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## THE BUSINESS OF THE WNBA: THE LIVES AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OF WOMEN ATHLETES IN AMERICAN BASKETBALL

### ABSTRACT

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) is an organization for women pursuing a professional basketball career. Ever since its establishment in 1996, it has taken steps to empower female athletes at the professional level. However, despite those steps taken, the league faces structural inequities that revolve around gender, race, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity. Over the years, these inequities have been compared to those in the National Basketball Association (NBA), the WNBA's brother organization, and the experiences of professional male basketball players. These shared inequities allow for an equivalent comparison based on gender since both leagues are paying athletes to play competitive basketball around the United States. This paper will explore inequities within women's basketball, and the WNBA specifically, from its historical beginnings to the present day. It will also compare current inequitable working conditions to the men's basketball league. Some challenges that will be examined are salary gaps, insufficient media coverage, lack of financial and material support, and prejudicial

behaviors specific to women employees. The paper will propose solutions that would eliminate inequities and offer suggestions that will help the league prosper. The overall purpose of this research project is to explore what it means to play in the WNBA, a league lacking resources and other necessities to function at its peak. I hope that by doing so, this information will shed light on the WNBA and help articulate solutions to long-standing issues that affect women's basketball and female athletes in particular. This, in turn, will lead to an inclusive environment for generations to come.

**Keywords:** WNBA, Inequities, Gender, Basketball, Race

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) is a sports organization in the United States that advocates for women's basketball. The league gives women who are age twenty-two and up an opportunity to extend their careers at the professional level. Although female athletes are presented with these opportunities, they face disparities compared to male athletes, including structural inequities that revolve around gender, race,



Caitlin Clark playing for Iowa on February 28th 2024 at the Williams Arena in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Photo credit: John McClellan via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

sexual orientation, and other axes of identity. These struggles make it hard for the league's players to compete at their fullest potential.

In this thesis, the WNBA will be compared to the National Basketball Association (NBA), the men's league. The men's organization was established in 1949, many years before the WNBA's founding in 1996 (Martin, 2023). Since its establishment, the NBA has seen nothing but growth. Over recent years, inequities faced by women players in the WNBA have been compared to the conditions of NBA players. These comparisons allow us to identify a range of inequities based on gender, since both leagues are paying athletes to play competitive basketball around the United States.

Although the leagues have their differences, they are not responsible for all of the issues that will be identified in this paper. Some of these inequities have been carried through history and are caused by societal views on gender, race, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity. Throughout time, society has assigned behavioral roles to individuals based on their identity. Because this is the way society determines how certain groups of people act, it can be challenging for people to excel in domains they have previously not engaged in.

Despite all this, the WNBA is continuing to inspire and empower people around the world through the sport of basketball. With its high level of competition and commitment to social justice as well as women in sports, there are high hopes for the league. But there are still inequities that need to be overcome for the league to thrive at its utmost potential.

## **2. THE BUSINESS OF THE WNBA: THE LIVES AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OF WOMEN ATHLETES IN AMERICAN BASKETBALL**

### **2.1 The WNBA**

The WNBA, as stated before, is a professional league for women pursuing a career in basketball. The league has been successful in its intent to give women a job like their male counterparts in the NBA. But the league has been characterized by struggle since its beginnings (Mannen, 2021). The league is failing tremendously because of the lack of money and representation which ultimately leads to other failures. Because of these compounding hardships, it makes it nearly impossible for the league to thrive at the NBA's level. But the WNBA is not to fully blame for this. Society plays a major role in these failures because, as Dr.

Brittany Jacobs, an Associate Professor of Sports Management at American Public University, states: "Despite many advances over time, gender inequality and sex discrimination are still rampant in sports" (Jacobs, 2024, para. 1). As a result, today we see that the majority of society does not support the league or contribute to its success. Although women have earned more rights over the centuries due to improved laws and regulations, society continues to overlook the greatness of women's athletics. In this paper, I will look to compare these areas of disparities between the NBA and WNBA. I will also validate areas of inequality among society and those directly in the league.

