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Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

No Shock – Founding ABL Player Energizes Detroit – Delivers another Title

In an ironic twist, the 10th anniversary season of the WNBA arrived at its summer conclusion Saturday with the championship determined by of all things _ a founding player of the former American Basketball League.

Katie Smith, the former Ohio State star who won two ABL titles with the Columbus Quest, sealed Detroit's final comeback in a five-game series of comebacks with a basket in the closing seconds to ensure the Shock's 80-75 victory over the defending champion Sacramento Monarchs to win the series, 3-2, in the Joe Louis Arena in downtown Detroit.

It's the second time the Shock, under Coach Bill Laimbeer, dethroned the defending champion. In 2003, the Shock ended the two-year rule of the Los Angeles Sparks with two wins in their normal home arena _ the Palace in Auburn Hills, Mich.



Katie Smith flies high vs. Yolanda Griffith in an epic Columbus Quest vs. Long Beach Sting Ray ABL battle. Both battled again this year in the WNBA Championship, Smith with the Detroit Shock and Griffith with the Sacramento Monarchs.

Detroit extended this series Wednesday by beating the Monarchs in the fourth game in the Arco Arena in Sacramento, forcing a move back to the Midwest for Game 5.

However, the Palace had already booked a Mariah Carey concert necessitating the move to the "temporary" venue that is also the home of the NHL's Detroit Red Wings.

Smith finished with 17 points behind teammate Deanne Nolan's game-high 24 points.

But it was the former Ohio State star's clutch shooting in the series that kept Detroit alive at several points when the Shock was about to sink for good.

Laimbeer, who played with the Pistons' "Bad Boys" contingent on the back-to-back NBA champions in 1989-90, made a late-season trade a year ago with the Minnesota Lynx to acquire Smith as a key to returning to the top of the WNBA.

Smith, who won her first WNBA title, and Shock teammate Cheryl Ford had little time to celebrate. The two had to take a quick flight to Brazil to catch up with the USA Basketball Senior National Women's Team that will begin competition to win another FIBA World Championship.

On a weekend that Connecticut women's basketball coach Geno Auriemma and five others, including Laimbeer's former Pistons teammate Joe Dumars, were enshrined into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, Smith's work in the series clinched her future induction when she becomes eligible.

Smith has been on two USA Basketball Olympic gold medal winning teams and won two ABL titles in 1997 and 1998 with the Quest before the league folded under bankruptcy the following winter.

She was also a member of the Buckeyes squad that was edged out by the Sheryl Swoopes-led Texas Tech squad in the 1993 NCAA championship.

Prior to Smith helping the Shock beat out the top-seeded Connecticut Sun in the Eastern Conference finals, the only other person to have played in finals in the ABL and WNBA, win a few Olympic gold medals, and play in an NCAA championship game was Dawn Staley, who retired from the Houston Comets after a prolific career to concentrate solely on her coaching duties at Temple in Philadelphia.

Staley is also making her sidelines debut with USA Basketball in Brazil alongside head coach Anne Donovan, who also coaches the WNBA's Seattle Storm.

Detroit's win kept the streak alive of all ten titles won by the team in the host city on the day the championships were determined.

But this season's playoffs had its oddities. Connecticut and Los Angeles had the best two records in the WNBA, but each lost to the eventual league finalists on their home court, making it the first time that the top two teams didn't advance.

The way this particular series played out, anything was thought possible going into Saturday's game.

Sacramento routed Detroit in the opener in Auburn Hills and then fell apart in the final quarter of Game 2. The Monarchs regained their dominance in Game 3 when the series moved West, but just when their fans came dressed for a title party assuming a win in Game 4, the Shock clamped down with such defensive pressure that Sacramento scored only two points in the fourth quarter of that encounter.

However, the Monarchs actually had an eight-point lead in the early action Saturday before the Shock came back to claim the trophy.

Although attendance in Detroit was disappointing in the first two games that were played before the Labor Day weekend, the Shock came back with 19,000 in the stands, Saturday, second only in playoff history to the 22,000 crowd in the final game of the 2003 series.

Growing 1 by 1

Meanwhile, WNBA president Donna Orender completed her second year at the helm projecting expansion with a new team every season beginning in 2008.

A group in Benton, Ark., in the Northwest corner of the state is already actively pursuing a franchise.

When attendance is mixed with online activity, television viewership, and merchandise purchasing, Orender said the “aggregate measurement is up 20 percent over last year.”

As for just attendance, she noted it did grow as the season came down the stretch from the All-Star break through the playoffs.

This was the first year the league played 10-minute quarters instead of 20 minute halves, and shortened the shot clock from 30 to 24 seconds. The result was a major increase in point production.

The brightest news was the major contributions from young talent entering the league with such first rounders as Seimone Augustus from LSU, Cappie Pondexter from Rutgers, Monique Currie from Duke, Sophia Young from Baylor, and Candice Dupree from Temple making an immediate impact.

The Phoenix Mercury improved under new coach Paul Westhead but lost a playoff slot in a three-way tie-breaker at the end of the season. On the other hand the New York Liberty sunk to their worst record since being one of eight charter franchises in 1997.

Although Rutgers had yet to make an official announcement as of late Saturday night, a Liberty official confirmed Friday that Marianne Stanley had resigned as an assistant coach under Pat Coyle to join the Scarlet Knights staff under C. Vivian Stringer.

Stanley, who won three national titles coaching Old Dominion and ran the WNBA Washington Mystics for two seasons, is a member of the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville, Tenn., as is Stringer.

Geno Nervous?

Meanwhile, in Springfield, Mass., Auriemma admitted to being “really, really nervous” in terms of his acceptance speech which was just fine.

Some 43 current and former UConn players attended. There were four prominent absentees who had allowable excuses. Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi were with the USA national team; Svetlana

Abrosimova was with the Russian squad, and Swin Cash was busy earning her second WNBA championship ring Saturday afternoon with Detroit.

Face of the National Team begins to Change

Although basketball takes a brief break before the collegiate crowd begins practice, there will be intrigue in the next two weeks with the USA women in Brazil.

Staley is no longer on the court as a leading point guard; Sacramento's Yolanda Griffith and Los Angeles' Lisa Leslie have withdrawn because of family considerations.

Augustus made the squad as a rookie. Houston center Michelle Snow, Ford, and Tennessee sophomore Candace Parker were added to shore up the front court.

There was some hope on Thursday when the USA squad beat Australia, which has Seattle's Lauren Jackson, even though several prominent players were sidelined or absent from the exhibition game at Duke.

Back in the WNBA world, Minnesota is looking for a coaching replacement for Suzie McConnell Serio, who resigned as the Lynx dropped out of the playoff hunt. Phoenix general manager Seth Sulka, with the Mercury since the league launched in 1997, resigned.

We'll be back at the end of the month to pour over what happens in Brazil along with whatever other news is occurring at the moment.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS
By Mel Greenberg



Michelle Snow, shown as a freshman at University of Tennessee, is getting her shot to deliver against long-standing expectations with Lisa Leslie and Yolanda Griffith exiting the National Team due to family commitments.