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[WNBA: After years of struggle, league hits double digits](#)  
[No other women's pro sports league has lasted as long](#)

- [Michelle Smith, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Friday, May 19, 2006



Nicole Powell has experienced the WNBA from one end of the spectrum to the other.

The former Stanford All-American celebrated her 15th birthday with a group of friends by watching the Phoenix Mercury -- one of the league's eight original teams -- play its first game in June 1997.

As a college star, both talent and ambition pointed Powell toward a WNBA career, but she had doubts whether the league would be there for her as the WNBA foundered through declining attendance, financial losses and labor strife.

Now she is one of the WNBA's rising stars. On Saturday as her team, the Sacramento Monarchs, opens the season on national television against the Mercury, she will receive her WNBA championship ring, just days after a congratulatory meeting with President Bush.

Powell has no more doubts about her WNBA experience.

"Last year when we played in the finals, and there were all those people in Connecticut and Sacramento cheering for us, I felt incredibly lucky," Powell said. "I feel privileged to be a part of this."


Thirteen women's professional basketball leagues have come and gone. Entering its 10th season, the WNBA is the longest-surviving women's professional sports league.

The WNBA has seen its attendance drop, its television package and ratings shrink and sponsors come and go. The league survived a threatened players' strike in the spring of 2003. Since the league's size doubled from eight to 16 teams in its first four seasons, three teams have folded and two have relocated.

There is no doubt the NBA's backing has kept the WNBA afloat through difficult days. But as the quality of the product on the floor improves, rosters becoming stronger and deeper, NBA Commissioner David Stern's assurances provide reason to believe that the WNBA's immediate future is secure.

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Stern told the Houston Chronicle in February that he's lost count of the number of times people have asked how much longer he planned to use his powerful, successful league to prop up the WNBA.

"I used to get annoyed in the first year (of the WNBA) when people said, 'Well, it will be one year,' " Stern said. "And then they said it would be two years, three years. And then people would come in and say, 'How much longer are you going to subsidize the league?' ... But for a lousy couple of bucks that are keeping us from breaking even -- and we will next year break even in the WNBA -- the question gets asked."

But Stern understands the unforgiving environment for women's sports. Six women's professional sports leagues have launched and failed since the WNBA announced its arrival in 1996.

"We're determined to make this a successful business proposition. This is not an altruistic endeavor," Stern said. "This is a business model, and we think the business model is in the right time and the right place."

Even in those right conditions, the WNBA has struggled. Attendance has dropped from the average of more than 10,800 of the 1998 season to last season's 8,174 -- the lowest in the league's short history.

Regular-season TV ratings have flattened in recent seasons as erratic scheduling and a dip in the number of network telecasts made games hard to find. The league is hoping that a 30 percent spike in the 2005 postseason ratings signals an upward trend in interest.

The WNBA's prospects also seem to be improving under its new business model. The league has moved from centralized league ownership to individual owners, not limited to NBA owners, or NBA cities, allowing investors with a passion for women's basketball to enter the fray.

The collective bargaining agreement reached in 2003 is keeping player salaries in check. The WNBA also dramatically slowed the expansion that diluted rosters and fan interest. The league, which peaked at 16 teams, is back to 14 this season with the addition of an expansion team in Chicago. There is talk of further expansion, the Bay Area remaining a potential market.

Gavin Maloof and his brother Joe, co-owners of the Sacramento Kings and Monarchs, have enthusiastically supported their women's team -- which won the city's first pro sports title in September.

"We love it," Gavin Maloof said. "We take it just as seriously as the men. We take care of the women the same as the men. People have to realize that these are the greatest women athletes in the world. There's tremendous value for us in having this women's team."

Gary Cavalli knows the value of professional women's basketball. Cavalli was a co-founder of the American Basketball League, which operated from Oct. 1996 to Dec. 1998 until it folded as the result of a lack of television exposure and sponsorships -- much of it being channeled to the WNBA.

Cavalli admires the way the WNBA has been able to "leverage" its NBA backing.

"I think David Stern is committed to the league," Cavalli said. "I think the WNBA is here for the long haul."

Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer has seen 17 of her former players play in the WNBA. She thinks the difficulty in cracking WNBA rosters is the biggest jump the league has made in 10 years.

"Look who is on waivers. Look at the caliber of players getting cut," VanDerveer said. "The first couple of years, those players would have made teams. It's really, really competitive. If there are women's basketball players out there thinking they are going to play pro ball, they better have a backup plan."

VanDerveer also said she's disappointed by the lack of opportunities for female coaches in the league. Eleven of the 14 WNBA head coaches are men. When the league opened in 1997, Van Chancellor was the only man among the eight head coaches.

The one big shortcoming of the WNBA has been in establishing its appeal with mainstream sports fans. That may never happen.

"There are an awful lot of great things happening in women's basketball, but I don't think they appeal to the traditional hard-core men's sports fan," Cavalli said. "I don't think the WNBA fan base will come from those male fans. The league is going to have to maximize its base of women and families and fans of the women's game."

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10th season

Opening day: June 21, 1997

Diminishing crowds: After peaking in the 1998 season with an average of 10,864 per game, the league drew an all-time low average of 8,174 in the 2005 season.

Still a milestone: The league will draw its 20 millionth fan this season.

2005 TV ratings: 13 games on ESPN2 -- 0.26 average; 7 games on ABC - 0.7 average. Playoff and Finals ratings up 30 percent on ESPN2.

Original eight teams: Phoenix, New York, Houston, Los Angeles, Charlotte, Cleveland, Sacramento, Utah.

Expansion and contraction: League jumped from eight teams to 16 from 1997 to 2000. Three teams folded: Miami, Cleveland and Portland. Two teams relocated, going from Utah to San Antonio and from Orlando to Connecticut.

Champions: Houston (1997-2000), Los Angeles (2001-02), Detroit (2003), Seattle (2004), Sacramento (2005).

Total number of players: 539

Player salaries: Up to \$90,000 per season. Players with three years experience or less make no more than \$42,000. Rookies average \$30,000.

Originals still playing: Lisa Leslie (Los Angeles), Sheryl Swoopes (Houston), Mwadi Mabika (Los Angeles), Wendy Palmer (Seattle), Bridget Pettis (Phoenix), Latasha Byears (Washington), Tina Thompson (Houston)

Representing Stanford: Nicole Powell (Sacramento); Olympia Scott (Indiana)

First game of 2006: Phoenix Mercury at Sacramento Monarchs, 1 p.m. Saturday, ARCO Arena

*E-mail Michelle Smith at [msmith@sfgate.com](mailto:msmith@sfgate.com).*

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