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

While researching, I discovered that there is limited scholarly work around women's basketball and its evolution. Although this is the case, I did find a book written in 1996 by Joan Hult on women's basketball and its struggles. Hult is an alumni at the University of South Carolina, where she received her Ph.D. in sports history. After this accomplishment, she joined the Department of Physical Education for Women at the University of Maryland. As for her professional work, she focuses her writing on sports history and the philosophy of sport. Hult's book, *A Century of Women's Basketball from Frailty to Final Four*, is one of the earliest scholarly books that examines all aspects of women's basketball, including governance, the Olympics, basketball, and Title IX issues. For example, Hult mentions that female athletes were restricted from physical play in the first half of the twentieth century. She writes, "The middle class and college women of the era (1920-1930) still had role restrictions mandating only sporting experiences that had historically been acceptable. Basketball, however, fit into the category of acceptable recreational sport because rule modifications restricted physical contact" (Hult, 1991, p. 30). These restrictions were seen a lot during this time, and many wrote on the matter after the release of Title IX when more articles about women's basketball and women's place in society with sports appeared.

Over the next few years, there was a wave of publications about women's athletics as a whole, especially those related to Title IX. These writings have illustrated the struggles women have faced when wishing to participate in recreational, high school, or collegiate sports. For example, another writer, Heather Ross Miller, a relatively well-known novelist, wrote about the

experiences of women basketball in 1992. According to Ross Miller, women have always been restricted in pursuing athletics. This was seen in 1957 with women's basketball, where women were limited to playing with fewer players and were restricted to only one-half of the court. They were desperate for change, and the issues they raised were bigger than basketball (McFall & Perkiss, 2022). Yet, another writer speaks out on the differences within women's sports.

Through the next ten years, specific issues have begun to come to light through various research endeavors. These issues now not only reference women's basketball and Title IX, but the professional Women's Basketball Association, also known as the WNBA, and its struggles. Two university students looked at women's basketball on the global level. They specifically analyzed the impact players had globally because of their time spent overseas. Although that was the objective, the research yielded the insight that over one hundred WNBA players from the U.S. and elsewhere compete abroad during the off-season to supplement their incomes (Berber & Turco). This was one of the few documents that showed basic yet big issues that WNBA players are experiencing. Between this time (2010-2015), more previously unacknowledged disparities were coming to light. Therefore, there was a lot more writing concerning this matter.

It wasn't until very recently that there have been a few selected scholarly sources around women's basketball and the WNBA with regards to ongoing inequities. These sources have highlighted the attention women's sports and basketball receive, the amount of income the league is receiving, along with the lack of representation. It also addresses important issues such as discrimination, gender equity, less pay, sexual harassment, and sexist questions in media coverage, but does so on the surface level.

In addition to research on inequities, you can also see a lot of comparisons between male and female athletes in these sources. There has even been more information on the matters of comparing similar leagues playing the same sport, in this case, the WNBA and the NBA. For example, the two charts below give great insight into the pay inequities between male and female athletic figures. These two charts were developed at Adelphi University by students completing their masters in sports management. In the first chart, they analyzed the pay of top-

paid athletes based on gender. The second chart only looks at the WNBA and the NBA and compares the two. The two charts' purpose is to see the inequities in pay to athletes based on their gender. Based on the charts, female athletes are being paid less to do the same job or sport as their male counterparts.

	2012	2022
<b>Male professional athletes in boxing, basketball, golf, soccer, tennis</b>	Floyd Mayweather, \$85 million Manny Pacquiao, \$62 million Tiger Woods, \$59.4 million LeBron James, \$53 million Roger Federer, \$52.7 million	Lionel Messi, \$130 million LeBron James, \$121.2 million Cristiano Ronaldo, \$115 million Neymar, \$95 million Stephen Curry, \$92.8 million
<b>Female professional athletes in tennis, race car driving, skiing</b>	Maria Sharapova, \$27.1 million Li Na, \$18.4 million Serena Williams, \$16.3 million Caroline Wozniacki, \$13.7 million Danica Patrick, \$13 million	Naomi Osaka, \$51.1 million Serena Williams, \$41.3 million Eileen Gu, \$20.1 million Emma Raducanu, \$18.7 million Iga Świątek, \$14.9 million

**Table 1:** Income earned with endorsements by top-paid athletes. *Note:* Data from Adelphi University that illustrates a comparison of Male vs. Female Professional Sports Salary. *Source:* Adelphi University (men 2012, 2022; women 2012, 2022).

