could beat me one on one, I think we all can agree: It's a great time to be keeping up with the W.'<sup>88</sup>

Comments like "make me a sandwich" and "get back in the kitchen" fly around, particularly on social media platforms such as *Twitter*, a way of buttressing fragile

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<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Merrill. 'Can Breanna Stewart Transform the WNBA?' *ESPN.com*, 10 May 2016, accessed 9 November 2020,

<[https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/\\_/id/15471937/for-wnba-stars-seattle-storm-pick-breanna-stewart-draft-night-pinnacle](https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/_/id/15471937/for-wnba-stars-seattle-storm-pick-breanna-stewart-draft-night-pinnacle)>

<sup>86</sup> Smart, *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity*, p. 97.

<sup>87</sup> Merrill, 'Can Breanna Stewart Transform the WNBA?'

<sup>88</sup> Sue Bird. 'So I Broke My F\*cking Nose,' *The Players' Tribune*, 8 September 2018, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/sue-bird-seattle-storm>>

masculinity and ensuring that male physical superiority is not threatened.<sup>89</sup> As Ravens player Isabella pointed out, these comments are ubiquitous and involve a level of effort on behalf of the trolls to seek out WNBA content to comment on:

Even on the WNBA page when they post something and it's like the WNBA page and then these people get on there, I was like, Oh, what meal are they cooking tonight? Or things like that. And you're just like, why are you going out of your way to follow the WNBA page? And your comment is so old, it's been used 75,000 times. Like at least come up with something original. But, um, yeah, it's just, it's funny.

Ravens players, though all aware of the trolling, mostly seemed bemused by it and try to ignore it. Taylor told me that she did not pay attention to 'naysayers,' though this did seem to be something she had to deliberately learn to do, saying:

I never read the comments. Um, I was invited to one page and my girlfriend's like, Oh, you like, you need to get off that page, like it's not good. Like, so, I mean, you live and you learn, when you're at this level and you know what, what you have to do, who you have to listen to and, and whatnot.

Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that there has been a growth of a 'popular misogyny' which circulates and spreads throughout digital networks and everyday life, a systematic method of diminishing and degrading women.<sup>90</sup> As women, and a form of popular feminism, gain more prominence in the cultural landscape, popular misogyny has emerged as a response, struggling for distinction in the battlefield of the economy of visibility.<sup>91</sup> Thus, Banet-Weiser argues:

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<sup>89</sup> Martenzie Johnson. "'Get Back in the Kitchen": A WNBA Roundtable on Sexism in Basketball,' *The Undeclared*, 20 August 2018, accessed 16 November 2020, <<https://theundefeated.com/features/wnba-roundtable-on-sexism-in-basketball-imani-mcgee-stafford-devereaux-peters-mistie-bass-elena-delle-donne-aja-wilson-candace-parker/>>

Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 158.

<sup>90</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 2.

Networked misogyny operates as a way to consolidate a “cultural will-to – humiliation” that promises the restoration of male privilege, prerogative, and rightful ownership of economic, cultural, and political spaces.<sup>92</sup>

The very existence of a professional women’s basketball league threatens the idea of sport as a male preserve. Consequently, trying to prove that men are superior athletes gains an outsized importance within this battle between popular feminism and misogyny. Cynthia Cooper lamented:

It’s amazing to me how many men automatically assume they are better basketball players than women... Some of these guys may never have played organized basketball in their entire lives, some may only have played a little intramural ball in college, but, hey, they’re men, so they must be better.<sup>93</sup>

Elena Delle Donne, when asked what she would say to the men that criticise women’s basketball, replied while laughing, ‘what did women ever do to you? And why are you so angry? You might need to go to counseling and get some help.’<sup>94</sup> As this indicates, WNBA players are fully aware of the ridiculousness of this situation, and the ‘male ego’ as the driving force behind it.<sup>95</sup>

As Sue Bird put it, ‘a lot of men *who suck at basketball* hate women’s basketball.’<sup>96</sup> Ravens player Chloe repeated a common refrain among WNBA players, that ‘a lot of the men in the NBA respect our games because they can, they see us play the game.’ NBA players, including the biggest stars in the game, regularly voice their public support for the league and express admiration for the players.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, Chloe mostly ignores critics:

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<sup>92</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 38.

<sup>93</sup> Cooper, *She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey*, p. 185.

<sup>94</sup> Johnson, “‘Get Back in the Kitchen”: A WNBA Roundtable on Sexism in Basketball.’

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, “‘Get Back in the Kitchen”: A WNBA Roundtable on Sexism in Basketball.’

<sup>96</sup> Bird, ‘So I Broke My F\*cking Nose.’

<sup>97</sup> Johnson, “‘Get Back in the Kitchen”: A WNBA Roundtable on Sexism in Basketball.’

Alex Schiffer. “‘He Saw Us As Trailblazers”’ Inside Kobe Bryant’s January Camp with WNBA Players,’ *The Athletic*, 15 April 2020, accessed 29 April 2020, <<https://theathletic.com/1747120/?source=twittered>>



Because those are people that don't really know much about the game. But you know, everybody, I mean, people that I respect in the game respect the WNBA, and those are the best players in the world. So Joe blow on his couch saying, Oh my goodness, they're shooting layups. Like I know I don't have time for it, and he can come see me on the court or whatever.

Banet-Weiser focuses on the way in which popular misogyny has exploded within nerd culture, pointing to a kind of 'geek masculinity,' in which the benefits of their gendered privilege clash with 'a kind of alienation from hypermasculine norms.'<sup>98</sup> In this context, the fragility of masculinity is heightened by their perceived distance from masculine power, and their lack of confidence is blamed on women.<sup>99</sup> I would extend this to sports fans, who often have never played sport at a high level, and who rely on degrading female athletes to buttress their own masculinity. Unable to play professionally, they express their anger by symbolically associating with professional sportspeople—a form of vicarious masculinity—and utilising them to “prove” the superiority of men.<sup>100</sup> The repetitive, consistent, and prevalent nature of these comments demeaning the WNBA, supposedly in response to a sport they do not care about, highlights both the importance that some place on minimising the accomplishments of women and the way in which popular misogyny circulates and perpetuates itself in online spaces.<sup>101</sup>

Pat Griffin argues, 'some men are obsessed with proving that girls and women are inherently physically inferior to boys and men.'<sup>102</sup> There seems to be little that WNBA players can do to quiet this noise, as any achievement comes with it a cacophony of supposed justification of why men are still better and subsequent moving of the goal posts. Women supposedly cannot beat men or perform skills like dunking, and hence if they do, there must be some reason for it, or they are seen as still not performing the

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<sup>98</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 158.

<sup>99</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 97, 158.

<sup>100</sup> Michelle D. Dunbar, 'Dennis Rodman—Do You Feel Feminine Yet? Black Masculinity, Gender Transgression, and Reproductive Rebellion on MTV.' In *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport*, edited by Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner and Don Sabo, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 2000), p. 265.

Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, p. 22.

ability at the same level as men. Elena Delle Donne, for instance, has the highest free throw percentage of any player in NBA or WNBA history, exulting that ‘I really hate bragging, but breaking men’s records in a game that people just *assume* men dominate makes me smile.’<sup>103</sup> Yet, as Sue Bird suggested:

When Elena makes history, there’s almost none of that echo throughout the sports landscape. Her achievements come with less visibility — and a silent asterisk: *Steph Curry plays against LeBron James. Who does Elena play against?*<sup>104</sup>

The notion that Delle Donne might be better than men at a basketball skill threatens the coherency of the gender hierarchy, and thus steps must be taken to downplay her abilities. Meanwhile, every missed lay-up or turnover is seen as “proof” of inferiority, as a regular and common basketball play becomes an indictment against women’s basketball as a whole.

