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WNBA stars show they've got game

League, Fever's Catchings get image boost

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Tamika Catchings is a star forward for the Indiana Fever, a three-time WNBA All-Star and an Olympic gold medalist.

But that's nothing like being in a video game.

"It's a feeling you can't really describe," she said. "It's like: Out of the six people that they chose, they picked me."

Catchings -- along with the WNBA's Sheryl Swoopes, Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, Lisa Leslie and Lauren Jackson -- is featured in a new game from Electronic Arts, "NBA Street Homecourt."

It's the first time WNBA players have been in a video game.

"Just having your name on a video game is a signal that you're important," Catchings said.

The same can be said of the WNBA.

Since its inception in 1996, the league has struggled with inconsistent attendance, sluggish TV ratings, muddled marketing and an ever-changing brand image.

In 2001, for example, the WNBA decided to court lesbian fans as a core audience to shore up ticket sales. Then, in 2003 and 2004, the league shifted gears for the "This Is Who I Am" ad campaign, featuring players in sexy, often belly-baring clothes.

Now there's the "Have you seen her?" campaign, with commercials that show off the players' skills on the court and their involvement in their communities. The WNBA says it is targeting women -- of any sexual orientation -- and families.

"It isn't really a very clear brand image," said Henry Schafer, executive vice president of The Q Scores Co., a market research firm in Manhasset, N.Y.

Game attendance figures seem to bear that out. The WNBA doesn't provide specific numbers, but admits attendance has been declining for years. There was an uptick late in the 2006 season, though.

"It's the only sport where you have a professional female league trying to be on the same level as men," Schafer said.

The WNBA has often faced the question: "Why watch the WNBA when I can watch the real league?" said Andrew Rohm, assistant professor of marketing at Northeastern University in Boston.

The video game, in some sense, is an equalizer. It pits WNBA players against NBA players in exaggerated, gritty street-ball games. This is the fourth game in the series.

"One of the reasons I love it is it puts the women on par with the men," said Andi Poch, senior vice president of business development for the WNBA.

"There's always the question of: Do they have game? I think this is the best example that they do."

Catchings was happy to find out her avatar can steal the ball as well as she can.

"The video game allows our skills to speak for us on the court," she said.

Electronic Arts chose Catchings and the rest of the "NBA Street Homecourt" lineup based on their athleticism and personalities. The decision to add WNBA players was partly in response to the increasing number of female gamers, said David Pekush, brand manager for EA Sports.

Typically, the "NBA Street" series attracts gamers in their teens and twenties. About 10 percent of them are female. But "Homecourt" could raise that to 20 percent to 25 percent.

"Now the girls feel like they have something that's made for them," said Catchings from Seoul, South Korea, where she is playing in the WKBL women's basketball league.

"NBA Street Homecourt" also is an opportunity to turn the six WNBA players into household names -- something long missing from the league's marketing strategy.

Basketball, more than most sports, is about personality, Schafer said. It's about stars who are willing to go out and sell the sport. Think Michael Jordan.

The WNBA is having trouble cultivating personality, he said. Other than Swoopes and Leslie, there are no real "faces of the league."

People know the names Taurasi and Sue Bird, but they don't follow them.

"(The video game) will help people get more familiar with the athletes, their names, their athleticism and more familiar with the WNBA product as a whole," Schafer said.

Poch said the WNBA's starless approach is a bit by design. The WNBA is not the NBA. It's not about dunks and showboating. It's about teamwork and fundamentals. But she admitted it would be nice to have more stars.

"I'm going to get their butts out there," Poch promised.

The WNBA expects the video game to expose the league to new fans, teen gamers who may not even watch sports on TV.

"Anytime you have a new marketing opportunity with your players . . . it's an advantage in getting your brand out there," said Kelly Krauskopf, general manager of the Indiana Fever.

The WNBA already is beginning to build momentum with the spike in attendance that started in the second half of the 2006 season and lasted into the playoffs.

"Ultimately," Poch said, "our goal is to get more butts in seats and more eyes on TVs."