

ESPN
May 12, 2008

Plenty of mystery remains as WNBA's 12th season approaches

By Mechelle Voepel

Each year, it seems like our WNBA season preview should come with a voucher that reads: "Redeem for real 'preview' next month."

Because it's always easier to look at the season *after* we get our bearings by finding out for a few weeks what these teams are really like.

The late arrivals from overseas/short training camps means the preseason is about as illuminating as striking a match in a pitch-black cave. You see what's right in front of you, but even that's a limited view. And who knows what's in the shadows?

Still, let's look at what we do know -- or at least think we know.

In subsequent stories this week, I'll look more specifically at Los Angeles and Detroit, teams which right now I'm guessing will end up at the top of the Western and Eastern conferences. But here's a really quick take on the Sparks and Shock.

Lisa Leslie didn't play last season because of maternity leave, and Candace Parker's shoulder is still a question mark after the Tennessee star twice dislocated it en route to leading the Lady Vols to the NCAA title in April. But Leslie has worked hard to come back at a level in which she could have another MVP season. And if Parker's shoulder holds up, those two provide a can't-miss duo for the Sparks.

For Detroit, if Cheryl Ford can play regularly despite lingering knee problems, the Shock are in good shape. With Deanna Nolan, Katie Smith and Plenette Pierson also back, Detroit is a team that knows how to win.

The Shock were a shot away from being a repeat champion in Game 4 of the finals last season. And while Detroit wasn't in position to draft a superstar such as Parker last month, the Shock did pick up players who seem likely to fit well and contribute to this team.

As for the league overall, the biggest X factor this season is the summer Olympics, for which the WNBA takes a month-long break. The last WNBA games before Beijing are July 27, then the season starts again on Aug. 28. Some players will head to China for the Olympics. The rest will be practicing, doing community service gigs and trying to either maintain their team's good vibe or change it if things are going badly.

Seattle was the franchise that navigated this best the last time the league season was interrupted for the Summer Games. And like in 2004, Storm stars Lauren Jackson and Sue Bird will be adversaries in the Olympics. Team USA beat Australia in the gold medal game in Athens, then Bird and Jackson combined with their Storm teammates to win the WNBA title later that year.

Seattle is one of the more intriguing teams in the league this season. Under different ownership and separated from the SuperSonics, the Storm have new components who are old hands in the WNBA.

Those changes will come on the court with the additions of Sheryl Swoopes, Yolanda Griffith and Swin Cash, and on the sidelines with coach Brian Agler. Will this work?

Swoopes, 37, and Griffith, 38, are both nearing retirement but are trying to squeeze the last bit out of their amazing ability and longevity. Cash, 28, is attempting to get back the high-level consistency she once had. Her relationship with coach Bill Laimbeer in Detroit went past the salvaging point last season.

And how about the defending champion Mercury? Aussie star Penny Taylor, so crucial to Phoenix's title in 2007, is staying with her national team to prepare for the Olympics. With Paul Westhead gone, Corey Gaines takes over as head coach. Having played for and coached with Westhead, Gaines might be able to make a fairly smooth transition as far as keeping the Paul-ball style going strong.

The Mercury, however, can't "replace" Taylor's talent, productivity or personality. There is the possibility that she might rejoin Phoenix after the Olympics, but the Mercury certainly can't count on that. If Phoenix is in really good position at that point in the season, maybe that will factor into her stepping back in. By the same token, though, a break in playing time might be what's best for her long-term.

So ... hey, Diana Taurasi and Cappie Pondexter! See the basketball? Once again, shoot it until the season is over or your arms fall off. Whichever comes first.

San Antonio is another team that seems likely to contend for a playoff spot or maybe even the West title. The Silver Stars might have the right mix of veterans and young players who are not necessarily the league's greatest talents but have a lot of skill and the ability to have big games when needed.

