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Authority in Women's Sports™ by Brian Straus

Heartbeat Detected – WUSA will play in 2004

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

Nearly four months after the WUSA folded on the eve of the World Cup, women's soccer in the United States still has a pulse thanks to the efforts of former Boston Breakers General Manager Joe Cummings and league founder John Hendricks.

While Hendricks has been meeting with potential sponsors interested in financing a relaunch in 2005, Cummings has finalized a more realistic business plan for a smarter, revamped WUSA. He also has been making arrangements for three doubleheader "festivals" this June that will keep the WUSA name alive in case Hendricks is able to come through.

Cummings discussed the future of the WUSA with REAL SPORTS last week.

"It wasn't that the league ended, it was the abrupt way it ended. It was so sudden, and we headed right into the World Cup and didn't have time to grieve," said Cummings, who

heads the committee charged with reorganizing the league. "There's something going on in 2004. It's possible that the last weekend, June 26, will be the end of the WUSA. But at least there's no abruptness to it. Maybe this will be a farewell tour, or a celebration. At least everyone will go into it saying we understood."

Here is what we know: The doubleheaders will take place the weekends of June 11-13, June 18-20 and June 25-27 at different venues. Proposals were sent to 24 sites and the league reportedly is interested in taking the events to new markets, although Cary, N.C. is a likely option. The weekend will include a Saturday doubleheader, clinics, appearances and other activities designed to reach out to fans and potential sponsors. Cummings said that all players who want to take part in the festivals will be flown in, paid a \$1,000.00 appearance fee plus a per diem, but will not necessarily play in one of the two games. The competing teams will wear the uniforms of WUSA



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clubs but will be limited to 16 players and likely will have to borrow from other teams in order to fill out their rosters. Which teams will play at which sites has not yet been determined.

The festivals will be funded through contributions from current investors, ticket revenue and any sponsors Hendricks can secure. The availability of players from outside North America is doubtful, and some WUSA veterans who already have secured full-time jobs or are unable to train at a professional level through 2004 may opt out. Some players, like San Jose's Brandi Chastain, already have signed with domestic minor league clubs while others are considering spending the summer in Europe.

By the time the festivals conclude, the future of the WUSA should be clear. When the league folded in September, Hendricks said he needed to secure eight sponsorships at \$2.5 million apiece to relaunch. Cummings has spent the past several months devising ways the league could return at various levels of sponsorship commitment.

"We said at the beginning that we wanted to build a million dollar home but we only had \$100,000. We never came up with a way to run a league based on the revenue we had coming in," Cummings said. "I've finished in the past week for John some tiered plans of what it might look like to run a league if all the sponsors don't come in, so we don't have to come in hoping we get \$20 million. A full year before we start the league again, we'll be able to say 'we have x millions of dollars'. Then I'm going to cross-reference on the spreadsheet and know what the league looks like as a \$10 million league. The players might get paid \$20,000 on average, and half of them might have second jobs, and there might only be 10 TV games and no league preseason. There's a model for whatever we bring in, and we're not going to start the league in 2005 unless the dollars on the revenue side match up perfectly. We have a business model that will match up with six or seven different levels of actual revenue."

But what are the chances of signing those sponsors? Cummings said negotiations remain promising,



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and that there have been no “cold calls”. Major companies have been contacting the league since September, and Hendricks has sent letters of commitment to each interested entity with a mid-February deadline. Cummings and Hendricks will know what their new league will look like - or if it will exist at all - by the end of the month.

A couple of things are likely - there probably will be new markets for a handful of the eight teams. There has been a great deal of talk since the World Cup about combining front office and ticket sales staffs with Major League Soccer teams, saving an enormous amount of money that would have had a couple of WUSA franchises on the road to breaking even. Cities where there already are MLS teams, especially markets like Columbus, Los Angeles, Dallas and Chicago where soccer specific stadiums already exist or are being planned, are very attractive.

Officials with Major League Soccer reportedly have been receptive to those ideas.

WUSA team owners obviously would have to make a few hires, and would pay the local MLS club a maintenance fee, but would save hundreds of thousands of dollars in salaries. In addition, each WUSA owner would be responsible for the financial health of his own club – there will be no shared losses.

