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For Women's Players, Europe Where Money Is

By Gene Phelps

You can bet LeBron James didn't buy a roundtrip ticket to Poland when the Cavaliers lost in the NBA Finals to the Spurs.

There's no need for the talented King of Cleveland to head overseas to supplement his income in the offseason. He makes plenty from his all-star performances on the court, and from wrapping his feet in Nike leather.

However, the stars of the women's pro game aren't afforded the same big paydays and mega-bucks endorsement deals.

Tamika Whitmore, a forward for the Indiana Fever, is in her ninth WNBA season. When it's over next month, she'll be on a jet headed to some foreign soil - Poland, France, Spain in years past - for a ninth consecutive year to cash in on her talent.

Women's pro basketball is a lot bigger business in Europe than it is in the United States.

"I've been in the WNBA a long time, so I'm on the high end salary-wise," Whitmore said. "Still, I make four or fives times as much playing overseas."

The maximum salary for a veteran WNBA player tops out at \$100,000. Rookies make, on average, between \$34,000 and \$41,000. The league minimum is \$30,000 for first-year players and \$42,000 for vets.

"I played in Poland last season and Turkey the year before," said Tan White, a teammate of Whitmore's with the Fever. "You make a lot more overseas than you do in the WNBA, but you always want to come back home and play in your country."

White actually had a one-month check in Europe that topped her entire WNBA season salary.

Chicago Sky rookie Armintie Price, the former Ole Miss and Myrtle standout, said she's looking forward to playing basketball abroad.

"I want to experience some of that good money," she said, then smiled.

Whitmore says there's a lot of passion for the women's game in Europe. The teams are willing to pay top money for talent.

"It's more of an offensive game," she said. "When you go there, you do what you're hired to do, and that's put up big numbers. Of course, with the money and fame comes a lot of the blame."

The WNBA is celebrating its 10th season this year, but many of its 14 teams are playing to half-full houses.

Whitmore says better marketing and a longer season - add a month - could help raise salary levels. Until then, you play because you love the American game.

"When you've been in the league as long as I have, you play

because you love the game," she said. "That's the common all the way around in the league."

One of the items the WNBA is looking into is implementing a soft salary cap to give teams the flexibility to compete with teams overseas in salary. The current cap is \$728,000 per club.

The league also announced a new eight-year multi-million TV deal with ESPN.

Whitmore and White have the same passion for the game whether they're on foreign or home soil. Still, they would like to earn their primary paycheck in the WNBA.

"I hope it gets to a point where we make more in the WNBA," White said. "It's a work in progress. We need more fan support. We need more people interested in the game."