Though the Ravens players I talked to largely focused on comments made online, it is not only anonymous trolls that engage in this kind of misogynistic rhetoric. Popular and well-respected sportswriters regularly belittled the WNBA and made fun of players’ skills, appearance, and sexuality. For example, Bill Simmons, perhaps the most influential sportswriter of his generation who popularised the conversational, fan centred way of talking about sports, regularly mocked the WNBA in his articles, podcasts, and book, saying in 2005:

Maybe you enjoy watching women playing basketball at the highest possible level—a level that could roughly be compared to "a good intramural game at a Division 2 college, only if nobody could jump or dunk"—and find the WNBA strangely intoxicating.<sup>105</sup>

Simmons argued that the failure of the WNBA was because players lacked ‘crossover sex appeal,’ as ‘some are uncomfortably tall and gawky, while others lack the requisite,

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<sup>103</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 199.

<sup>104</sup> Sue Bird. ‘Analyze This,’ *The Players’ Tribune*, 11 March 2016, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/sue-bird-storm-wnba-analytics>>

<sup>105</sup> Simmons, ‘This is Who I Am...’

um, softer qualities to captivate males between 18 and 35.<sup>106</sup> This kind of overtly misogynistic rhetoric on major sports websites and newspapers was not uncommon and was largely taken as conventional wisdom among a large segment of sports fans and writers. Furthermore, the level of venom these writers espoused and the actual visibility of the WNBA is extremely out of proportion. Simmons lamented in his book:

I wish WNBA scores and transactions would be banned from all scrolling tickers on ABC and ESPN. I'm tired of subconsciously digesting tidbits like "Phoenix 52, Sacramento 44 F" and thinking, "Wait, was that the final score?" before realising it was the WNBA. Let's just run their scores on NBA TV with pink lettering. And only between the hours of 2:00 a.m. and 7:30 a.m.<sup>107</sup>

Besides the fact that, as I argue in Chapter Five, this critique of low scoring WNBA games is factually incorrect, the quote demonstrates that even small encroachments by women into the male space of sports is met with vitriol and mocking. Simmons has since admitted that these comments came from a desire to keep sports as a male preserve, though this epiphany has not translated into any significant investment into covering women's sports in his role as founder of the website *The Ringer*.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the willingness of popular sportswriters like Simmons to disparage the WNBA created a permission structure for others to follow suit, and this legacy has lived on amongst fans.

While prominent sportswriters are now less likely to publicly criticise the WNBA—though sportswriter Natalie Weiner argued they still do privately—it is still relatively common for media to perpetuate the narrative that the WNBA is boring and its players ugly.<sup>109</sup> Weiner pointed to an off-handed comment in the television show *Grown-ish*, in which the female characters made fun of the women's basketball team, and when met

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<sup>106</sup> Simmons, 'This is Who I Am...'

<sup>107</sup> Bill Simmons. *The Book of Basketball: The NBA According to the Sports Guy*. (New York: Ballantine Books and ESPN Books, 2010), p. 265.

<sup>108</sup> Bill Simmons. Interview with Lena Dunham. *The B.S. Report*. Podcast. 14 January 2015, <<http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/b-s-report-lena-dunham-on-the-backlash-to-her-book-the-new-season-of-girls-and-more/>>

<sup>109</sup> Natalie Weiner. 'The Best Way to Support Women's Basketball is to Just Watch It,' *SB Nation*, 18 March 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://www.sbnation.com/2019/3/18/18271122/march-madness-womens-basketball-selection-show-best-way-to-support-the-players>>

by scepticism, replied ‘what, only guys are allowed to make fun of women’s basketball?’<sup>110</sup> In the same year, 2019, Saturday Night Live (SNL) aired a sketch titled ‘Gold Diggers of the WNBA,’ in which they made fun of WNBA players’ height, deep voices, and sexual orientation, jokes that would not be out of place in the internet comment sections that WNBA players roll their eyes at.<sup>111</sup> While the SNL sketch is more obvious in its stereotyping, these misogynistic comments more often manifest in quick, “drive-by” jabs at the WNBA’s expense. For example, a 2011 Jodi Picoult novel *Sing You Home* briefly diverts from its main plot—centred around the experiences of a bisexual woman—to take a shot at the WNBA and its lesbian fanbase.<sup>112</sup> It is worth pointing out that these are not conservative institutions that are casually and unapologetically maligning the WNBA and women’s basketball. *Grown-ish* is a show centred around a Black woman, while the laziness of the SNL skit certainly belies its claims to sharp cultural critique. The heavy reliance on tired stereotypes of women’s basketball, and the level of casualness that suggests these are recognisable ideas for their audience, illustrates the way in which these misogynistic impulses are deeply embedded into society.

Elizabeth Williams argued that the WNBA needs to ignore its detractors, saying ‘you could write anything, and someone would still make a sandwich joke.... But the people who actually want to learn something or engage in a conversation, they’re on there too. We’re slowly seeing that shift.’<sup>113</sup> When the league has tried in its marketing to “speak back” to critics, it has largely seemed apologetic and unconfident. Williams is right that misogynist critiques of the league are declining, at least in sporting institutional spaces; it seems unlikely that a mainstream *ESPN* writer could write what Bill Simmons wrote in 2003 without significant backlash. However, the online circulation of misogyny on social media, as well as the continued denigration of the WNBA in non-sporting media, still continues to be a concern, as, in addition to circulating ‘with relative ease in digital networks, misogyny is also reified in institutional structures.’<sup>114</sup> The lack of investment

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<sup>110</sup> Weiner, ‘The Best Way to Support Women’s Basketball is to Just Watch It.’

<sup>111</sup> Saturday Night Live. Twitter Post. 11 March 2019, 9:09 am, <<https://twitter.com/nbcSNL/status/1104866972989382656>>

<sup>112</sup> Jodi Picoult. *Sing You Home*. (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2011), p. 105

<sup>113</sup> Weiner, ‘The WNBA is at a Turning Point, and the Stakes Could Not Be Higher.’

<sup>114</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 5.

in the WNBA, the difficulty in finding a coherent marketing strategy, and the vitriol online are all interrelated and part of a larger mobilisation of misogyny in the face of women gaining access to male spaces.

What then is the best way to counter this misogyny and market the league? The renewed attention to marketing in the CBA negotiations was precipitated by intense player dissatisfaction with the direction the marketing had taken in the past. Chloe, talking before the CBA negotiations, told me:

I think that's where we're at a standstill right now is because like the NBA, like they did get like they're supporting us but not, it's not a realistic support because they're not giving us enough to actually be successful. And the amount of success that we've been able to achieve without proper funding is pretty amazing.

