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by Mel Greenberg

INSIDE SCOOP™ ... Milestones Approaching

Another WNBA season has gone into the history books.

Just ahead in a few weeks, another women's collegiate basketball season is about to begin.

Midnight Madness will launch the formal practice period as a prelude to the **NCAA's 25th anniversary celebration** of its sponsorship of women's competition.

In the spring when the WNBA returns, it will have one new team which recently was given its official name – the Chicago Sky – and will launch the celebration of its **10th anniversary season**.

In the interim, the Sacramento Monarchs, one of the WNBA's original charter eight teams in 1997, rule the pro women's world after a thrilling best-of-five championship series in the new expanded format that fell just short of going the distance when the Monarchs held off the Connecticut Sun, 62-59, in the Arco Arena.

Veteran Monarchs center **Yolanda Griffith** led the way in gaining the

MVP trophy a half-year after she contemplated going elsewhere because she thought Sacramento was about to go into a rebuilding mode.

Actually, they did, but found the right combination of veterans and rookies to prevail at the finish.

Yo was the second overall pick to the Washington Mystics' **Chamique Holdsclaw** in the 1999 draft in which she was one of the many who were refugees from the bankrupt American Basketball League that died the previous winter.

Despite Holdsclaw's reputation coming out of college, many felt at the time that Griffith might get a team to a championship faster.

Technically, she did twice, in terms of Holdsclaw teams. The Mystics haven't gotten past an Eastern final and Los Angeles, the overwhelming preseason favorite after she joined them in March, fell to the Monarchs in the first round of the Western Conference playoffs.

It took Griffith seven years to taste the title and for the second straight season her impact marked a former ABL personality involved at the finish.

Previously, Seattle Storm coach **Anne Donovan**, who once coached the ABL's Philadelphia Rage, got the job done in the Emerald City.

It was also Yo's second attempt at a pro championship in the U.S.

When she joined the ABL, one of the few that slipped through the WNBA's hunt for Americans overseas, Griffith was placed on the Long Beach Stingrays, an expansion team that got to the finals in 1998 and went 2-0 at home to start the best-of-five series against the Columbus Quest.

But the Quest, featuring **Val Still**, **Andrea Lloyd**, **Shannon Johnson**, **Katie Smith** and **Nikki McCray**, came back and won three straight to defend their previous season's title.

Long Beach was coached by **Maura McHugh**, who reunited with Griffith with the Monarchs before being jettisoned during the 2003 season.

McHugh is now coaching Stony Brook. Two other previous Sacramento coaches are also around in **Mary Murphy**, who broadcasts pro and collegiate games and also writes commentary on teams in the Pac-10 conference.

Heidi Vanderveer, the sister of Stanford's **Tara Vanderveer** who succeeded Murphy, was an assistant at San Francisco last season.

The other thought concerning Griffith was how the USA Basketball selection committee was reluctant to put her on the Olympic team because she had bypassed the building process to play for pay in Europe.

A certain person known to have won four WNBA titles with Houston and also was the coach of the USA National team was influential in making the committee reverse its thinking.

During the opening week of the finals in Connecticut, we ran into **Ruth Bolton**, who had retired from Sacramento before the season began.

"Timing is everything," Bolton quipped.

The championship brought happiness to a slew of Sacramento players who had fallen short of titles previously in their careers, most recently **Kristin Haynie**, whose Michigan State team lost to Baylor last spring in the NCAA championship.

Long ago, **Ticha Penicheiro** helped Old Dominion upset NCAA-favorite Stanford in the national semifinals in 1997, only to lose to Tennessee in the title game.

Other notable Monarchs winners with previous frustrations were rookie **Chelsea Newton** (Rutgers), **Kara Lawson** (Tennessee), **DeMya Walker** (Virginia), **Rebekkah Brunson** (Georgetown), and **Nicole Powell** (Stanford), who was voted the WNBA's most improved player. It's also the third straight year a once-endangered franchise thrived to a title after Detroit (2003) and Seattle.

In terms of thriving, add the Connecticut Sun, once known as the Orlando Miracle, who had the league's best record by a game over Sacramento but was

Lindsay Whalen suffered successive knee and ankle injuries right before and in game one of the finals.

WNBA Balance Sheet

Sponsorships were up, TV ratings were up, especially in the playoffs, but attendance was down slightly, a statistic that first-year president **Donna Orender** was ok with in terms of the league knowing where it's at.

Washington was down, but Orender attributed the decline to a change of ownership with one group looking beyond its immediate undertaking and another getting up to speed while coming aboard.

The offseason will not be quiet, although this may be the first time in a while that negative vibes won't be transmitted after seasons of the immediate past in which some teams closed shop or moved, and **Val Ackerman**, the league's founding president, resigned a year ago shortly after the finals.

Free agency will include notable names

More veterans such as Griffith and

careers next season, joining **Natalie Williams**, whose last game was with Indiana when the Fever fell to Connecticut in the Eastern finals.

There will also be the expansion draft for Chicago, which could start the season with a roster that will be more talented than the usual expansion variety.

Phoenix needs to hire a coach and one name on the short list is former Auburn mentor **Joe Ciampi**, a Women's Basketball Hall of Famer.

So since we have some time to get a handle on the collegiate season in the next six weeks, here's an exercise you can perform to influence what we cover.

Write us and tell us what you liked best about the WNBA season, what you didn't like, what surprised you pleasantly and what disappointed your expectations.

Have fun.

Write to: team@realsportsmag.com

The College Scene

The week leading up to this report began with the shocking news of the untimely death of Arizona 22-year-old senior **Shantinice Polk**, who collapsed at the McKale Center on Monday and died soon thereafter of a pulmonary blood clot.

I didn't get to see her play during career since most of my seasonal energies are housed back here in the East.

However, I attended Pac-10 media day right before Polk's freshman year and Arizona coach **Joan Bonvicini** introduced us and said I would hear from her (on the court) the next four years.

That was certainly true and Polk will be regarded as one of Arizona's all-timers.

It's the second time in three seasons a Pac-10 school suffered a tragedy after junior forward **Alisa Lewis** died Jan. 19, 2004, from bacterial meningitis.

The conference happily avoided a third tragedy when **Kayla Burt** of Washington suffered a sudden cardiac arrest on New Year's Eve,

She's since recovered, returned to the Huskies and will be a senior this winter.

The other news not directly related to the basketball court was the impacts of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Women's teams at schools

throughout the affected area and throughout the nation have been involved in activities along with everyone else to help the recovery.

We'll mention some of them next time. [RS]



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