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by Mel Greenberg

INSIDE SCOOP™ ... WNBA PLAYOFFS IN FULL SWING

The WNBA playoffs are barely under way, each team has played one game, with **New York, Detroit, Houston** and **Los Angeles** trying to avoid elimination the next few days.

And if you think about those four names, you can see how far the WNBA has come competitively through the recent influx of outstanding collegiate talent.

Three of the four teams with their backs to the wall are past champions, while the fourth - **New York** - has been to the finals four times in the previous eight seasons since the league launched in the summer of 1997.

The **Houston Comets** won the first four titles, followed by the **Los Angeles Sparks** with the next two, and then the **Detroit Shock** before the **Seattle Storm** captured the prize last year.

Connecticut, formerly the forlorn **Orlando Miracle** franchise, has continued to get better since its move to the Nutmeg State three seasons ago.

This time around, the **Sun** own the overall top record, the best-ever win achievement for an Eastern Conference team, and a whopping 13-1 performance against the **Western Conference**.

Detroit was the only big thorn in the side of the **Sun** all summer, winning the regular season series, 3-1.

Connecticut, however, made life easier Wednesday night by beating the **Shock** in **Detroit** to need only one win in two opportunities at home to continue its Eastern Conference playoff title of a year ago.

The **Indiana Fever** has also found a way to avoid late season slides and might be the darkhorse in the field.

In the West, **Sacramento** has become the new power with its first-ever regular season title. The **Monarchs** are a win away from dispatching **Los Angeles** in the first round for the second straight seasons.

Seattle suffered free agents losses to the roster in the offseason but managed to finish in second place. The mainstay inside-outside combo of **Lauren Jackson** and **Sue Bird** continues to thrive with **Betty Lennox**, the MVP of last year's playoffs.

AUTUMN OF SUSPENSE?

In recent years, the WNBA has had a way of springing surprising news soon after the playoffs end, which this year will be in mid-September.

It was last year that **Val Ackerman** announced she was giving up her presidency after running the league the first eight years.

Two years ago, the **Cleveland Rockers** announced they were folding up shop, citing finances, although many believed the NBA-brother Cavaliers' addition of rookie sensation **LeBron James** and how the organization wished to spend its promotional money might have been a mitigating factor.

Three years ago, the WNBA changed its business model and in the process, Orlando moved on to

Connecticut, Utah became **San Antonio**, while **Miami** and **Portland** dispersed.

While it's hard to predict what surprises might occur this time, the big news early on will be the jockeying by teams to protect players prior to the expansion draft by the new **Chicago** team that will take the court next summer.

The collegiate season will be extra worth watching with such prized seniors as Louisiana's **Seimone Augustus** and Rutgers' **Cappie Pondexter** expected to be high draft picks.

There's also the possibility another expansion city could be announced for 2007.

The offseason will see the retirement of another longtime veteran as Indiana Fever center **Natalie Williams**, a former UCLA star who played in the former **American Basketball League**, reaches retirement.

Since we stopped by at the beginning of August, the league had two block-buster trades in **Katie Smith** moved from Minnesota to Detroit, and **Dawn**

Staley went from the Charlotte Sting to Houston.

The Staley deal added one more season for certainty to her career that includes her collegiate coaching job at Temple.

Speaking of the ABL, we count 12 players, give or take one or two, on playoff rosters whose pro careers began in the other league.

We'll keep it a little short this time, since the playoffs have yet to run their course and collegians are just reporting back to school.

One poignant note:

Next week, the late **Sue Gunter**, who dies last month and is one of four coaches with 700 victories, will be inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass.

Pokey Chatman, a former player of Gunter's who succeeded her at LSU, will speak on her behalf, as will broadcaster, Hall of Famer, and former UCLA all-American **Ann Meyers**.



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