	2002-2003	2012-2013	2022-2023
<b>NBA</b>	Minimum salary: \$349,000 Maximum salary: \$25,200,000	Minimum salary: \$474,000 Maximum salary: \$27,849,149	Minimum salary: \$953,000 Maximum salary: \$45,780,966
<b>WNBA</b>	Minimum salary: \$30,000 Maximum salary: \$79,000	Minimum salary: \$36,570 Maximum salary: \$105,000	Minimum salary: \$60,000 Maximum salary: \$234,936

**Table 2:** NBA vs. WNBA Salaries. *Note:* Data from Adelphi University that illustrates a comparison between NBA and WNBA Salary. *Source:* Adelphi University (NBA, WNBA)

In sum, my purpose for writing this research paper is to explore the discriminatory problems within the WNBA. So far, scholarly research has lacked the ability to explore all areas of disparities and has not suggested solutions for these problems. As for my paper and research, I will inspect the inequities faced by members of the WNBA based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity. I will explain why some of these inequities are the way they are, which reflects on societal history and then, finally, I will explore new avenues for the league to create a better and safer environment which can ultimately grow the league and its presence in society.

In this thesis, I will explore avenues of growth for the league. As the league struggles holding on to its presence in society, I will make suggestions that can help broaden the organization. According to previous research, it takes an organization anywhere from seven to ten years to truly be successful (FreshBooks, 2023). Therefore, when you consider the establishment of the league, they should be flourishing, but yet there are still many problems.



University of California-Berkeley women's basketball team, photographed in 1899. "Berkeley's Famous Basket Ball Team," *San Francisco Call*, 9 April 1899, p. 24. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

One of the biggest problems that has prevented the league from reaching its potential is the overall lack of awareness of the athletes' struggles. Much of society is unaware of news around and actions taken within the WNBA, and some of this is due to inequity issues and societal beliefs. Through this paper I will explore the causes for and effects of this. An example of this is that society might not be aware of the league because of the sparse media attention it receives. Awareness is one of the bigger issues that need a solution which this paper will discover.

#### 4. HISTORY

##### 4.1 Phase 1: The Beginnings (1892-1972)

Women's basketball officially began in 1893. It was on March 22, 1893, that the first women's basketball game was documented. This game took place at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, a Division-III college program (History, 2021). This prestigious program was geared towards unmarried upper-class white women, and these women made up the team. This game consisted of two halves, each fifteen minutes long. In addition, each basket was worth only one point, which is very different from the rules of present-day women's basketball. The rules of women's and men's basketball were the same from the start, though.

The sport of basketball had been developed just two years prior by a Canadian named James Naismith, a second-year graduate student at Springfield College in Massachusetts. He had recently been appointed to be a physical education instructor and his love for sports sparked his curiosity to construct the game of "basket ball" (Klein, 2004). In 1891, the game was

considered a "bloodbath" because of the sport's high degree of contact. Because of its physicality, Naismith wanted to reorganize the game in a more "respectable" and more structured manner; therefore, he established thirteen rules. These rules were developed to create greater order and organization within the sport. One of those rules, for example, said:

Rule #5: No shouldering, holding, pushing, tripping, or striking in any way the person of an opponent shall be allowed; the first infringement of this rule by any player shall count as a foul, the second shall disqualify him until the next goal is made, or, if there was evident intent to injure the person, for the whole of the game, no substitute allowed. (Klein, 2004)

One thing that is striking is that, according to rule #5, there exist the second and third infringements. According to this rule, on the second infringement a player is disqualified until the next goal. Or if there is evident intent to injure a player, there is no substitution allowed after the fact. This is in contrast to today's game for both men and women. If this were the case, then a player would be called for another foul and if there were intent to injure a player, then that player would be ejected from the game and there would be no effect on substitutions made.

When women began participating in "basket ball" in 1893, they were required to be dressed in



James Naismith, the inventor of basketball. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons



Smith College's class of 1902 women's basketball team. Note the bloomers. Photo credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

blouses and bloomers, loose pants gathered under the knee, for the games (*First women's*, 2021). The idea behind these uniforms was to preserve the players' femininity. This was because middle-class women, in these times, were supposed to be seen as relatively physically powerless, and they had to preserve a certain image of "frail" femininity. It also did not help that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, society frowned upon women who participated in sports, especially those sports as physical as basketball. Therefore, to keep the feminine order, they were mandated to wear the frilly attire of blouses and bloomers. These mandates did cause issues for women athletes, especially during play: "Players would trip and bruise, further fueling the trope that women were too frail or weak to play" (Grundy, 2024, p. 7).

These ideas lasted for many years until the rebellious 1920s when women began to take a stand against the clumsy attire. But, until then, their physical activity was performed in blouses and bloomers, all because they were told to put modesty over performance and practicality by a male-dominated society (Ambush, 2024). To people of that time, women's femininity needed to be preserved, and society listened.

