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Downsized W.N.B.A. Will Make Do With Less

By Chris Hine

The [W.N.B.A.](#), which has undergone radical changes in the past six months, can only hope that entering its 13th season with 13 teams will not bring bad luck.

The Houston Comets, who won the first four league titles, [were disbanded in December](#). The W.N.B.A. dispersed the roster after taking over the franchise from Hilton Koch because he could not sell it. The league also reduced the number of active roster spots on the remaining teams to 11 from 13.

“I think as we’d keep talking about the economy and trying to figure out how, from a budget standpoint, to move forward, it was just something the union and the W.N.B.A. agreed on,” Indiana Fever forward Tamika Catchings said of the roster reduction in a conference call last week. “That’s not to say it is what it is, but we want to stay around for a while.”

“We don’t want to, from a money standpoint and from a budget standpoint, stay at 13 and then down the road look and say we wished we would have went down. So now we have that opportunity and it’s going to make the league stronger and each team is going to get better and better.”

In all, 39 active roster spots were eliminated, a decrease of about 21 percent from last year.

“Every sports league now is about survival,” Detroit Shock Coach Bill Laimbeer said. “Every sports league is working a little extra harder to put revenue into their teams and sports, and we’re no exception. We’re going to have to continue to be diligent and work extremely hard.”

Not only are the Comets gone from the league, but so is a key component to their title run, guard Sheryl Swoopes. She spent her career with the Comets before signing with the Seattle Storm in 2008. The Storm waived her in January, citing the need to clear salary-cap space. She did not sign with another team.

Swoopes was a league cornerstone, along with Los Angeles Sparks center [Lisa Leslie](#), who announced that this season [would be her last](#). If the league’s general managers are right in voting for the Sparks as the [preseason favorites](#), she will finish with her third championship. Leslie has been with the Sparks her entire career.

“It’s a great thing for her,” Sparks Coach Michael Cooper said. “Not every player wants to retire, but to go out like she’s going out is magnificent.”

Leslie is surrounded by some of the W.N.B.A.’s most talented players, including Tina Thompson and [Candace Parker](#). Thompson, who has played in the league since Day 1, averaged 18.1 points last season. She found a home with the Sparks after 12 seasons with Houston. Parker was named most valuable player as a rookie last season, but she will probably not join the team until [late June](#) after [giving birth to her first child, a girl](#), on May 13.

The Sparks open the season on Saturday against the defending champion Shock. Last year they played a memorable game in which they [engaged in a brawl](#).

Detroit is the general managers’ pick to take the Eastern Conference, ahead of Indiana and the Liberty. After the Liberty

finished 11-23 in 2006, its worst season, Coach Pat Coyle devised a [four-year plan](#) to win a title.

But going into Year 3, the Liberty may be ahead of schedule. Most of the talent returns from last season, when the Liberty lost in the Eastern Conference finals to the Shock. Shameka Christon, a forward in her sixth year, led the team with a 15.7-point scoring average last season. The fifth-year center Janel McCarville set career highs in points, rebounds, steals and assists last season.

The Liberty, like every team, will make do with less. But players and coaches say they do not expect the league’s quality of play to suffer.

“I’ve been here a long time, and every year the league gets bigger, faster and stronger,” Laimbeer said. “The depth right now is bursting at the team level. It’s very, very difficult for a player to make a roster right now.”

“With the last dispersal and the great players that come into the league every year, it’s tough. Every team can win now on any given night, and every team thinks they have a chance to get in the playoffs. It hasn’t always been that way.”