“ The teams function independently and decide how they want to run their teams. I’ve done a model of how a team could function and lose a half million dollars,” Cummings said. “Investors can decide how much they want to put into the league and how they want to run their team. Losses will occur on a team level, not a league level. There likely will be some kind of franchise fee each year. There will be league people who do some work on behalf of the teams.”

If Hendricks and Cummings can match sponsorship revenue with one of their 2005 models, then the league office could reopen in July, Cummings said. [RS]



Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

“Wait till the end of January!”

That used to be alert that meant we might get to see some clarity in how the NCAA tournament picture would look. Yet as parity of some sorts arrives on the women's collegiate basketball season, how about, “Wait till the end of February!”

Since we last checked in at the start of the New Year, much has happened.

Connecticut's unbeatable image got a little roughed up. First Duke made an impressive rally from a deep deficit at the same time the two-time defending NCAA champion Huskies suffered an improbable collapse and the Blue Devils emerged from the hostile Hartford Civic Center with a triumph on a three-pointer at the buzzer.

So perhaps the Blue Devils are for real? That's the way it seemed, especially after Connecticut took another hit, soon thereafter, with a Big East Conference defeat at Notre Dame.

Meanwhile, within the conference wars, those same Irish several days later lost at West Virginia. Just when Rutgers seemed to have its act together, the Scarlet Knights were upset at Syracuse.

And in the Colonial Athletic Association, Hofstra beat Old Dominion, the same contingent that had beaten Penn State in December.

Stanford, considered rock solid in the Pac-10, lost to Southern Cal.

Texas Tech suffered a loss when Jia Perkins was sidelined by what was categorized as an unspecified health problem not considered to be life threatening.

As the end of the month arrived another national showdown loomed. Tennessee was to visit Duke. By the time the two powers hooked up, the Vols had moved up to No. 2 in the AP poll, setting up a 1-2 free-for-all in Durham.

Duke was a favorite because, well, the Blue Devils had the win in Hartford and shouldn't be nearly as rattled as a year ago when Connecticut visited as a No. 2 before a sellout crowd that included the Cameron crazies.

Bad assumption.

Duke missed a bunch of open shots in the second half and Tennessee claimed the victory and moved to No. 1 for the first time since the week of Feb. 26, 2001.

The triumph became bittersweet when it was learned that starting point guard Loree Moore had suffered an ACL injury



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in the second half and would be lost for the season.

All of that set up intrigue over the next national showdown when Connecticut visits Tennessee, Feb. 5.

Late breaking news occurred in Lawrence, Kansas, as we were ready to email this report, with the announcement that veteran Kansas coach Marian Washington, a member of the next Women's Basketball Hall of Fame inductee class, had decided to take at least a three-week leave of absence to handle a health problem, also considered not life threatening.

Lynnette Woodard, one of the all-timers in the sport, was named interim head coach in Washington's absence.

WNBA

Over in the pros, the WNBA decided to make some noise. The league announced its schedule, including a national TV opener on May 22 when the Phoenix Mercury will visit the Connecticut Sun.

Why are we not surprised?

The Mercury, which has the overall No. 1 pick, is likely to choose Connecticut collegiate star Diana Taurasi, although the Sun is working hard to move up in the draft.

In that regard, a deal was announced in which all-star Shannon "Pee Wee" Johnson was sent to the San Antonio Silver Stars for the No. 4 overall pick, among other considerations.

Whether the Sun can use that to work its way up the ladder for a shot at Taurasi remains to be seen.

Also, what remains to be seen is who the new coach of the Washington Mystics will be following the sudden resignation of coach Marian Stanley.

Neither Stanley nor the Mystics would comment, but there are indications that Stanley suffered the same late Winter Surprise from Mystics management that former coach Tom Maher received several years ago when he thought he was attending a morning meeting to discuss talent and the upcoming draft and learned that Washington wanted to go in a different direction.

The name being mentioned the most is former NBA star Rick Mahorn, which would continue a trend in backgrounds of WNBA coaches. Some former WNBA coaches who could be candidates, if that's the way the Mystics want to go, are Nell Fortner (Indiana), Lin Dunn (Seattle), Dan Hughes (Cleveland), and Brian Agler (Minnesota).



