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**Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)**

An exciting WNBA season is coming down the stretch drive and heading into the playoffs with many unknowns still to be determined.

### **SPARKS CHALLENGED**

One liked the Los Angeles Sparks revival led by veteran center and Olympian Lisa Leslie under full first-year coach Joe "Jelly Bean" Bryant, who took over in the closing week of last season and got the floundering team into the playoffs.

The L.A. bunch had the best record for most of the season but now that mark is being challenged as they have lost all three of their outings in August, including a Thursday night loss in Uncasville, Connecticut where the Sun set a franchise record nine-game tear.

The battle could be a preview of the championship best-of-five round later this month.

Connecticut has won two straight Eastern Conference titles and lead the Detroit Shock by 2 ½ games as the final two weeks approach but Detroit has beaten coach Michael Thibault's squad twice in two close games at the Mohegan Sun Arena.

Detroit solidified its hold on at least second place by beating the Indiana Fever, Tuesday night, a potential first-round Eastern Conference opponent.

The Sun has become known as the All-Star special after having all five starters named to the mid-summer classic in New York in July. Taj McWilliams-Franklin became a replacement for Nykesha Sales, who's been sidelined with nagging hip and Achilles problems.

The result of the Connecticut influx was a surprising first-ever win by the injured East squad over the West with the Sun's Katie Douglas being named the most valuable player.

Connecticut extended its streak with a win over New York that is at a franchise-worst 7-21 record with only two wins over quality opponents and both those games – Los Angeles and Washington had questions attached to the Liberty triumph.

Milton-Jones had just gone to the sidelines for Washington and Los Angeles, which fell in overtime to New York, was on the back end of a rugged Eastern swing early in the season.

There has been speculation most of the season as to whether Liberty upper management might replace longtime general manager Carol Blazejowski, a Hall of Famer.

Los Angeles' overall record got into jeopardy Tuesday night when the Sparks fell to the surging Washington Mystics in the nation's capital.

Washington gained the fourth and final Eastern playoff slot on Sunday and is challenging Indiana for the No. 3 seed for the postseason action.

The Mystics got off to a fast start but then struggled when DeLisha Milton-Jones was sidelined for 11 games. Since her return, Washington has been hot.

### **USA BASKETBALL SELECTS FINAL 3**

Guard Alana Beard was named Tuesday along with Sacramento Monarchs veteran Yolanda Griffith and WNBA overall top draft choice Seimone Augustus of the Minnesota Lynx as the final three members of the USA Basketball squad that will compete in next month's FIBA World Championship in Brazil.

Over in the West, Los Angeles leads the crowd and has clinched a berth but the rest of conference is still trying to wrap up spots.

The WNBA defending champion Sacramento Monarchs got closer with a win over Houston at home Tuesday night, a crucial loss for the Comets in that had the result gone the other way, coach Van Chancellor's bunch would have caught the Monarchs in a second-place tie and gained, for the moment, home-court advantage in a potential first-round matchup with Tuesday's opponent.

### **HOUSTON READIES FOR STALEY'S RETIREMENT**

The Comets, of course, are trying to send veteran Dawn Staley into retirement with a first-ever WNBA title for the three-time Olympic gold medalist and Temple coach.

Houston will celebrate Staley's forthcoming retirement at the nationally-televised regular season final for the Comets at home on Saturday, August 12th, where a ceremony and other events will honor the prolific point guard, who was voted as a starter on the West squad.

Staley, after her playing days end in a few weeks, will immediately head to join the staff of Seattle's Anne Donovan on the USA Basketball contingent.

Donovan's Storm squad stayed 2 ½ games ahead of the San Antonio Silver Stars and Phoenix Mercury with a narrow win over Minnesota Tuesday night that also moved Seattle to within a game of Houston.

The Storm will be Houston's opponent in the game in which the WNBA and the Comets will honor Staley at the close of the regular season.

Seattle has treaded water with a slew of injuries in a conference fight in which all the contenders have beaten up on each other.

## **COACHES' CURSE**

Meanwhile, Minnesota is now navigating for the rest of season under interim coach Carolyn Jenkins, who moved up when Suzie McConnell Serio recently resigned as the under-achieving Lynx drifted away from playoff contention.

The former Penn State all-American, Olympic gold medalist and former star of the defunct Cleveland Rockers, became the latest of a nearly decades long victims list of coaches who have taken overall No. 1 draft choices.

Only Chancellor, in Houston, whose team won the first four WNBA titles, has survived after making Tina Thompson the very first overall No. 1 in 1997.

Since then, here's the history.

In 1998, the former Utah Starzz took Margo Dydek, now with Connecticut, and Denise Taylor lasted a month before Frank Layden finished out the season. Utah ultimately moved to San Antonio.

In 1999, Chamique Holdsclaw, the Tennessee sensation, was taken by Washington and newly-hired coach Nancy Darsch was dismissed early in the following season.

Dan Hughes, now in charge of San Antonio, took Ann Waulters when he was at Cleveland in 2000 and appeared to beat the curse. Not really. He was up at the plate again in 2003 and took LaToya Thomas from Mississippi State. The Rockers folded at the end of the season.

In 2001 and 2002 Seattle gained the foundations of their 2004 title by taking Lauren Jackson from Australia and then Sue Bird from Connecticut. But Lin Dunn was gone from the team before 2003 when Hughes met his Cleveland fate.

In 2004, new Phoenix coach Carrie Graff took another Connecticut star in Diana Taurasi, but she was gone after last season. That's when Trudi Lacey of the Charlotte Sting took Janel McCarville from Minnesota. Lacey is still general manager but left her coaching duties near the end of 2005.

Now McConnell Serio has added her name to the list.

Quipped Hughes of the unslightly trend, “There’s a good reason to trade your No. 1 pick.”

In other WNBA news as the collegiate world remains quiet, Washington is considered the front runner for next season’s all-star game, although Connecticut Sun officials would take the event back in a heartbeat after having a successful effort last season.

“If it’s midweek, we certainly wouldn’t have problems here with hotel space,” said Sun head Mitchell Etes who helps oversee the vast casino-entertainment complex near New London that includes the Sun.

So, once the field is set, we’ll be back in a few weeks to preview the playoffs.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

By Mel Greenberg