The players were not alone in this; new commissioner Cathy Engelbert immediately recognised that ‘we have a marketing problem.’<sup>115</sup> Diana Taurasi was harsher, saying ‘are you kidding me with some of the stuff that they do marketing and promoting-wise? It's almost mind-boggling.’<sup>116</sup> Both Taurasi and Ravens player Jasmine recognised how well the NBA has marketed their players, making ‘rock stars out of their best players,’ and were frustrated that the WNBA could not mirror that.<sup>117</sup> Ravens players and coaches all believed that their team did a good job of marketing—an investment reflected in their success—but were disappointed in the WNBA more generally. Players have numerous ideas about how best to improve the position of the WNBA and increase media attention. Sue Bird believed that there needs to be greater availability of statistics, while Maya Moore pointed out the difficulties in obtaining merchandise.<sup>118</sup> Lauren Jackson highlighted the level of hype surrounding her games against the LA Sparks, suggesting that ‘a bit of controversy will always get you viewers.’<sup>119</sup> Leslie

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<sup>115</sup> Hahm, ‘WNBA Commissioner: “We Have a Marketing Problem.”’

<sup>116</sup> Weinfuss, ‘Phoenix Mercury’s Diana Taurasi on Pay Scale: “WNBA Always Finds a Way to Mess It Up.”’

<sup>117</sup> Weinfuss, ‘Phoenix Mercury’s Diana Taurasi on Pay Scale: “WNBA Always Finds a Way to Mess It Up.”’

<sup>118</sup> Bird, ‘Analyze This.’

Moore, ‘(in)Visibility.’

<sup>119</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, p. 91.

echoed this, emphasising the importance of rivalries in drumming up interest.<sup>120</sup> With the new CBA, the players are now considered partners in growing the WNBA and have input in the direction of the league's marketing.

There is a clear generational divide between players on how best to grow the league: Lisa Leslie believed that the best face to put forward is a feminine one, while Brittney Griner argued the best way forward is to appeal to an LGBT fan base. Until recently, the WNBA had largely followed the position advocated by Leslie, attempting to promote feminine and maternal women, and utilising techniques such as shorter playing shorts to, as Griner puts it 'show our bodies in a way that will attract more men.'<sup>121</sup> It is entirely likely that early WNBA players such as Leslie and Cooper were utilising their femininity pragmatically as a way to secure the future of the WNBA, in a similar manner to Berenson changing the rules of basketball to ensure its future in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. The postfeminist sensibility that had gained precedence in the US at the time of the inception of the WNBA only left room for a form of women's empowerment that allowed for the league's existence but did not challenge underlying gender hierarchies and stereotypes. This debate is significant as it hinges around which bodies are visible within a media landscape that rewards bodies that perform femininity in a specific way.<sup>122</sup> The deliberation over the visible body is so important because, as Banet-Weiser argues, 'girls and women are hypervisible because they are so often understood as bodies,' and this is particularly true in the sporting arena where the body moves to the forefront.<sup>123</sup> Yet all bodies are not the same, and do not have the same potential to be commodified, something that Delle Donne understood when she compared her position to Skylar Diggins pre-draft:

[Skylar] was also a social media star, which would bring thousands of new fans to whatever team chose her. I loved Skylar, but I wasn't sure I had half the charisma or charm that she did.<sup>124</sup>

Diggins embodied the "spectacularly feminine" and thus benefitted from the economics

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<sup>120</sup> Leslie. 'Who Got Next?'

<sup>121</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 190.

<sup>122</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 25.

<sup>123</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 32.

<sup>124</sup> Delle Donne and Durand, *My Shot: Balancing It All and Standing Tall*, p. 119.

of visibility.<sup>125</sup> In contrast, marginalised bodies are subjected to forms of punishment when they enter the arena of public visual consumption.<sup>126</sup>

Griner argued that trying to thrive in a landscape of visibility that promotes femininity hinders the marketing of the WNBA:

The league is trying to be edgier, but it feels like the marketing folks are still chasing a certain kind of fan—young men—who have never really watched the WNBA...If we want to be edgier, we should focus more on finding clever ways to embrace the people who are more likely to attend our games, like the LGBT community, which has always been an important part of our audience.<sup>127</sup>

Griner is putting forward a form of discourse that is much more resistant and intersectional than the popular feminism that values visibility above all.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Ravens player Chloe believed that while the league had made strides in appealing to its gay fanbase, they continued to view it as a 'last resort.' While she did not think that the WNBA should 'put all our eggs in that basket,' they still needed to acknowledge it. Chloe argued that from the players perspective:

What we can do is just continue to be our best basketball players and you know, just be role models, which I believe we are. I mean if you look from top to bottom, like our league, we are full of educated, strong, like talented women and yeah, we just have to continue being us and hopefully we get some recognition that way, you know?

WNBA players recognise that, as Layshia Clarendon argued, 'it's been so hard to market us because we're a big chunk of queer women of colour,' yet trying to obscure this in their marketing strategies has been unsuccessful.<sup>129</sup> The WNBA has made strides in

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<sup>125</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, p. 56.

<sup>126</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p. 25.

<sup>127</sup> Griner and Hovey, *In My Skin: My Life on and Off the Basketball Court*, p. 191.

<sup>128</sup> Toni Bruce and Dunja Antunovic. 'Gender, Media and New Media Methods.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, edited by Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton and Becca Watson. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 261.

<sup>129</sup> Spruill, 'The WNBA's Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the "Layers on Top of Layers" of Player Identities.'

trying to present a more authentic image, which Cathy Engelbert made explicit in discussing the new CBA, saying that their marketing strategy would be based on a platform of ‘the diversity of our league, women, women of color, [and] LGBTQ community.’<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, she extended Chloe’s argument, saying ‘what better role models than these WNBA players to help them with their own platforms around diversity and inclusion?’<sup>131</sup> Authenticity, or at least perceived authenticity, can be a major marketing plus; Katz argues that Nike, for example, has an ‘internal obsession with authenticity’ as a marketing technique.<sup>132</sup> The WNBA is betting that authenticity, rather than femininity, will be more successful in growing their league, offering a way to reconceptualise the sporting discourse and resist dominant narratives of the identity of sports fans.<sup>133</sup>

Though the WNBA hopes to ride on a growing wave of support for women’s sport, particularly the support for the US Women’s National Team (USWNT) in the soccer World Cup, the players are cognisant of the differences between the sports and are somewhat ambivalent about the USWNT’s success. Chloe maintained that ‘we are so supportive of any women's team, any, you know, women in sports. But on the flip side, our, our women's Olympic team has won how many gold medals in a row now?’ Chloe was unsure why women’s soccer was more popular than women’s basketball, musing:

Thinking about it further right now, just the difference in the men and women's game and soccer is, there's not much of a difference. You know, the men, I mean you can say they're more physical, but I can say there's the same physicality allowed in both games. You know what I'm saying? Like their athletic abilities, you see some of the women doing the same stuff as the men. But like with basketball, people always want to come in and say, Oh men are dunking, they're doing this and this and this. So, our games are a little different in that regard.

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<sup>130</sup> Spruill, ‘“The Time is Now For Women’s Sports”: Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA’s Watershed CBA Deal.’

<sup>131</sup> Spruill, ‘“The Time is Now For Women’s Sports”: Breaking Down the Major Provisions in the WNBA’s Watershed CBA Deal.’

<sup>132</sup> Donald Katz, *Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World* (1994), quoted in Smart, *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity*, p. 108.

<sup>133</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 104.



