



Broken Arrow's Valerie Santiago (12) defends Union's McKenzie Garcia (31) in a February game this year. STEPHEN PINGRY/Tulsa World

# State is prime for WNBA

## Lots of Oklahoma girls play the game

BY MATT BAKER  
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The announcement of a WNBA team moving to Tulsa has drawn excitement from one of the league's target audiences: girls basketball players.

"It's a great experience," said Britney Morgan, a senior at Pawnee. "I hope I can be that good one day."

Basketball ranks as the most popular high school sport for girls in Oklahoma, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

More than 8,000 girls play basketball at 481 high schools in the state. Only 15 states have more participants in the sport, according to the federation.

Area players said they look forward to seeing positive female role models up close. Coaches said they plan on going to games with their team to learn from the top women's basketball players in the world.

Tulsa's team is expected to begin playing at the BOK Center in mid-May, team officials said Tuesday.

"We'll be going to the games," said Webster coach James Asberry, who has two daughters on his team. "It's going to be great for girls basketball in Tulsa, and it will encourage more girls to play basketball. Instead of just only being able to watch them on TV, they will be able to go see them play."

Rogers coach Josh Berry said he hopes his girls pay attention to the little things that stars like Candace Parker and Diana Taurasi do so they can improve their own games.

"The main thing I want them to see is practice, just so they can see how hard they

work," Berry said. "I can preach it all day, but until they see it themselves, that's when they'll know."

Boys basketball coaches also welcomed the WNBA's arrival.

Cascia Hall coach Brian Rahilly said he's eager to see how Nolan Richardson, the WNBA team's new coach and general manager, fares in the league.

"I think it's very cool," said Rahilly, who played for Richardson at the University of Tulsa. "It'll be interesting to see how Nolan adapts to coaching women."

Memorial junior Savannah Carter said many fans often overlook girls' and women's basketball. She said she hopes casual fans give the WNBA a chance and that the enthusiasm trickles down to high schools.

"I think it'll give us a lot of attention," Carter said. "Most people don't see girls basketball. They see the boys dunk and stuff. But they'll get to see defense instead of just shooting."

Many area players said they follow the WNBA regularly, and newly retired superstar Lisa Leslie was the most commonly named favorite player. But others said they struggle to find games on TV and that the league doesn't have enough exposure here.

A team in Tulsa would solve that problem.

"It's really cool," said Talor Ward, a senior at Beggs. "I can see what the best is, right here."

World Staff Writer Barry Lewis contributed to this story.

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