

Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

Newcomers – Old-timers, Each Offers Familiar Faces

Maybe it's a good thing that there will be a long break in the WNBA season during the Olympics. The way things are happening on a daily basis, time is going to be needed to catch up.

If there was any doubt about rookie Diana Taurasi quickly making the adjustment to life in the pros after a hectic and grueling eight-month run to a third straight NCAA title with Connecticut, the native of Chino, Calif., has made those notions vanish. In three games, Taurasi, the No. 1 overall pick in April's draft by the

Phoenix Mercury, has taken off faster than Smarty Jones has dominated the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness. She's already set the WNBA career-launching scoring record with three straight games in which she has put more than 20 points on the board.

All this after a wild period immediately following the NCAA tournament in which Taurasi worked a week with the Olympic team, went through the draft, joined the Mercury, handled three national

teleconferences, got chosen for the Olympic squad and made an emotional return to the Nutmeg State with the Mercury as Phoenix met the Connecticut Sun in the first ABC-TV telecast of the season.

Taurasi shook off a late-night party she reportedly hosted at the Mohegan Sun casino-entertainment complex for a few of her collegiate friends and former teammates and several others to score 26 points as the Mercury dominated the Sun in the second half.

Oh, she might have been a little nervous, like when she came out on the court for a pre-game session with the press and discovered she put her shorts on backwards.

It was amusing glancing at her Phoenix teammates, who came out for the shoot-around and did double-takes after seeing the media swarm around Taurasi under one of the baskets.

Talk about impact

Her arrival in the league has WNBA internet traffic booming at record levels while the ABC telecast also was the most

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watched game since the league entered its new TV contract a year ago.

How well has Taurasi made the adjustment?

Listen to three prominent Olympians who have all earned superior accolades in their own careers.

“Diana Taurasi is just an amazing player,” said Los Angeles Sparks center Lisa Leslie, whose led her team to two WNBA titles. “I think that she's really accomplished all her goals at the college level and now she's definitely going to have an impact on our league her first year.

“Playing with her, she's very poised,” Leslie continued. “She's a big guard, she handles the ball well, she sees the floor very well. She reminds me a lot of Nikki Teasley. She has the same type of abilities.”

Tamika Catchings, the former Tennessee star who was one of the top newcomers to the WNBA in 2002, added, “They (USA basketball officials) were kind of skeptical about her coming into USA Basketball, coming in straight from eight months of playing, how she'd able to

interact with the players, and how'd she be able to perform coming straight off a national championship.

“She came in and she was a huge presence,” Catchings said of Taurasi's week with the squad following the Huskies' triumph in New Orleans. “She did all the things that she did at Connecticut. The assists, scoring, open threes, layups, going in and doing whatever.”

Sheryl Swoopes of the Houston Comets said, “Diana loves the game. I don't think it's any secret when she's out all over the floor, you can see it in her face.

“She loves the competition and she's going to be a great addition to the (Olympic) team,” Swoopes added. “I don't think it was any surprise the way she played and fit in. The good thing about it, is she has a type of cockiness to her that gives her a lot of confidence. At the same time, she was willing learn and willing to get better.”

In the game in Connecticut, Taurasi was miked in the first half by ABC and chatted up Sun rookie Lindsay Whalen, the former Minnesota star taken fourth

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overall in the draft whom she had faced in the semifinals of the Women's Final Four.

“How's it going?” Taurasi asked Whalen.

“Fine.”

“How's Connecticut?”

“Good”

“You can't gamble, though.”

Taurasi referred to the state rule that employees of the casino – The Mohegan Indian Tribe who owns the Sun also operate the casino – can't gamble on the premises although they can go to the nearby Foxwoods complex.

As for herself, Taurasi said she hit the slots for \$60 bucks on one of her early pulls on the handle.

Old-timers and Newcomers

When the WNBA launched in 1997, rosters on the eight charter teams consisted of 10 active players each and two developmental players.