Around the turn of the century, more women started to seek involvement in physical activity, and they began to form informal athletic clubs to feed their competitive nature. This eventually led to the establishment of the

National Women's Basketball Committee (NWBC) in 1905 (NCAA). This committee advocated for women's physical exercise through basketball in all aspects. The NWBC even collaborated with the American Physical Education Association to promote athletics and physical activity for women in schools. This integration was not only for the sake of women seeking equal rights and having fun, but for health benefits as well. Physical activities were seen to create a healthier population. Before middle-class and upper-class women won the opportunity to participate in athletics and physical activities, statistically speaking, they were, in fact, weaker and more frail (Riess, 2015). So, sports were offered as a way to increase health and help women live longer and have healthy offspring.

Although the importance of women's basketball slowly grew towards the end of the nineteenth century, particularly among collegiate women, there was not much wider societal attention paid to it. Because of this, women supported themselves throughout their athletic careers. For example, women players would be told they had to wear the same game uniform every year, no matter how worn the uniform was. On the other hand, men's teams were told they had to look fresh and clean, and that resulted in them receiving new uniforms every year, no matter the conditions of the previous ones (Grundy, 2024). This was just one

incident of obvious under-resourcing of women's basketball before the passing of Title IX made slow progress towards equality a century later. But until then, women players were on their own and had to fend for themselves.

It was in 1920 that some of this progress began. In the '20s, many women questioned society's patriarchal standards and embraced a life viewed by many at the time as outrageous, immoral, or downright dangerous (*Flappers*, 2018). It was a rebellious period for women in the sport of basketball, too. After the rise of so many nagging inequity issues within the sport, women athletes began finding ways to improve the overall experience of being a basketball athlete. For instance, women began sewing their own uniforms once they were worn to pieces. In addition, they sought a new custom in bottoms for games because the puffy bloomers hindered movement. Their innovation consisted of shorts which became a part of the new standard uniform. Shorts offered greater and easier access to mobility which, maybe unsurprisingly, caught lots of audience attention. To give an idea, once women were wearing shorts, men found it visibly pleasing (Grundy, 2024). Most men loved the new look because they saw the attraction of the view it offered. This perspective of thinking by men increased attendance numbers to games, but obviously for the wrong reasons. Men were not there to admire the talent or athleticism of these women, but were there because of the athletes' appearance.

Early women's basketball was a man's sport. But over time, women have turned it into their own, and the sport has developed into something more inclusive. For instance, shortly after the first women's game at Smith College, many other women's college basketball programs developed across the U.S. Schools such as Iowa State College, Carleton College, Mount Holyoke College, and Sophie Newcomb College (Tulane) in New Orleans each adopted basketball into their programs. Additionally, each year more schools added women's basketball to their sports offerings for girls (Lewis, 2008). Although this was tremendous progress for women in athletics between 1920 and 1970, the greatest change to the game came with



Sheryl Swoopes, one of the first athletes signed by the WNBA in 1996, in 2008. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Congress's passing of Title IX in 1972. Before Title X banned sex-based discrimination in sports, only about 30,000 women played at the collegiate level (Cramer, 2022).

#### *4.2 Phase 2: The Evolution (Title IX, 1972)*

President Richard Nixon signed and passed Title IX in 1972, making it one of the most unforgettable years for women's athletics. Title IX is a federal civil rights law in the U.S. The law states that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Cooky & Lavoie, 2012, p. 42). In summary, this law promotes equality by legally advocating for women and minorities in college environments. It mandates that all schools and sports organizations provide equal opportunities regardless of demographics. Although Title IX has influenced much of the overall sports world, it has specifically had a significant impact on

women's basketball and the 1996 founding of the WNBA.

Before Title IX was passed, physical activities for women were limited in collegiate contexts. Women's athletics received less attention, funding, resources, and support compared to men's sports. These inequalities within athletics made high-level competition difficult for women. For example, only 1% of college athletic budgets went to women's sports programs before the passing of Title IX (King, n.d.). This means that the other 99% were given to support male teams. This became an issue because there was no budget left for women to purchase proper equipment they may have needed. Therefore, they were constantly reusing the same equipment, just wearing it out. But somehow, they were expected to make it work. It was also noted that, at the high school level in early 1972, male athletes outnumbered female athletes 12.5 to 1 (King, n.d.). This only proves yet again that women did not have the same opportunities as men. Before the law was passed, women athletes were not acknowledged as men's equals. So, they did not have the opportunity to be recognized because they were not allowed the chance to participate in all activities, hence the skewed male-to-female ratio.

