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Travel Tough On WNBA Players

By John Altavilla

Uncasville- When asked last week what she considered the biggest differences between playing basketball at UConn and professionally for the Connecticut Sun, rookie guard *Ketia Swanier* offered something the casual fan might find surprising.

"We fly commercial," Swanier said.

The WNBA does not allow charter flights, a concession the players, many of whom traveled in style in college, were willing to collectively bargain to help the developing league get a stronger financial footing.

"I don't think the issue was ever really a sticking point," Sun general manager *Chris Sienko* said.

Sienko admits that flying commercially has added some stress and many extra hours to moving his team around the country.

There are only three instances this season when the Sun play back-to-back games. In May, the home opener in the afternoon was followed by a day game in New York, which the team bused to. In late June, a night game in Detroit was followed by a home game at night against Atlanta. And in August, the Sun resume their season after the Olympic break with consecutive road games in Indiana and Atlanta.

"It's tough for every team, not just us," Sienko said. "You talk about adding several hours to every travel day. Most times, you need to wait until the next morning to leave. ... Chartering makes it a lot easier, but it's also a costly proposition."

Sienko said the team tries to avoid problems by traveling a day in advance.

"It's difficult, because you are so used to it," said Sun forward *Tamika Raymond*, who played at UConn and was an assistant at Ohio State before taking the same position at Kansas this season. "But I also understand how expensive it is. It's \$30,000 to \$50,000 just to get the plane in the air, which the WNBA unfortunately doesn't have right now. We just don't generate the money yet to consider it. Would we love it? Yes, we would love it. But we know we can't have it right now."

"But as a player, and now that I'm a college coach, it's just so much better. You don't fall behind or miss many days [of practice and school]. And the planes are larger with bigger, bucket seats. You get your own row, not sitting in the middle all the way to California."

Give Me Liberty

The league's first outdoor game Saturday night at Arthur Ashe Stadium in New York, where the U.S. Open is held, came at the perfect time for the host Liberty.

After the Liberty's 1-3 start, which featured two losses to the Sun, there was a feeling coach *Pat Coyle* might be on the way out. But that talk has long since receded, especially after a week in which the Liberty reasserted themselves into the Eastern Conference with consecutive wins over Detroit, Connecticut and Washington.

Former UConn forward *Ashley Battle* had 15 points off the bench for the Liberty in their 77-56 win over the Mystics at Madison Square Garden on Thursday. The Fever defeated the Liberty 71-55 Saturday night.

No Shock, Really

The Shock, defending Eastern Conference champions, have not lost at home (10-0) this season. Seattle, the top team in the West, has lost only once at home. San Antonio lost its second home game Saturday night to Minnesota. ... Struggling Atlanta, the league's expansion franchise, had the best win of its history last week when *Izianne Castro Marques* scored 24 points to help the Dream beat the Indiana Fever 81-77 in Atlanta. The Fever's *Tamika Catchings*, named to the Olympic team last week, re-injured her right heel in the fourth quarter and had to leave the game. Catchings missed most of the first half of the season recovering from a torn right Achilles' tendon sustained in the conference finals last season against Detroit. An MRI showed just a bruise.

Great Honor

Minnesota Lynx assistant coach *Jennifer Gillom* will be one of three former WNBA players to be inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2009. The others are *Cynthia Cooper*, who won four WNBA titles in Houston, and *Jennifer Azzi*, who played five seasons in the league.

"I am incredibly humbled," Gillom said. "I played a long time overseas, and I enjoyed a wonderful college career at Mississippi, but one of my greatest accomplishments in my career was being a pioneer of the WNBA. People said the league wouldn't make it, but we were determined to make this league a success. I won an Olympic gold medal in 1988, but this honor is truly the pinnacle of women's basketball and it will be a wonderful gift for my 45th birthday." Gillom, one of the first players signed by the WNBA, played seven seasons, six with the Phoenix Mercury.