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Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

By Mel Greenberg

EXCILE NOT NECESSARY – TEAM USA SECURES OLYMPIC BERTH

The WNBA encore, also known as the USA Senior National Basketball team, successfully brought September to a conclusion on the last day of the month by beating Cuba, 101-71, to win the FIBA Americas tournament in Chile and earn a berth in the 2008 Olympics in China.

It's the same Cuban squad that gave the U.S. a needed scare in the opening round before coach Anne Donovan's squad gained a win near the close of the fourth quarter.

The gold medal was a necessary commodity for the U.S. to obtain because its bronze medal finish at last year's world championship eliminated an initial opportunity to earn the trip to China.

The FIBA's win, on a squad dominated by WNBA players except Tennessee's Candace Parker and Oklahoma's Courtney Paris, also eliminated looming headaches for the women's pro league.

It's enough that Beijing Olympics, themselves, will probably cause a temporary suspension of the WNBA season as the Athens Games did in 2004.

But had not the U.S. won the berth out of the FIBA Americas competition, it would have had to take one last qualifying route early next summer forcing difficult decisions by USA Basketball as to who would be on the roster.

Donovan, herself, would have had to part from coaching the qualifying round or provide a substitute to coach the Seattle Storm.

As it was, the U.S. got the job done in Chile without mainstays such as Lisa Leslie (post-pregnancy), Sheryl Swoopes (back surgery), and Cheryl Ford (leg injury).

On the other hand, Sacramento's Rebekkah Brunson emerged as a young star of the international future with the U.S. bunch as did former Rutgers All-American Cappie Pondexter and former Louisiana State star Seimone Augustus.

Then there's Parker, who fits so swell with the pros, one wonders how boring things could be back at the college level when she returns to Knoxville for the start of practice this month.

And, as University of Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma once boasted of his Huskies' own luxury in the past, the U.S. had Diana Taurasi and the other teams in Chile did not.

The mere mention of Taurasi's name allows us to move to the next item.

PHOENIX FLIES TO THE TOP

Having already talked about the WNBA encore in the previous item, the league put on its greatest playoff show through most of September in its 11-year history.

The competition got under way with a pulsating triple overtime game won by the Connecticut Sun and the WNBA featured rallies, near-upsets, and finally an even more exciting finals than a year ago as the Phoenix Mercury dethroned the defending champion Detroit Shock in five games. The high-scoring Mercury got the job done in history-making style by being the first visiting team to win the title in the deciding game.

Taurasi and Pondexter were two of three main engines in the offense augmented by Australia's Penny Taylor. Support was provided by veteran Tangelia Smith, who arrived courtesy of a headline-making draft day trade from Minnesota as Phoenix gave up overall No.1 pick Lindsey Harding out of Duke.

After proving he can adapt his octane offensive schemes to the women's game in Phoenix, coach Paul Westhead has moved on, returning to the NBA to be an assistant to Seattle's P.J. Carlesimo.

Whoever ultimately becomes the head coach, the person may be someone without NBA DNA.

When first-year Phoenix general manager Ann Meyers was a longtime broadcast analyst, she had expressed dismay at teams hiring coaches with NBA backgrounds, who appeared to use the women's league as a way to get back to the men's scene.

Besides building her own list of candidates, Meyers will wait until after the league meetings this week to see who comes knocking on the Mercury's door expressing interest.

While signs of growth continued to be seen, the league still has a bunch of issues to deal with in the off-season, the most serious of which is getting a new collective bargaining agreement with the players association signed.

Something has to be done to improve the quality of officiating, though few have suggested magic bullets to get the job done. But there were many close games, especially in the playoffs, where faulty calls helped determined outcomes.

To expand or not expand continues to be a question for 2008. Colorado, which had seemed a leading candidate, recently dropped out of contention for now. Atlanta has been mentioned.

Seattle's situation continues to be turbulent, though ownership has said the Storm will play in the Emerald City next summer.

However, the wintry off-season evolves, its end will appropriately occur in the land of sunshine in Tampa, Fla., the site of the 2008 Women's Final Four.

That's where the next draft will be held and it promises to be potentially the most highly-prized collection of young talent since the process began.

MIDNIGHT ALMOST HERE

The league, in its own name, will be shuttered for the winter, but soon after the colleges reach Midnight Madness and the start of activities for the 2008 season, the USA squad will take an eight-game tour of exhibition match-ups with colleges.

Yes, to answer that question, the team will play at Tennessee and Connecticut, but Parker will play with the Vols in Knoxville and not be part of the tour on the U.S. roster.

One thing this collegiate season won't have is the annual regular battle between Connecticut and Tennessee after Hall of Fame coach Pat Summitt of the Vols canceled the series for reasons that have yet to be formally specified.

The summer has been filled with debate over her reasons, with most pointing toward criticism of Connecticut's recruiting methods. The Huskies added their third straight overall top blue chip prospect when Elena Della Donne of Wilmington, Del., committed to UConn in August.

Because practice usually brings its share of unforeseen injuries, there's no sense discussing the collegiate ahead until next time around, when rosters are solidified and coaches have a better handle on their pleasures and displeasures.

Publisher's note: Due to the passing of Mel Greenberg's mother, the August edition of REAL SPORTS e-Zine was not published. We appreciate your understanding.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

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