Since the passing of Title IX, more opportunities have emerged for women. There has been an increase in sports participation, education, and employment opportunities for women and girls. Participation numbers increasing is proof that women want to participate in athletics, and that they want to be treated fairly. Because of this, it is only now that we see institutions investing in their women's athletic programs. They want to ensure that women are provided with good facilities, equipment, coaching staff, and scholarships. These attributes, highlighting institutions' commitment to equality, have also increased women's enrollment numbers in schools. As sports are advertised alongside academics, it becomes an appealing recruitment tool for schools. This, once again, helps grow the numbers of women and girl student athletes.

Lastly, Title IX has increased employment opportunities for women. For example, there have been collegiate and professional coaching opportunities opening up upon the release of Title IX. Women are now able to clearly identify what they can bring to the table and are provided the opportunity to do it. Since these times, many women have taken advantage of

these opportunities, and not just upper-class white women. Now, members of minoritized communities are looking to pursue a potential career in athletics and are putting themselves out there for a chance to be a part of history.

Another advocacy platform for women was the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), founded in 1974. It was established by Billie Jean King in part to protect the athletic dimension of Title IX's provisions. King, former tennis player and champion in the sports world, champion of equality, and champion of social change, created a goal where she wanted people of all genders, but specifically women, to have full access to the sport experience. This led her to build the WSF, and their official mission is to "enable all girls and women to reach their potential in sports and life" (WSF, n.d., para. 10). This organization has gotten more women involved over the years and still seeks to strengthen female involvement in sports today.

Title IX has done so much, but yet it doesn't stop there. It has also paved a way for women to turn their athletic passions into professional careers. Women can now compete for higher levels of competition analogous to how male athletes are supported by their professional associations. For example, this has been seen in women's basketball and its professional association. There have been many players who have achieved great success in college and have moved on to become better players, women, and role models. Today the WNBA gives women the chance to pursue a sports career professionally, allowing them to receive a regular income for exercising their talent.

Despite some issues that are still around today, such as disparities in salary levels and media coverage, Title IX has been a major stepping stone for women and athletics. Title IX has prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs and activities. It has improved the overall status of women's sports and women empowerment. It has drastically increased the number of women competing in athletics today by increasing funding and therefore opportunities for women and girls in educational institutions. For example, today there are approximately 229,060 female athletes registered with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), a nonprofit organization that regulates student athletics among about 1,100 schools in the United States, and one in Canada.

In conclusion, Title IX has ensured that female athletes receive the attention, funding,

resources, and support that they need to operate. Women and girls can now follow their passion, knowing they are entitled to the same recognition as their male counterparts, even if, in reality, disparities persist. Furthermore, today female athleticism has become normalized and celebrated, and that can be seen through the sport of basketball within the WNBA.

### *4.3 Phase 3: Present-Day Women's Basketball & The WNBA*

Title IX impacted the start-up of many women's athletic associations. But a more recent establishment it influenced is the WNBA, founded in 1996 and home to 144 drafted female athletes. Prior to the formation of this league, there was an alternate league called the Liberty Basketball Association (LIBA), created in 1991. The LIBA was a forerunner of the WNBA because it laid out expectations and guidelines towards greater professionalization within the sport. Today's WNBA is a major driver for women's basketball because it gives players career options for the future, that is, if they are good enough to make it and maintain the job.

The league today is composed of twelve teams, each containing twelve players. Although these numbers can not compare to those within the men's league (NBA), which is composed of thirty teams, each of which holds roughly fifteen players, the WNBA has grown overall awareness of women's basketball while empowering women.

Along with the development of the league, present-day basketball has changed drastically compared to the past. It has changed alongside society's changing mores. For example, in the late 1800s, the uniforms were challenging for women to compete in, but during the time heavy and ornamented gear was the norm. It was simply the appropriate attire for the game. But, because of social reforms, women have gained the ability to take a stand for themselves. Also, as the overall game has become more respected over time, women's uniforms began to mirror men's and, as a result, today's players are given the opportunities to choose how they want their uniform fitted. The league ensures the fit is comfortable and made for the player and her personal request.