Of that original opening group of 80 players, only 13 were still listed on cutdown date last month among a composite group of 143 on the 13 team rosters that allow for 11 players.

The group and their current teams are: Charlotte Sting - Andrea Stinson; Connecticut Sun Wendy Palmer; Detroit Shock Merlakia Jones; Houston Comets Sheryl Swoopes, Tina Thompson; Los Angeles Sparks Lisa Leslie, Tamecka Dixon, Mwadi Mabika, Teresa Weatherspoon; New York Liberty -Vickie Johnson, Elena Baranova; Sacramento Monarchs - Ruthie Bolton, Lady Grooms.

Of this group, Stinson, Swoopes, Thompson, Leslie, Dixon, Mabika, Johnson, and Bolton have been with the same teams, although Swoopes missed most of the first year due to pregnancy and later missed a season because of an ACL injury.

Jones had been with Cleveland all the way until the Rockers folded last season and she moved to Detroit in the dispersal draft. Weatherspoon had been with New York all the way until signing with L.A. as a free agent last winter.

Grooms spent the first year at Utah until moving to Sacramento. Baranova also started at Utah, moved to the former Miami Sol, and missed a season because of an ACL injury in her native Russia. Palmer also started at Utah,

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moved to Detroit in a trade, then ended up with the former Orlando Miracle, which became the Connecticut Sun last season.

Additionally, there are 14 companion players who spent the first two WNBA seasons as stars in the former American Basketball League.

Those vets are: Charlotte Dawn Staley, Charlotte Smith; Connecticut Debbie Black, Taj McWilliams-Franklin; Indiana Fever Natalie Williams; Minnesota Lynx Katie Smith, Stacey Lovelace-Tolbert; New York Tari Phillips, Crystal Robinson; Phoenix Mercury Nikki McCray; Sacramento Edna Campbell; San Antonio Silver Stars Adrienne Goodson, Shannon Johnson; Seattle Storm Sheri Sam. Lovelace-Tolbert, because of knee injuries, has only two years of WNBA experience.

Special mention goes to Teresa Edwards, however, the five-time Olympic medalist who was a founding ABL player and then bypassed the WNBA until coming out of retirement last season.

McCray spent one year in the ABL before jumping to the WNBA and being picked by the Washington Mystics.

The WNBA also has seven players who were prominent rookies in the ABL's second and last full season: Charlotte La'Keisha Frett; Detroit Barbara Farris, Elaine Powell; Houston Kedra Holland-Corn; Indiana Kate Starbird; Sacramento Yolanda Griffith; Los Angeles DeLisha Milton-Jones.

The seven No. 1 draft picks are still on board: Houston Tina Thompson (1997); San Antonio-then Utah Margo Dydek (1998); Washington Chamique Holdsclaw (1999); New York Ann Wauters (2000) who was dispersed from Cleveland; Seattle Lauren Jackson (2001), Sue Bird (2002); San Antonio LaToya Thomas (2003) dispersed from Cleveland.

There are 33 rookies, give or take a few due to injuries, and not all are from the college ranks.

Houston has none, but picked up Holland-Corn in a trade with Detroit and Lucienne Berthieu in the dispersal draft from Cleveland. Many, such as Alana Beard with Washington – the overall No. 2 pick – Whalen with Connecticut, Nicole Powell with Charlotte, and Nicole Ohlde with Minnesota, are already making significant contributions.



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And This Final Note:

The Connecticut 2002 unbeaten NCAA champion starting five are all in the league as starters with Taurasi, Detroit's Swin Cash, and Seattle's Bird named to the Olympic team. Taurasi and Bird, as

mentioned, were No. 1 pick, Cash was a No. 2, the Connecticut Sun's Asjha Jones previously with Washington was a No. 4 and Minnesota's Tamika Williams was a No. 6. [RS]

SPECIAL NOTE:

Since a month is a long time between appearances during the WNBA season, check in at realsportsmag.com several times a week for instant tidbits, when they arise, to shorten your reading time in our monthly visit.

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