This conception of the difference between soccer and basketball would seemingly support Markovits and Albertson's argument that it is women encroaching into a country's 'centre of sport' that is the problem. In the US, where basketball is one of the "Big Four" sports and more men play, it is easier for them to conceive of themselves as better than women. In contrast, in Europe, it is female soccer players that are derided, as soccer is the centre of sport.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Allison argues that 'soccer's position outside of the cultural mainstream gave it a "residual indeterminacy" that allowed multiple and shifting symbolic uses,' thus the idea that it was a "men's sport" was not as entrenched.<sup>135</sup>

Washington Mystics player Natasha Cloud, however, was blunter in her assessment, saying 'the difference is the colour of our skin... let me not even get into the sponsorships that support them and not us.'<sup>136</sup> Sue Bird agreed, contending that:

It's the demographic of who's playing. Women's soccer players generally are cute little white girls while WNBA players, we are all shapes and sizes ... a lot of black, gay, tall women ... there is maybe an intimidation factor and people are quick to judge it and put it down.<sup>137</sup>

Certainly, the USWNT's initial rise to fame in the 1999 World Cup was as much a result of their 'white, middle-class "girls-next-door" image as for their accomplishment on the field.'<sup>138</sup> Soccer's rise in the US has largely taken place within white, suburban neighbourhoods, in direct contrast to the urban image of basketball.<sup>139</sup> USWNT player, and the fiancé of Sue Bird, Megan Rapinoe agreed with Cloud, asking in regards to the WNBA, 'where's that energy for the women's sports that — instead of scanning cute and

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<sup>134</sup> Andrei S. Markovits and Emily K. Albertson. *Sportista: Female Fandom in the United States*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), p. 107.

<sup>135</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 31.

<sup>136</sup> LaChina Robinson. This Has To Be Said. *Around the Rim*. Podcast. 4 June 2020, <<http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play?id=29263530>>

<sup>137</sup> Guardian Sport. 'Bird Agrees With Rapinoe That Perception of "Cute White Girls" Helps USWNT,' *The Guardian*, 19 October 2020, accessed 3 November 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/oct/18/sue-bird-megan-rapinoe-uswnt-marketing>>

<sup>138</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 3.

<sup>139</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 30.

white and straight — scan tall and black and queer??<sup>140</sup> Though of course there are gay players on the USWNT, like Rapinoe, their whiteness made them more palatable and easier to market through established techniques.

Most Ravens players and coaches I talked to believed that the league and its marketing strategies were improving, even pre-2020 CBA. One exception was coach Erica, who had played in the WNBA in its early years. Erica pointed out that when she came into the league ‘we had sold out crowds,’ as well as ‘Nike, who was a big, big sponsor who exposed us a ton when I started and it helped.’ She was sceptical of the marketing of the current league compared to her time as a player, saying:

We were out in the community so much, like I think I probably visited maybe 40 high schools and the hospitals and all of that. And you know, we were really out in the community, getting the people and getting that fan base. And I don't know if it's that way anymore, you know, the kids, I don't even know how often they even go out or if they even do go out to, into the community. So, and I think that kinda hurt our league a little bit as far as the fan base. So, I think if the marketing part really, I don't know if they're even able to, because you know, with the union, the player union and all that, which limits them to do so much. So, I think that kinda hurt the marketing part of the league.

In Erica's quote, we can see the expectation that women do unpaid labour to grow the league and a level of blame placed on players for the league's decline. Of course, what she is saying is not actually accurate; the players certainly do community engagement—I saw Ravens players receive their schedule for when they had fan events—though it is possible that it is less than when Erica played. Furthermore, Erica largely pinned low salaries on a lack of fan support, particularly by women:

I don't even understand why women don't support women. They see the inequality of the men and the women, but we can't get women to come and support us. I mean, men come and support the men. You'd come to an NBA

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<sup>140</sup> Megan Rapinoe. ‘I've Got Some Things To Say. Let's Do a WNBA Finals Preview,’ *The Players' Tribune*, 5 October 2020, accessed 3 November 2020 <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/megan-rapinoe-seattle-storm-wnba-finals>>

game, you see a ton of guys, they're just drinking, hanging out, party and supporting the guys. Women. We don't support each other. Bring your daughters, bring it, you know, because someday maybe your daughter wants to play, you know. But we don't do that for each other. I think we've just accepted the way the world has been all these years and now, we just accepted it and, and don't make changes. If we don't make changes then how do we expect to get paid. I mean, that's the only way it'll change. If we can get the fan base, get the revenue in, then we will get paid.

Here Erica is repeating a commonly held belief that pins low wages on individual fans, particularly women, and exonerating media and sporting institutions for their lack of investment in women's sport.<sup>141</sup>

However, though Erica's position is a frequent refrain from those uninterested in women's sport or unwilling to challenge the established power structures, it is uncommon in WNBA circles, as WNBA players are very critical of its position within the sports media and the lack of coverage. They are very cognisant of the narrative surrounding the popularity of the WNBA and are quick to challenge it. Gabby Williams epitomised this, arguing 'people say, "Oh we don't have a game, we don't do this because nobody cares about the WNBA, blah, blah." OK, that's because you don't publicize it, we don't have video games like this. Once you do, then we will.'<sup>142</sup> As this indicates, players and coaches consistently identify the relationship between the lack of coverage and the growth of the league, and push for better coverage of women's sports. Cheryl Reeve contended:

What if we invested more coverage in women's sports? The media directly correlates to cultural conditioning. If we never show female athletes on TV, or

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<sup>141</sup> Cheryl Cooky. 'What's New About Sporting Femininities? Female Athletes and the Sport-Media Industrial Complex.' In *New Sporting Femininities: Embodied Politics in Postfeminist Times*, edited by Kim Toffoletti, Holly Thorpe, and Jessica Francombe-Webb. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 35-36.

<sup>142</sup> Gabby Williams and Sean Hurd. 'Gabby Williams: Rookie Season "A Million Times Better" Than Freshman Year at UConn,' *espnW*, 1 August 2018, accessed 1 October 2018, <[http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/24244029/chicago-sky-gabby-williams-says-rookie-season-million-s-better-freshman-year-uconn](http://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/24244029/chicago-sky-gabby-williams-says-rookie-season-million-s-better-freshman-year-uconn)>

at a significantly lower percentage than we do male athletes, what are we teaching young girls and boys? What's the implication there?<sup>143</sup>

These players are drawing on their own experiences to emphasise the importance of visibility and the magnitude of the WNBA's existence. Angel McCoughtry (2009-present) tells of finding out about the launch of the WNBA when she was thirteen:

The league had just started, and more and more people were beginning to talk about it. I went home that day and told my parents that I wanted to — *had to* — know more about this “women's basketball league.” And that I had to see it for myself...all these living legends, some of the best *ever* to do it, playing right in front of me... Maybe the girl who will go on to become the female LeBron ... she's just falling in love with hoops right now. And maybe she'll beg her parents this season to make that drive, however long it is, to take her to see me and the rest of these great women play.<sup>144</sup>

Furthermore, as Nancy Lieberman (1997) argued, it is not just the images of WNBA players that matter, but also the opportunities the league affords:

The WNBA gave us hope. It gave us something to strive for. You wouldn't know about Becky Hammon [the first female coach in the NBA] if there was no WNBA. She never would have met Coach Popovich if they weren't playing in the same building.<sup>145</sup>

The WNBA has largely relied on the existing media structures to improve visibility, with games televised on *ESPN* and *CBS Sports*. However, these channels largely minimise the WNBA in its broader sports coverage and do not make a concerted effort to grow a fanbase.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps a better model to improve visibility would be to embrace the

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<sup>143</sup> Reeve, 'No Excuses.'