To place this into perspective, players pick their jersey fit. The jerseys consist of women-specific scapula cuts on the jersey and vents on the shorts. There are also an extensive variety of uniform lengths and short rises that help

maximize range of motion and comfort in relation to the player (WNBA, 2018). This Nike-branded apparel wants to compel an image of elite basketball for women while being comfortable and flexible. The WNBA also focuses on the material of the jerseys and its importance. To do this, they look into temperature regulations, while playing the jersey. On the WNBA jerseys, there is an advanced, closed-hole mesh fabric with quick-dry back venting (the pattern and placement were determined by employing digital body maps that evaluated female athletes' primary sweat and cling zones) that helps regulate body temperature and provides optimal moisture control during play (WNBA, 2018). It was even stated by WNBA players that the jerseys over the years have become more distinctive for each team, making them much more meaningful to individual players and organization as a whole. This is a big stepping stone compared to the past because now women are offered the chance to look stylish with their choice of uniform, while also being protected in terms of body temperature regulation.

Since the early beginnings of basketball, many of the rules were differentiated by gender. For example, the women use a ball the size of 28.5", while the men use a ball the size of 29.5". The women play two twenty-minute halves, while the men in the NBA play four twelve-minute quarters. The shot clock in the WNBA is set at 30 seconds per possession, while the NBA shot clock starts at 24 seconds. The specific changes within the game have made it more detailed and more specialized for each gender. It's important to recognize the significance of these differences. As suggested by viewership numbers, the NBA has been more appealing because of these factors. In today's society, most audiences enjoy men's faster games, the time pressure, the bigger balls, and the excitement created by acrobatic moves like dunking. This is all seen in NBA, and therefore these features make the NBA more appealing. Even throughout history, it has been proven that America enjoys the rapidity of sports and the emotional appeal it has for the audience. There is a huge adrenaline rush generated throughout the body by the game (Riess, 2015).

On the flip side of this rush are the women's rule. The women's game is much slower and far less appealing, some would argue. But, although this "may" be the case, the game can be appealing due to other factors. For example,



women's basketball really breaks down the simplicity of basketball with the shot, the passes, and the dribble. Alongside this, women's basketball does not only represent basketball, but it represents a movement and a celebration of women in sports. Even though there are differences, those differences can be treated as equals.

Although these differences in rules and regulations seem small, they have had major impacts on the game and the league, causing plenty of inequality issues compared to the men's league. Some of these issues pertain to salary, media coverage, sponsorship opportunities, and more. Salary issues have

become a trending issue throughout the WNBA in the late 2010s and early 2020s. WNBA players and staff are receiving considerably lower incomes compared to those in the NBA. As for the media, the WNBA lacks widespread recognition of players, teams, and games. Therefore, no opportunities for growth, especially for increasing audience exposure, exist. Lack of sponsorship has also hindered the league and players. Because there are smaller salaries for women in the league, athletes are looking for ways to make a living elsewhere. Sponsorships could be the answer so that players can devote themselves to the game full-time. But there is a limited number of deals,

especially compared to those the men receive. These are just a few areas where we can see major inequalities, but there are many more beneath the surface level.

In conclusion, the WNBA has become the prominent professional league for women's basketball. Since its establishment in 1996, the league has experienced remarkable achievements. Although this is the case, there is still much more work to be done to improve the league and the awareness of the game for the sake of women equality.

## 5. INEQUITIES

### *5.1 Introduction to the Inequities between Female and Male Basketball Players*

Inequities are the disparities in treatment, opportunities, and resources that are given to one group or individual over another. These decisions are made in favor of one group based upon characteristic attributes. Some of these characteristics might consist of race, age, sex, as well as many others. With regard to women athletics, female athletes have faced these inequities since the beginning of sports history, and much of it had to do with them just being women. One would think that with creation of Title IX equality would be present, but there are still ongoing issues today. Some of these inequity issues, especially those related to gender, have been seen throughout the WNBA and their establishment.

With gender inequality being a leading issue within the WNBA, the league highlights imbalances that are present



Maya Moore of the Minnesota Lynx, MVP of the 2014 WNBA season. Photo credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

between men and women in professional basketball, in this case, the NBA over the WNBA. The NBA has been given better treatment, more opportunities, and more resources because it's a men's league, and the women have received less based on who they are. Not only have there been inequities between men and women outside of the league, but the WNBA itself has had its gender inequality issues.

Concerning women's and men's sports, the two can not be compared equally due to the level of disparities that are present. The men are significantly given better treatment, opportunities, and resources. Their league has been a reflection of that. Although there are many more contributions to the success of the NBA, the league is far surpassing the women's league. Although the NBA is given more, some teams do work to help and partner with WNBA leagues to assist in growing their franchise. But, this doesn't eliminate the inequities that are still there.

