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## WNBA aims for profits in 12th season, with new star

By Ben Klayman

Eager fans should be jumping from their seats next week to watch a young basketball player already billed as one of the game's best soar through the air and throw down a thunderous dunk.

It will not be Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Kevin Garnett of the National Basketball Association plowing through the playoffs.

Instead, the 12th season of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) kicks off on May 17 with a new TV deal, optimism about profitability and hopes that a rookie will carry a Michael Jordan-like mantle.

When 22-year-old Candace Parker laces up her sneakers next week for the first time, the WNBA is anticipating that a mega-star will be born and will lead the league to profitability and long-term legitimacy.

She seems off to a good start. Her jersey has become a hot seller even before she suits up for her first professional game after a storied career at the University of Tennessee that included championships the last two years.

Launched by the National Basketball Association in 1997 following the gold-medal performance of the U.S. women's team in the Olympics the year before, the stars may be aligning for the WNBA, with a strong female fan base and rising ticket sales.

"The progress this league has made in this short window is nothing short of miraculous," WNBA President Donna Orender said in a telephone interview.

Others do not share the same view.

"It's sort of now consigned to being a minor league, which is fine," said Robert Boland, a professor of sports management at New York University. "I don't think it was ever going to be anything else."

### ROUGH SLEDDING

Some women's sports leagues, like soccer, have folded, and others have failed to garner a huge following, like softball. After the initial excitement of its first two years, the WNBA has managed to survive both a decline in attendance and television ratings, feeding off its parent.

"They had the rocket booster known as the NBA," said David Carter, executive director of the USC Sports Business Institute. "Their biggest success is that they're still around, and from what we've seen that is by no means a small feat."

The NBA has used its muscle to send sponsors and ticket buyers the WNBA's way.

NBA Commissioner David Stern said his league's commitment will not end, even as the WNBA brings in more private owners to replace the NBA teams that sponsored them from the start.

"We're very committed to it. We gave it our name," he said in an interview.

Analysts say the new owners are independent and more dedicated to the WNBA.

As professional sports grapple with steroid scandals and rising ticket prices, the WNBA strives to offer affordable, family-friendly games where girls can find strong role models.

"More and more sponsors talk to us about the need to have a platform to reach women," Stern said. "We see the WNBA as a long-term investment in growing the audience for basketball."

### BY THE NUMBERS

The WNBA, whose fan base is about 60 percent female, offers a good place to appeal to women, who control most of the buying decisions in U.S. households. The NBA's fan base, on the other hand, is 64 percent male.

"If we're to win the hearts and minds of young, influential girls in this country, we need to partner up with the most authentic symbols that they aspire to reach," said Lawrence Norman, vice president of global basketball for Adidas AG.

The maker of sportswear and sports equipment signed an 11-year sponsorship agreement with the NBA and the WNBA in 2006.

Critics argue fans simply do not want to watch women's sports, and therefore TV networks will not pay billions of dollars to secure the rights as they do for the NBA.

Last July, the WNBA signed an 8-year extension with Walt Disney Co's ABC and ESPN networks to televise games, giving the league its first broadcast rights fee in a deal worth an estimated \$30 million. In contrast, the NBA's deal last year was for eight years and \$7.5 billion.

An estimated 100 million women play basketball worldwide, while the number of women and girls playing organized basketball has risen 40 percent since 1990, the WNBA said.

Title IX, the 1972 federal law that banned sex discrimination at educational institutions, helped level the playing field for college sports, but does not extend to professional sports.

However, league officials said the game's popularity in high school and college has fueled the WNBA, which in turn encourages more young girls to take up the sport.

This is where Parker, the rookie from the Chicago area, comes in. The WNBA expects fans to become familiar with Parker, who was selected first by the Los Angeles Sparks team at last month's player draft.

"People will come to see Candace Parker who really don't have any interest in seeing basketball and stay for what they found," said Kathy Goodman, co-owner of the Sparks.

The Sparks saw an immediate boost in season ticket sales following the addition of Parker, and the team has already sold more seats than last season, Goodman said. She expects the season ticket base to grow about 5 percent this year.

Still, the WNBA has a long way to go to match the men's league, and the disparity in numbers is stark.

The average NBA salary is about \$4.6 million, compared with \$65,000 for the women. NBA revenues total \$3.5 billion, while the WNBA is only a small fraction of that.

Stern expects the WNBA will be profitable next season and look to add two new teams by 2011.

Several WNBA franchises have sold for \$10 million over the past few years, compared with \$350 million that the NBA's Seattle Supersonics fetched in 2006. And that included the ownership of the Seattle WNBA team.

Goodman, who bought the Sparks with another woman in 2006, was not scared off by the numbers. The high school teacher and former film company executive sees the team as a long-term investment. "We looked at it as a classically undervalued asset."