<sup>144</sup> Angel McCoughtry. 'Feeling Good Again,' *The Players' Tribune*, 9 February 2018, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/angel-mccoughtry-atlanta-dream-wnba>>

<sup>145</sup> Nancy Lieberman. 'One of the Guys,' *The Players' Tribune*, 29 October 2015, accessed 13 November 2018, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/nancy-lieberman-kings-women-in-coaching>>

<sup>146</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 108.

growing number of independent outlets that cover the WNBA and women's sport, which have worked to grow the popularity of the league at a grassroots level. Newer, specialised outlets like *Winsidr*, *WNBA Nation*, *The Next*, and *Power Plays*, combined with reporters building a community on social media platforms like *Twitter*, has made finding information and stories on the WNBA easier than ever before. This puts pressure on more generalised sports outlets to cover the league, and indeed in 2019 *Bleacher Report* and *The Athletic* expanded their WNBA coverage, while *ESPN* and *CBS* have increased their number of game broadcasts.<sup>147</sup> While the WNBA has embraced this to some extent—WNBA games are often broadcast on Twitter for example—reporters for independent outlets are critical of the lack of access they receive. Alex Bazell, from *Through the Lens*, tweeted after Skylar Diggins-Smith was not made available to talk to the media following a playoff loss, 'there's so many great people in media that are trying to help the W grow but they are handcuffed with the info they get.'<sup>148</sup> Lindsay Gibbs, creator of *Power Plays*, similarly called it 'bush league from the WNBA.'<sup>149</sup> Arielle Chambers, a reporter from *Bleacher Report* and an active WNBA supporter on Twitter, opined 'it's very confusing to me how we fight for more women's coverage, but when the smaller companies/platforms reach out to do things, they get denied. This has got to stop. It really does.'<sup>150</sup> The WNBA has to work to build relationships with non-traditional media companies, and players have to be willing to talk to the media, even in uncomfortable positions such as after a loss.

WNBA players were very complimentary of the role Commissioner Cathy Engelbert played in the CBA fight, commending her on her support for progressive maternity leave policies and her enthusiasm for growing the league.<sup>151</sup> Engelbert was appointed in 2019 as the WNBA's first commissioner, as previous leaders had been referred to as

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<sup>147</sup> Erin Underwood. 'Expanded Media Coverage Fuels The WNBA's Sudden Spike in Fan Engagement,' *Front Office Sports*, 17 July 2019, accessed 28 April 2020, <<https://frntofficesport.com/wnba-media-coverage/>>

<sup>148</sup> Alex Bazzell. Twitter Post. 18 September 2020, 11:48am, <<https://twitter.com/alexbazzell24/status/1306772124183310336>>

<sup>149</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. Twitter Post. 18 September 2020, 12:17pm, <<https://twitter.com/linzsports/status/1306779253053304832>>

<sup>150</sup> Arielle Chambers. Twitter Post. 6 May 2020, 4:54pm, <<https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/1257745405535797249>>

<sup>151</sup> Aldridge and Lambre, *Inside the WNBA CBA*, *Stern Memorial* and *The Forgotten*, MLK Day.

President.<sup>152</sup> Though this could be seen as a change in name only, in reality, her appointment was crucial to the success of the CBA negotiations, enabling the WNBA to negotiate as its own league without having to send everything to the NBA offices.<sup>153</sup> Having a commissioner placed the WNBA on the same level as other sporting leagues, allowing Engelbert to be the face of the league in negotiations with the government for restarting games in the COVID era.<sup>154</sup> The WNBA had previously had four presidents, and Ravens player Chloe argued that this had hindered the marketing strategy of the league:

I feel like our president situation has been like a rotating seat throughout the years. And so our marketing strategies or our approach has changed every couple of years. And it's just like we're starting over again. We're starting over again. So, we haven't had a, we haven't had a stretch where we've been able to see out a marketing vision, you know, to see if it actually works.

Furthermore, the league had relied on the NBA greatly in negotiations with other entities, with Mark Tatum, the deputy commissioner, even acting as interim president before Engelbert's appointment.<sup>155</sup> This was problematic because, of course, the WNBA is not the NBA's first priority. In 2016, for example, ESPN did not initially plan to televise the opening-day game of the WNBA season, and it was not until ESPN President John Skipper noticed that this was rectified. NBA commissioner Adam Silver responded by saying 'I had accepted that we'd gotten all we could out of ESPN and was thrilled when John added the opening-day game.'<sup>156</sup> The fact that Silver did not even attempt to push for the opening game to be added highlights the low priority the NBA put on the

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<sup>152</sup> Kevin Draper and Howard Megdal. 'W.N.B.A. Selects Cathy Engelbert as Commissioner,' *The New York Times*, 15 May 2019, accessed 3 November 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/sports/wnba-cathy-engelbert-president.html>>

<sup>153</sup> Spain, Liberty: Layshia Clarendon.

<sup>154</sup> Chris Halicke. 'President Trump To Hold Conference Call With Pro Sports Commissioners,' *SI.com*, 5 April 2020, accessed 9 November 2020, <<https://www.si.com/mlb/rangers/news/president-trump-conference-call-pro-sports-commissioners>>

<sup>155</sup> Draper and Megdal, 'W.N.B.A. Selects Cathy Engelbert as Commissioner.'

<sup>156</sup> Lindsay Gibbs. 'The Myth That Women's Sports Are in Peril is Perpetuated By the Men in Charge of Them,' *Power Plays*, 31 October 2019, accessed 28 October 2020, <<https://www.powerplays.news/p/the-myth-that-womens-sports-are-in>>

WNBA, as well as that members of the NBA had simply accepted that women's basketball would not receive media attention. In 2018, Silver doubled down on this, saying he was frustrated by demands for more exposure by players:

I thought [ESPN] was very generous with the exposure they've given us. That's not to say we shouldn't be fighting for even more, but to me, the biggest issue with the WNBA right now is not the need for more exposure on ESPN.<sup>157</sup>

Silver saw *ESPN* and the NBA's investment in the WNBA as a platitude or an act of charity, not as a smart business decision. By giving Cathy Engelbert more power than previous WNBA Presidents, she has been able to rectify this line of thinking, giving her the ability to push for more investment into the league and successfully negotiate the 2020 CBA.

Cathy Engelbert's role may have been important, but none of the substantial changes in the 2020 CBA would have happened without the combined weight of the players. Nneka Ogwumike had a leading role as President of the WNBPA, but she credited the entire playing group, saying 'the women of our league — all of us, in collaboration — we accomplished something significant and substantial... The players came together and worked and pushed and made it happen.'<sup>158</sup> The success of the negotiations demonstrate the power of unions in sports leagues and indicates that women athletes are starting to flex their power; no longer are they walking on eggshells to ensure the league does not collapse. WNBA players, while celebrating their success, have continued to advocate for more, particularly on issues of travel, and this consistent effort is gaining traction; the new New York Liberty owner Joe Tsai recently tweeted his support for charter flights.<sup>159</sup> They are pushing the WNBA to dream bigger when it thinks of success, so that at some point in the future, they are paid the same as men. The players

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<sup>157</sup> Gibbs, 'The Myth That Women's Sports Are in Peril is Perpetuated By the Men in Charge of Them.'