### 5.2 Women in the WNBA

The WNBA is a very diverse community, especially among the players. The league is filled with a tremendous number of stars that come from various backgrounds and who represent themselves completely differently from each other. As stated before, the league consists of 144 players at most, and each individual brings their unique characteristics to the organization. The league underlines these diversities from several key perspectives that are recognized as race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. These are priorities in the face of diversity because they are visible issues in society today and not just within basketball. Therefore, the attention around them is brought to light.

First, the WNBA is racially diverse and, although there is a leading majority, there is still variety. In 2022, the league was made up of 70.3% African American players (WNBA Players by Ethnicity 2022, 2022). In the game's early history, Black women rarely had the access or luxury to play sports. It was disapproved of and much of society was not a fan of Black athletes. However, Black women still embraced competitive sport and particularly basketball (Munro-Cook, 2021). This could have been influenced by the accessibility of the sport. As



Layshia Clarendon, the first non-binary WNBA player, in a game against the Minnesota Lynx in 2019 when they played for the Connecticut Sun. Photo credit: Lorie Shaull via Wikimedia Commons.

we can see today, there is a positive female sporting tradition that emerged among Black athletes in the 1950s, and soon these athletes were less constrained by feminine ideals of weakness (Munro-Cook, 2021). Yet once again, early history did not approve of that.

Alongside the African American women in the league, there are 18.9% white, 5.4% mixed-race (two or more races), 2% Asian, 2% POC, 0.7% Hispanic, and 0.7% unknown-ethnicity players (WNBA Players by Ethnicity 2022, 2022). Although there is a leading majority of Black players, the league is very diverse and it proudly emphasizes this diversity. For example, WNBA team Washington Mystics, established in 1998, makes it their mission to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, along with other teams. The WNBA does not limit itself to its diversity inside the league, but looks to "connect communities and create a space where remarkable resilience, innovation, creativity, and agility can be exemplified by people at every level" (WNBA, 2024).

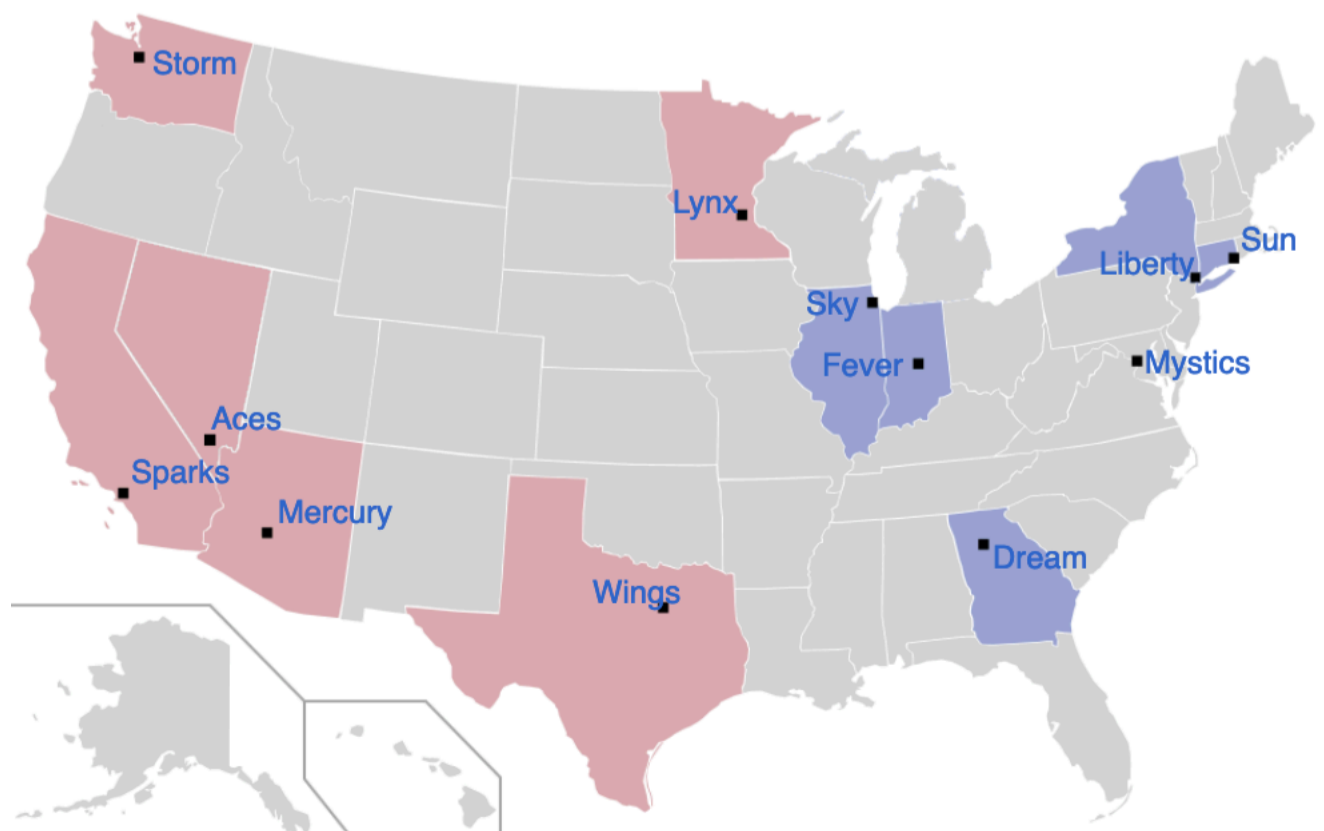
Another remarkably diverse status among athletes within the WNBA are players' self-identified genders and sexual orientations. This is important because the league has recently placed much emphasis on this concept as they represent their players' identities. This is because so many players are open about it and because of current societal debates on issues of sexuality and gender. The league consists of a