Meanwhile, the possible "beauty" of both Sacramento and Houston is in the eye of the beholder. Meaning some observers will see these teams as contenders and some won't.

The Monarchs no longer have Griffith, but she's also not the same player who was the team's rock for so many seasons. And DeMya Walker, who missed virtually all of last season, suffered another knee injury recently that will keep her out this year.

Sacramento's stability with experienced players such as Ticha Penicheiro, Nicole Powell, Rebekkah Brunson and Kara Lawson is a plus in the Monarchs' favor, though.

The Comets still have Tina Thompson and Michelle Snow, and they've added veterans who've had success elsewhere, such as Shannon Johnson and Mwadi Mabika. How the chemistry works with Houston will be something to watch. There's talent on this squad ... but there are also a lot of tempers.

As for Minnesota, I'm not sure I know what kind of team the Lynx are trying to build -- or if they know. There are a lot of young players who are promising, but still not proven at a pro level. And it's hard to pick a really inspiring leader among any of the veterans.

Now, turning to the East ... beyond Detroit and Indiana, there seems a lot of the usual unknown. Not that the Fever don't have a big question mark, too, since Tamika Catchings' return from her Achilles injury is uncertain.

The Fever have been very dependent on Catchings -- not just for her production but also for her winning mentality. But the team has to proceed, and compete the best it can without her and not worry about when she's going to be back.

Katie Douglas is back home in Indiana, where she has always wanted to be, and the Fever elevated Lin Dunn to head coach. It has certainly been a long and winding road between now and when Dunn was running the Purdue program in the 1990s and Douglas was a high school standout in Indiana. Had things gone differently, Dunn would have coached Douglas in West Lafayette. But ... now they have a chance to win a WNBA title working together.

There's a different look to Douglas' former team, the Connecticut Sun, but coach Mike Thibault has been successful in figuring out different ways to win in his time in the WNBA.

Lindsay Whalen is a consummate playmaker. But will the Sun's interior play be as consistent as it needs to be, especially against some of the better post players in the league?

Speaking of questions about post play, what can be expected from Washington? The Mystics traded DeLisha Milton-Jones to L.A. for Taj McWilliams-Franklin. How much does McWilliams-Franklin have left in the tank at age 37? The only other experienced interior player the Mystics have is Nakia Sanford.

New York got off to a good start last season. Then there was a stretch in July when the Liberty lost seven in a row, and it appeared the team might go totally off the rails. But that didn't happen, and the Liberty made the playoffs. There's reason to think New York can do that again in 2008 -- if the team plays as well as a unit as it seemed to during its best moments last season.

The Chicago Sky are in their third season -- and already have their third head coach in Steve Key. Bo Overton resigned abruptly in March in one of those situations that was surrounded by innuendo and message board rumors. Neither the Sky management nor Overton has cleared up why he left.

Key played professionally for a long time overseas, then coached over there with men's teams before joining Dave Cowens' staff for the Sky's inaugural season in 2006. Then Cowens left for the NBA after one year. And Overton -- who had spent several years in the women's college game -- departed suddenly before starting what would have been his second season in Chicago.

So now Key is yet another of the many coaches so far in the WNBA's history who didn't have a career track in women's basketball but ended up in the game. And now, of all things, he finds himself running a team.

Chicago has a lot of youthful ability, including Sylvia Fowles, the second overall pick in the draft. But especially with the Sky off to this Mystics-like start as a franchise in terms of coaching, I just can't bring myself to be too optimistic about what Chicago might do this season. I'm certainly open for the Sky to surprise me.

Finally, the team with the most unknown -- simply because it's just getting started -- is the Atlanta Dream. Marynell Meadors, who has spent her career in women's hoops at the college and pro levels, is coach for the expansion franchise. The Dream should have the goal of building up some excitement among its new fan base by playing hard and being really involved in the community.

At least ... that's the way it all looks now for the league's 12th season. Of course, it will be worth reanalyzing everything in a few weeks.