<sup>158</sup> Nneka Ogwumike. 'Hindsight in 2020,' *The Players' Tribune*, 21 December 2020, accessed 8 October 2021, <<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/posts/hindsight-in-2020-nneka-ogwumike>>

<sup>159</sup> Joe Tsai. Twitter Post. 2 October 2021, 11:06am, <<https://twitter.com/joetsai1999/status/1444106385860431874>>

and the WNBA are, as Cathy Engelbert put it, trying to take the league ‘from survive to thrive.’<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Tisha Thompson and Mechelle Voepel. ‘WNBA Commissioner Outlines Transformative Plan to Pivot League From “Survive to Thrive,”’ *ESPN.com*, 15 October 2021, accessed 20 October 2021, <[https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/32388122/wnba-commissioner-outlines-transformative-plan-pivot-league-survive-thrive](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/32388122/wnba-commissioner-outlines-transformative-plan-pivot-league-survive-thrive)>



## Conclusion

Coming in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests, WNBA players were determined that should the 2020 season occur, racial justice should be at the forefront. The Covid-19 pandemic had thrown the season into serious jeopardy after Utah Jazz player Rudy Gobert's positive Covid test had shut down the NBA season. Most U.S. sports soon followed suit. After the success of the recent labour negotiations, the WNBA was hoping to build on the momentum they had generated, and as commissioner Cathy Engelbert understood, 'we cannot be out of the sports landscape for more than 20 months.'<sup>1</sup> The solution was a bubble-like environment at IMG academy, which became known as the "wubble," where teams and some family members stayed for nearly 100 days.<sup>2</sup>

The players agreed to this difficult arrangement on the basis that they could use their platform to highlight and demand justice for Black women killed by police. Alysha Clark (2012-present) summed up the players' mindset, saying 'every game that we played this season, was a chance to be in front of an audience, so every time that we were in front of an audience, we wanted to educate them about something that we were fighting for.'<sup>3</sup> Though the initial incentive for entering the "wubble" was the fight for racial justice, events that happened in the "real world" further catalysed the players to act in more explicit ways. The shooting of Jacob Blake created ripples within the entire sporting world, as NBA players boycotted playoff games, soon to be followed by WNBA players, who also organised a league-wide candlelight vigil and worked to develop, as Nneka Ogwumike put it 'a more pointed message around the boycott'.<sup>4</sup> WNBA players also worked to educate themselves, with the WNBPA organising meetings with Kimberlé Crenshaw and other activists and scholars. While the NBA in this instance was the

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<sup>1</sup> 144, directed by Lauren Stowell and Jenna Contreras (ESPN, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Dearica Hamby, Nneka Ogwumike, and A'ja Wilson. 'WNBA Players Reflect on Challenges Overcome and Lessons Learned in the "Wubble,"' *ESPN.com*, 13 May 2021, accessed 2 August 2021, <[https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/\\_/id/31431510/wnba-players-reflect-challenges-overcome-lessons-learned-wubble](https://www.espn.com.au/wnba/story/_/id/31431510/wnba-players-reflect-challenges-overcome-lessons-learned-wubble)>

<sup>3</sup> 144

<sup>4</sup> 144

impetus for the boycott, these events made clear the leadership role that WNBA players were already in. For instance, NBA players' response was to work to create a social justice council, emulating the WNBA's already existing one.

It was WNBA players most explicit entrance into politics that caught the most attention and differed most dramatically from the activism of other leagues. Annoyed with Atlanta Dream co-owner and Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler's continuing denigration of the WNBA's racial justice efforts and the players' belief that she was using them for political gain, the players decided to take a stand.<sup>5</sup> Sue Bird described their thinking:

So what can we do to kind of you know just defend ourselves in a way, stand up for ourselves, but be strategic about it. And that's when we discovered Reverend Warnock... How can we get some t-shirts made that say Vote Warnock, would this be a good idea, and everyone was like, yeah let's do it.<sup>6</sup>

Believing that continuing to publicly criticise Loeffler would only give her the attention she craved, players set out to research her opponents, and, after a call with Reverend Warnock, settled on him as the candidate they endorsed.<sup>7</sup> They were very deliberate in how they got their message across, coordinating their t-shirt wearing campaign to ensure that the Dream were the first team seen wearing the "Vote Warnock" shirt in a nationally televised game to achieve maximum effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> In some ways, this was only possible because all of the players were together in the "wubble," able to strategize and coordinate their efforts. Atlanta Dream's Blake Dietrick (2016-present) pointed out, 'there was a convenience level that I really think helped us unify before we decided to

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<sup>5</sup> Jane McManus. 'The WNBA's Activism and How it Just Might Change the Country in a Matter of Weeks,' *Deadspin*, 21 December 2020, accessed 18 February 2021, <<https://deadspin.com/the-wnba-s-activism-and-how-it-just-might-change-the-co-1845926074>>

<sup>6</sup> 144

<sup>7</sup> Chantel Jennings. 'Inside the WNBA's Evolution from a League of Activists to Organizers,' *The Athletic*, 15 October 2020, accessed 15 February 2021, <<https://theathletic.com/2137508/2020/10/15/inside-the-wnbas-evolution-from-a-league-of-activists-to-organizers/>>

<sup>8</sup> Jennings, 'Inside the WNBA's Evolution from a League of Activists to Organizers.'

make a move.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the *ESPN* documentary “144” showcases the league-wide players’ strategy meeting that took place following the boycott of games, made possible only because of the central location.<sup>10</sup> This “Vote Warnock” campaign was quite distinct among sports protests not only in terms of it being a league-wide collective action, but its deliberate connection of racial justice with voting, and not just voting generally, but for a specific candidate. In the 2 days following the initial t-shirt protest, the Warnock campaign raised \$183,000 and gained 3500 new grassroots donors, while his poll number steadily increased.<sup>11</sup> Warnock labelled the effort a ‘turning point’ for his campaign and went on to win an upset runoff election against Loeffler.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, WNBA players actions were not the only reason that Warnock won the Georgia runoff election. What is especially interesting, however, is the widespread credit they were given in both the sporting and non-sporting media.<sup>13</sup> As I have outlined throughout this thesis, this was not the first time that WNBA players have been engaged in racial justice, with the first wave of protests even pre-dating NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s well-documented kneeling during the national anthem. However, what

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<sup>9</sup> Julie Kliegman. ‘Can WNBA Players Take Down a U.S. Senator?’ *SI.com*, 30 October 2020, accessed 12 February 2021, <<https://www.si.com/wnba/2020/10/30/wnba-vs-loeffler-daily-cover>>

<sup>10</sup> 144

<sup>11</sup> Angele Delevoye. ‘The WNBA Influenced the Georgia Senate Race, New Research Finds,’ *The Washington Post*, 30 November 2020, accessed 15 February 2021, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/30/wnba-influenced-georgia-senate-race-new-research-finds/>>

<sup>12</sup> Rose Minutaglio. ‘Inside the WNBA’s Fight To Turn Georgia Blue,’ *Elle*, 26 January 2021, accessed 12 February 2021, <[https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a35138768/wnba-georgia-election-kelly-loeffler-nba/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social-media&utm\\_campaign=socialflowTWELM](https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a35138768/wnba-georgia-election-kelly-loeffler-nba/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social-media&utm_campaign=socialflowTWELM)>

<sup>13</sup> Cassandra Negley. ‘Sports World Applauds WNBA Activism After Dream Co-Owner Kelly Loeffler Loses Georgia Runoff,’ *Yahoo Sports*, 7 January 2021, accessed 2 August 2021, <<https://au.finance.yahoo.com/news/election-wnba-appreciation-raphael-warnock-defeats-kelly-loeffler-us-senate-runoff-georgia-150907967.html>>

