



e-Zine October 2006

Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

Earning bronze in Brazil is usually a delightful practice for those tourists who venture to the South American country's beaches to soak up the sun.

However, when it came to the USA Basketball World Championship team at the FIBA World Championship last month in the same locale, a bronze acquisition at the host country's expense was a measure of redemption that had a less-than-satisfying taste.

At the outset, the United States expected to be winners on the final day of competition, but the 99-59 victory over Brazil meant little when the North Americans were expected to be in the gold medal game against Australia, the foe it overcame two years ago in Athens, Greece, to claim Olympic gold.

It was not to be, however, when a cold shooting performance early in the semifinal game two days earlier resulted in a 75-68 upset loss to Russia.

Australia, paced by WNBA All-Star Lauren Jackson of the Seattle Storm, did its part in the semifinal with an 88-76 win over Brazil. The folks from Down Under went on to earn a long-sought gold medal in international competition by beating Russia, 91-74.

Although the USA squad seemed capable of keeping its long win streak alive, there seemed to be an underlying feeling that somewhere a hurdle might pop up along the way and be a challenge to overcome.

Two reasons fed that sensation. The first was that the squad was WNBA-dominated with players coming off a recently completed summer season on a schedule that was compacted to accommodate the FIBA World Championship.

The exception was the well-rested Tennessee sophomore Candace Parker, the lone collegian on a squad that clearly had gone into transition.

The other cause for anxiety over USA's chances was that two talented veterans – Sheryl Swoopes and Tina Thompson of the WNBA Houston Comets – played hurt. Three more from a core group of the last decade were off the court in the retired-point guard Dawn Staley and centers Lisa Leslie and Yolanda Griffith, whose absences were due to family considerations and injuries.

One replacement for the sidelined post players was Cheryl Ford, coming directly off a WNBA extended five-game championship with the Detroit Shock. However, the USA's Anne Donovan, who coaches Australia's Jackson in Seattle, did not go to Ford in the semifinal game.

Some also thought that Ford's Detroit teammate Katie Smith, another longstanding USA veteran, might have been better utilized at point guard, a position she acquired after being traded late in the 2005 WNBA season from the Minnesota Lynx to Detroit.

However, considering a group of talent from the next generation is bubbling at the collegiate level with such stars as Parker, Louisiana State's Sylvia Fowles and Oklahoma's Courtney Paris, along with WNBA rookie Cappie Pondexter out of Rutgers and third-year sensation Diana Taurasi out of Connecticut, the USA bunch should be ready to compete for gold again in two years at the Olympic level when the games are held in Beijing, China.

MEYERS MAKES A MOVE

It wouldn't be a normal start to the WNBA postseason without a few headlines to catch attention soon after the playoffs were over.

In 2003, there was the demise of the Cleveland Rockers. Two years ago came the announcement that Val Ackerman was stepping down as president after heading the league through its first eight seasons. She has since gone on to become the first female president of USA Basketball and recently was named to the FIBA governing board.

A year ago came the supplemental draft to begin filling the rosters of the expansion Chicago Sky.

Last month, Phoenix was quickly back in the news after a late season surge had left the Mercury out of the playoffs on the wrong end of a three-way tiebreaker in the Western Conference.

General manager Seth Sulka resigned and he was quickly replaced by Hall of Famer Ann Meyers, a former Olympian who led UCLA to the national title in 1978 when the sport was governed by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women.

Meyers, the widow of Los Angeles Dodgers baseball Hall of Famer Don Drysdale, was also named a vice president of the Mercury's WNBA big brother Phoenix Sun.

She had been a longtime broadcast analyst, primarily handling the WNBA and NCAA tournament with ESPN.

"Ann has been a leading basketball voice for decades," the network said in a statement. "She is a trailblazer who has made major contributions to the game both as a player and television commentator. We wish her continued success."

Meyers is also the only female to be signed to a NBA team training camp contract when the Indianapolis Pacers inked her after her graduation.

“I’m excited. I felt the time was right to make a change,” Meyers said.

Oddly, she was not invited to the recent WNBA/NBA executive meetings in Minneapolis but did say she would be at the next series of meetings in New York at league headquarters.

Another piece of news was the departure of former Boston Celtics star Bill Cowens as coach of Chicago after one season. He left for an assistant position with the NBA Detroit Pistons.

Another coaching vacancy still yet to be filled is in Minnesota, which is reported to be leaning towards someone at the WNBA’s coaching flavor of choice – a guy in the NBA.

MADNESS ON THE HORIZON

Next month will be the time to discuss the collegiate season ahead. But right now, just ahead is Midnight Madness in less than two weeks, which will be the series of celebrations in many places to get practice under way for the 2006-07 season.

Due to a change in NCAA rules and expanded schedules, more teams will be playing when the games become official on Nov. 10.

The big news of the opening weekend will come out of Norman, Oklahoma, when the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame tip-off doubleheader will feature Rutgers against Georgia and the host Sooners against DePaul on Nov. 12. That same day will be the announcement of the next class, expected to be six members, with induction ceremonies in Knoxville currently targeted for June 8-9.

Some Connecticut blood has been injected into the institution in the town of the Huskies’ longstanding rival. Karen Tucker, a 2002 graduate of Southern Connecticut who had covered UConn and the WNBA’s Connecticut Sun for the last several years, is the WBHOF’s new director of basketball relations.

MEDIA COVERAGE

Speaking of the media, the NCAA on Nov. 1-2 is hosting prominent print writers who cover women’s basketball to discuss ways of improving coverage and access.

This month will also see the annual gathering of conference-hosted media days where optimism will begin to flow until dismal won-loss records and inevitable injuries begin to dampen some of that enthusiasm.

EARLY PICS – NCAA 2007

Defending champion Maryland, with everyone significant back in the lineup and a few talented additions, is already showing as the preseason favorite in magazine polls. Other teams making a strong showing are North Carolina, Tennessee, Stanford, Ohio State, Duke, and Connecticut, among others.

That said, we'll be back with a more focused look next month unless some breaking news causes us to return a little earlier.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

By Mel Greenberg