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WNBA Coming Of Age

By John Altavilla

There is a new eight-year television deal with ABC/ESPN that will provide the riches of rights fees for the first time. And a six-year collective bargaining agreement will ensure labor peace as the WNBA begins its 12th season Saturday.

"What's happened in the first 11 years of our history is we've essentially completed a generation of young women entering the league," said Donna Orender, WNBA president since 2005. "This draft was the strongest we've ever had, and those young women were just 10 years old when the league began [in 1997]."

"There's been an explosion of participation which has created more of an opportunity to play at every single level, and the quality of coaching has followed along. That has resulted in an exponential growth in the quality of play. If you have 10 million athletes to choose from instead of 10, guess what's going to happen? It's all coming together to create our new and improved property."

It is a property that consists of 14 teams, with the expansion Atlanta Dream. A team in Albuquerque might follow as the league moves away from the original model of NBA ownership and NBA arenas.

The Connecticut Sun, owned by the Mohegan Sun, is one example. A group of Seattle women, led by former Seattle Deputy Mayor Anne Levinson, bought the Storm this year from the SuperSonics for \$10 million to save the team from moving to Oklahoma City.

Orender came to the WNBA from the LPGA, which has never been averse to glamorizing its players. Perhaps for that reason, Orender didn't take the politically correct route when the racy photos of Sun guard Erin Phillips appeared in an Australian magazine last month, just like she didn't about nude photos of 2003 MVP Lauren Jackson.

"The success of the league is going to be built around the quality of the basketball," Orender said. "But you can never ignore the fact that men and women are hard-wired to enjoy good-looking people."

"I'm not into supporting the objectification of women. ... But on the other hand, we have incredibly beautiful women playing for us, and I think they should be appreciated for their beauty as well. Erin is 22 years old. She has an amazing body. And now she's got some great pictures to show everyone."

The league will debut a new marketing campaign this season that targets men and their misconceptions about the league. The campaign features Detroit's Cheryl Ford, Indiana's Tamika Catchings and Candace Parker of Los Angeles, the league's top draft pick from national champion Tennessee.

"We attract a lot of male fans. They follow our game, without a doubt," Orender said. "I think we have an incredible mix of fans. We understand that men tend to govern the conversation when it comes to sports, and I think the WNBA is starting to bring change to that. We had growing pains, but what is emerging now is the

fruit of that labor."

Of course, there are still problems such as the overseas seasons that keep many of the WNBA's players away from training camp, causing some to miss a game or two of the season.

"The overlaps in the schedule are not optimum for us," Orender said. "But we work the best we can with it, with an eye on making modifications as we move forward, if we can. But at this point, there is no solution."

The monthlong break in August forced because of the Summer Olympics — and the loss of players such as Penny Taylor and Svetlana Abrosimova to national team commitments — is just another example of how the WNBA compromises.

The league is not even prepared right now to say if there will be time for an All-Star Game this season. But Orender isn't discouraged.

"It is what it is," Orender said. "The global game is growing. There is world-wide interest, and that speaks positively to the growth of the game. When you grow, there will be bumps along the way."