Sean Gregory. ‘“We Did That”: Inside the WNBA’s Strategy to Support Raphael Warnock—and Help Democrats Win the Senate,’ *Time*, 7 January 2021, accessed 2 August 2021, <<https://time.com/5927075/atlanta-dream-warnock-loeffler/>>

Bryan Armen Graham. ‘How the WNBA Helped the Democrats Take Control of the US Senate,’ *The Guardian*, 7 January 2021, accessed 2 August 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jan/06/wnba-kelly-loeffler-raphael-warnock>>

was different about the 2020 protests was that while previous actions by WNBA players were largely ignored, these were not. WNBA players have begun to get credit for their consistent work, with the original 2016 protests now regularly cited as evidence that the WNBA was ‘at the forefront of social justice movements.’<sup>14</sup> Some of this had to do with the circumstances the 2020 season took place in, as the world-wide protests following the murder of George Floyd put the focus on police brutality at a level well beyond where it was in 2016 and the public was perhaps more receptive to hearing the WNBA’s message. Certainly, the league was helped by the increase in nationally televised games in 2020, which gave the players a bigger platform, as well as the strategizing potential of the “wubble.” However, regardless of these unique circumstances, the narrative that WNBA players are leaders in political movements has now firmly taken hold and is perhaps displacing the negative characterisation of the league as boring or on the brink of collapse.

The explicitly political actions of WNBA players today seem worlds apart from what McDonald characterises as the postfeminist sensibility of the early years of the league.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the autobiographies of the early WNBA players rarely claim an overt feminist position, with only Lauren Jackson directly referencing the impact of her Gender Studies degree on her thinking about gender equality.<sup>16</sup> The WNBA’s conception of itself as an explicitly feminist or activist project until recently is difficult to parse, and in its early years the league relied on popular feminist ideas of empowerment. It positioned its players as role models, that is, ‘smart, achievement-oriented and athletic women, who balance the rigours of professional sport with a benevolent sense of womanhood.’<sup>17</sup> While visibility is important, images of empowered women being absorbed into the media landscape is not inherently political or feminist. However, I contend that it would be unfair to suggest that the league of the late 1990s/early 2000s is completely distinct from the explicitly political league of today. By occupying a sporting space that is

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory, ‘“We Did That”: Inside the WNBA’s Strategy to Support Raphael Warnock—and Help Democrats Win the Senate.’

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, ‘The Marketing of the Women’s National Basketball Association and the Making of Postfeminism,’ p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson and Nicholls, *My Story: A Life in Basketball and Beyond*, pp. 193-199.

<sup>17</sup> McDonald, ‘Queering Whiteness: The Particular Case of the Women’s National Basketball Association,’ p. 383.

traditionally dominated by men, the WNBA functioned as a way to resist hegemonic sporting practices and challenged the very notion of basketball as a “man’s game.”<sup>18</sup> As Enke points out, the occupation of gendered spaces can be political even while rejecting an overt feminist position, and can set the stage for future, more explicitly political action.<sup>19</sup> The initial wave of players may have had to compromise, conforming to certain ideas about gendered presentation or enduring substandard conditions and wages, but they did so because they believed it would secure a future for women’s professional basketball in the United States. They were able to set the stage for the current wave of protests and the growing belief in the importance of the WNBA as a political force.

That said, it is clear that there has been a seismic shift in the way the WNBA has positioned itself, and, as I have argued, this is largely due to the continuing demands of players who no longer will accept subpar conditions or tactical deployments of femininity. In the early years of the league, both players and executives were convinced that they needed to portray a respectable form of femininity. While flagging ratings in the early 2000s may have caused executives to double down on this form of marketing, I have argued that players began to publicly express some more ambivalence towards the focus on femininity. However, it was not until 2013 and the entrance of Griner into the league that players began to directly challenge the strictures of femininity and heterosexuality and demand recognition for queer players and fans. This progress came in fits and starts, with players like Diggins-Smith continuing to be sexualised. However, the end result is a league that allows for an array of athletic presentations and ensures the Blackness of its players is not obscured. This is not to say that there are not remnants of apologetic femininity, as even in 2021 players like Indiana’s Kysre Gondrezick (2021-present) made comments like ‘you may play like a boy. Doesn’t mean you have to look like one.’<sup>20</sup> Media coverage still tends to disproportionately focus on white players.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of WNBA players still work to push against

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<sup>18</sup> Woodward, *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*, p. 104. Markula and Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self*, p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> Jojo Gentry. ‘Fever’s Gondrezick Aims to Alter the Landscape of Women’s Basketball,’ *CBS 4 Indy*, 3 May 2021, accessed 2 August 2021, <<https://cbs4indy.com/sports/fevers-gondrezick-aims-to-change-landscape-of-womens-basketball/>>

<sup>21</sup> Isard and Melton, ‘Make This the Season We End Discriminatory Sports Coverage.’

this and ensure that players that do not conform to traditional femininity, or even identify as women in the case of Layshia Clarendon, have a place in this league.

Embodiment may be the issue where players opinions are the hardest to parse, and while players continue to expand the possibilities of what women can do on the basketball court, they are still hindered by the constraints of feminine body comportment. The legacy of Senda Berenson and her rules for women have resulted in a way of playing basketball “like a woman” that values cooperation and teamwork, at the expense of individuality and other, more flashy skills. Griner’s negotiations with herself on whether or not to dunk best epitomises these limitations and demonstrates the continuing relevance of Young’s notion of “throwing like a girl.” Despite these limitations, most WNBA players have demanded a place on the basketball court, playing against boys and men in the face of disdain and even violence. They have negotiated an understanding, albeit somewhat convoluted and contradictory, of what it means to play basketball “like a woman.” For a long time, the WNBA was the sole prominent women’s professional league of any team sport in the United States, and consequently was one of the few places that women could publicly display strength, aggression, and skill.

While the players’ position on embodiment may be somewhat ambivalent, their explicit demands for better pay and conditions are anything but. Initially, players may have been impressed by the level of professionalism the league displayed due to its connection to the NBA. They were quickly disenchanted though by the continuing lack of resources and subpar facilities. WNBA players are expected to act like professionals—forced to deal with the pressures of unguaranteed contracts, trades, an unrelenting schedule, the need to self-motivate, and media attention—however they feel as if the league has not lived up to its end of the bargain, particularly compared to the elite colleges many players attended. Consequently, in the most recent CBA fight, they demanded and received better travel arrangements, housing, maternity benefits, and family planning. Despite these improvements, the inequalities between men and women are still embedded within the material environment—the arena, the training facilities, the merchandise stand. Players are still stuck on unreliable, commercial flights, and are still often forced to play year-round on overseas teams that have inconsistent levels of professionalism. Even with the improvements of the new CBA,

players are not being quiet with their frustrations, and are continuing to push the league to meet their level of professionalism.

WNBA players are not just voicing their opinions haphazardly but are very intentional in the framing of their arguments. They strategically used the slogan 'Bet on Women' in their recent CBA fight, linking their fight for higher salaries to the need for more investment and marketing, while reframing the wage gap to focus on percentage of revenue. In the process, they worked to deflect the traditional arguments against higher wages, working to counter the fake reports that they were looking to be paid the same salaries as NBA players. This CBA battle was revolutionary for women's sports, moving away from the notion that women should just be grateful to have a place and should put up with insufficient facilities and pay because there is simply not enough interest. Instead, WNBA players put the onus on the league to invest in itself and to stop assuming that there is a limit to the success of women's sports. The players were helped by the new commissioner Cathy Engelbert, however it is still the players that have the loudest voice and are the most important in demanding change. Of course, there is a high level of labour involved for the players outside of the basketball court, whether through marketing or the constant barrage of misogynistic attacks that they face. However, they continue to do it because they want to ensure the league not only persists, but becomes a lucrative and stable career option for women in future generations.