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WNBA – Free Agents

Beginning Feb. 1, free agents are allowed to be signed. The restricted list, meaning players' previous teams have ten days to match the offer or give up the rights, consists of: Charlotte's Dawn Staley, Shalonda Enis, and Charlotte Smith-Taylor, Connecticut's Debbie Black and Taj McWilliams-Franklin, defending champion Detroit's Astou Nidiaye-Diatta, Ayana Walker, Elaine Powell, Jennifer Rizzotti, and Kedra Holland-Corn, Houston's Cynthia Cooper, Dominique Canty, Lucienne Berthieu, Pollyanna Johns Kimbrough, and Tiffani Johnson, Minnesota's Kristi Harrower and Michele VanGorp, New York's Becky Hammon, Crystal Robinson, Linda Frolich, Tamika Whitmore, and Tari Phillips, Phoenix's Maria Stepanova and Tamara Moore, Sacramento's Edna Campbell, Hamchetou Maiga, and La'Keshia Frett, San Antonio's Andrienne Goodson and Jennifer Azzi, Seattle's Alisa Burris and Tully Bevilaqua, and Washington's Chasity Melvin and Keisha Brown.

The unrestricted list, which includes those not named core players, consists of Charlotte's Rushia Brown, former Cleveland players Merlakia Jones, Nina Bjedov, Eva Nemcova, and Tracy Henderson, Connecticut's Jessie Hicks,

Wendy Palmer and Rebecca Lobo (now retired), Houston's Janeth Arcain and Ukari Figgs, Indiana's Bridget Pettis, Coquese Washington, Nikki McCray, and Sonja Henning, Los Angeles' Lynn Pride, Jennifer Gillom, Nicky McCrimmon, Vanessa Nygaard, and Sophia Witherspoon, New York's Elena Baranova and Teresa Weatherspoon, Sacramento's Ruthie Bolton, San Antonio's LaTonya Johnson and Tausha Mills, Seattle's Adia Barnes and Rita Williams, and Washington's Vicky Bullett, who is also retired.

Wooden Award

Speaking of lists, the Wooden Award competition for the first female recipient has been pared down to 20 contenders (alphabetical), LSU's Seimone Augustus, Duke's Alana Beard, Colorado's Tera Bjorklund, Arkansas' Shameka Christon, Tennessee's Shyra Ely, Florida's Vanessa Hayden, Houston's Chandi Jones, Penn State's Kelly Mazzante, Kansas State's Nicole Ohlde, Arizona's Shawntinice Polk, Rutgers' Cappie Pondexter, Stanford's Nicole Powell, Texas' Heather Schreiber, DePaul's Khara Smith, Texas' Stacy Stephens, Connecticut's Diana Taurasi, Georgia Christi Thomas, Kansas State's Kendra Wecker, Minnesota's Lindsay Whalen, and Purdue's Shereka Wright. [RS]



Olympic Preview – Athens Greece by Brian Straus

Miss Congeniality Need Not Apply

(First of a seven-part series)

Women's field hockey has been an Olympic sport since 1980, but despite the popularity of the game in high schools and colleges in the United States the Americans have won only one bronze medal (1984).

The effort to secure gold in Athens will commence March 18 in New Zealand, where the United States will be one of 10 teams vying for the five remaining berths in this summer's tournament. Five spots already have been awarded (host Greece and the champions of the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania). The United States did not qualify for the 2000 Olympics but won silver at last year's Pan American Games. It finished fifth at the 1996 tournament in Atlanta.

The Americans will play in New Zealand against Spain, Russia, Japan and South Korea in first-round pool play through March 24. Placing in the top two guarantees a spot in Athens - finishing third or fourth puts the United States in a four-team playoff for the final berth.

Veteran midfielder Tracey Fuchs, 37, the team's oldest player by nearly eight years, will be one of six holdovers from the United States' last Olympic effort on the 18-member team. Fuchs is still going strong. She led the team with eight goals in the 2003 Pan Am Games and tallied six during a recent nine-game series against Canada and Ireland in California.
[RS]

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1st of every month.