Throughout my examination of the WNBA, it is clear that the players have pushed and prodded the league to enable it to get to the place where the "Wubble" protests were possible. To quote Terri Jackson, WNBA players are 'redefining and defining feminism on their own terms,' and they are doing so with an explicit intersectional focus.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other women's sports leagues, such as the short-lived Women's Professional Soccer (WPS), which have been very ambivalent towards the role of feminism, both the WNBA and its players have been very explicit on its position on cultural and political issues.<sup>23</sup> This is not Banet-Weiser's "Popular Feminism," focused solely on visibility and

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<sup>22</sup> Hashtag Sports. Twitter Post. 28 June 2019, 4:20 am, <<https://twitter.com/HashtagSports/status/1144309667608309760>>

<sup>23</sup> Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*, p. 73.

empowerment, but an intersectional feminism that incorporates political action and pushes for explicit benefits for its female workforce, such as maternity leave and family planning. It is worth pointing out that when the WNBA initially tried to lean into an overtly political position with its 2018 “take a seat, take a stand” campaign, it did so unilaterally, without the involvement of its players. Consequently, the campaign was unsuccessful and did not translate into the kind of adulation that the “Vote Warnock” campaign generated. It had to come from the players. Furthermore, it had to come from the collective action of the entire playing group. This is unique to sports activism, where the focus has largely been on individuals. For example, the media coverage of LeBron James’s forays into political action have emphasised his work and leadership even when his entire team takes an action such as wearing political t-shirts.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the WNBA as a whole is often given credit. The fact that this goes against traditional framing devices has resulted in some tension, such as when Breanna Stewart won *Sport’s Illustrated* Sportsperson of the Year as an “Activist Athlete.” This was greeted with some backlash, not only because she was a white player receiving an award for racial justice efforts in a majority Black league, but because the players believed that the award should have gone to the entire playing group.<sup>25</sup> This collective action was what allowed the WNBA players their activist success.

WNBA players are now seen as leaders among athlete activists, as the WNBA is proving itself to be a feminist organisation beyond its status as the longest running professional women’s sports league. The publicity and acclaim the players have received as a result of their social justice work is beyond anything that has occurred as a result of their on-court play. This perhaps supports some feminists’ perspective that for women’s sports there could be a different mode of judging success not based on the masculine model that values commercialism and winning above all. However, the WNBA is not settling for this, and they are determined to achieve commercial longevity and continue growing the league. They have attempted to leverage this social justice activism into more traditional commercial success. Indeed, ratings for WNBA games in 2020 rose, while

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<sup>24</sup> Danielle Sarver Coombs and David Cassilo. ‘Athletes and/or Activists: LeBron James and Black Lives Matter.’ *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 41, no. 5 (2017), p. 434.

<sup>25</sup> Maitreyi Anantharaman. ‘Who Gets the Magazine Cover?’ *Defector*, 8 December 2020, accessed 2 August 2021, <<https://defector.com/who-gets-the-magazine-cover/>>



those of most men's sports leagues fell, belying the narrative that Black Lives Matter protests were the cause of the NBA's falling ratings.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that fans of the WNBA are more accepting of racial justice protests, while the attention they garner might encourage those who are open to watching women's basketball to pay more attention to the WNBA. Indeed, companies are increasingly engaging with politically contentious issues that require consumers to 'pick a side.'<sup>27</sup> For instance, Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick sparked both considerable support and vehement backlash, yet online sales increased by 31 percent and Nike's stock rose.<sup>28</sup> Nike was willing to alienate some percentage of the market to bolster support amongst Kaepernick's defenders, and in fact the backlash probably helped, as 'brands' willingness to alienate some consumers is attractive to other consumers who construct their identities oppositionally—they will support brands like Chick-Fil-A or Nike that "stick it to the Lib/Conservative."<sup>29</sup> The WNBA is primed to capitalise on this dynamic, as support for the WNBA becomes conflated with a specific progressive political identity. Like Nike, the WNBA is willing to sacrifice some of the potential audience—who they are betting would not watch women's basketball anyway—to stake a claim to one side of a divided political landscape, and hopefully to the resulting viewership. Key to this is that the player-led activism gives the WNBA an authenticity, as consumers are often sceptical of insincere corporate advocacy.<sup>30</sup> As television audiences dwindle, the reasonably steady ratings for live events make them even more valuable for advertisers,

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<sup>26</sup> Eric Nemchock. 'Viewership of 2020 WNBA Finals Up 15 Percent From 2019,' *Swish Appeal*, 9 October 2020, accessed 2 August 2021, <<https://www.swishappeal.com/wnba/21507979/wnba-finals-2020-viewership-ratings-up-cathy-engelbert-espn>>

<sup>27</sup> Jo-Yun Li, Joon Kyoung Kim, and Khalid Alharbi. 'Exploring The Role of Issue Involvement and Brand Attachment in Shaping Consumer Response toward Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) Initiatives: The Case of Nike's Colin Kaepernick Campaign.' *International Journal of Advertising* (2021), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Soo Youn. 'Nike Sales Booming After Colin Kaepernick Ad, Invalidating Critics,' *ABC News*, 22 December 2018, accessed 26 October 2021, <<https://abcnews.go.com/Business/nike-sales-booming-kaepernick-ad-invalidating-critics/story?id=59957137>>

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Montez de Oca, Sherry Mason, and Sung Ahn. 'Consuming for the Greater Good: "Woke" Commercials in Sports Media.' *Communication & Sport* (2020), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Li, Kim, and Alharbi, 'Exploring The Role of Issue Involvement and Brand Attachment in Shaping Consumer Response toward Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) Initiatives,' p. 9.

and the WNBA's growing ratings suggests that even appealing to a somewhat niche, progressive audience could be a worthwhile proposition.

Where, then, does the WNBA go from here? Certainly, there is greater optimism surrounding the league than when I started this research project in 2017, and there has even been significant progress and change since my ethnographic research in 2019, with the new CBA and increased protest efforts. As I have argued, this is the culmination of the efforts of WNBA players who have come to realise that they no longer have to feel grateful to even have a league. No longer do they have to conform to a narrow version of supposedly marketable femininity; no longer do they have to put up with low wages and poor facilities. Instead, they can push for better, they can display alternative versions of athletic femininity or female masculinity, and they can use their platform to effect real political change. That is not to say that there is still not a long way to go, as WNBA players still face regular misogynistic trolling, still have to fly commercial, still have low levels of media coverage, and still do not make the kinds of salaries that guarantee long-term financial security. Internally, as Layshia Clarendon pointed out, players need further education on gender identity, and the league has yet to fully have to grapple with trans issues in sport, though there has been much public support for Clarendon and trans women outside of the WNBA.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, the WNBA is showing that it is possible to value inclusivity and the voices of Black women, rejecting superficial notions of empowerment in favour of a league that respects both the athletic prowess of the players and their political and labour rights activism. Indeed, WNBA players have proved that, as Leilani Mitchell (2008-present) pointed out, 'it's bigger than basketball.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bar-Lavi, "Being Black and Non-Binary is My Superpower": Layshia Clarendon on Race, Gender, Social Justice and the WNBA.'

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