mixture of heterosexuals and homosexuals, and it has recently had its first trans non-binary player come out in 2021. It was just in the 2022 season that the WNBA had reported 28.7% of WNBA players who publicly identify as LGBTQ (Stuart, 2024). There is no other professional sports league in the world that has more publicly “out” LGBTQ athletes, coaches, and executives than the WNBA, making them a real trailblazer (Zeigler, 2024). Just like the Black Lives Matter Movement, the WNBA makes sure they represent these communities of players. They do this by supporting it on warm-up t-shirts, hosting Pride events, parades, and more.

In summary, the WNBA is a diverse league full of players that represent various races, ethnicities, and gender and sexuality backgrounds. Not only does the league work to showcase these differences, but individual teams throughout the league embody these ideas of diversity and inclusivity to empower their players and communities. Studies show that a diverse workplace helps bring benefits to an organization or team. Some of these benefits consist of attracting and retaining talent, boosting a company’s reputation, enhancing decision making, and more (Washington State University, 2020). In saying this, diversity impacts the operations of the WNBA and gives them a stepping stones to further success. A diverse organization can boost a company’s reputation, and for the WNBA this could mean increasing their audience attraction and bringing more notice to the league.

### 5.3 Size of the League

The WNBA is one of the smallest leagues at the professional level in the United States. It originally started with a total of eight teams in 1996, but now the league is composed of a solid twelve. These numbers are devastating when you compare them to other professional leagues. As an illustration, the NBA has a total of thirty teams, the National Football League (NFL) has a total of thirty-two teams, and the National Hockey League (NHL)



has a total of thirty-two teams as well. The only sister pack with the WNBA is the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) with twelve teams (NWSL, n.d.). This is yet another women’s league which gives an idea of how men are dominating the professional world and leagues.

The WNBA also has a full roster of 144 players. This only allows for each team to have a roster of twelve. This small number of available spots makes the league very competitive and challenging to access, especially for incoming players. For instance, when the draft is held, there are a total of thirty-six players who are drafted over three rounds (WNBA, 2023). This is a huge chunk of players added to the league, which means that some have to go because the capacity number for the league tops out quickly. Therefore, some players, new or old, lose their job and team membership, which can make this career less suitable for women who are competing athletes because they can not plan long-term. But as players get drafted each year, they must compete to be one of the standing 144, and, if not, they must find another alternative, making being a professional player very precarious.

In comparison, the NBA has a capacity of 450 players in the regular season. This allows for each team to have a roster of fifteen per team. This grants incoming and current players a greater opportunity to compete for a roster spot. Due to the fact that the league is so big, this also increases draft numbers. The NBA drafts roughly sixty new players into the league every year (Corr, 2023). Although players are still

fighting to compete for a spot, the chances of entering the league and getting a spot are higher in comparison to the WNBA. This alone is proof that the NBA offers more opportunities for men pursuing a professional career in basketball, competed to women who want the same career. These differences between the leagues help outline some reasons for why the league is producing players at the current, very low, level.

When looking at the size of the league, it has its reasons for being maintained this way. Studies show that the WNBA is not producing enough revenue, which makes it harder to develop teams and pay more players to play. The WNBA brings in a total of \$60 million in revenue each season (Janvrin, 2023). Even though this number sits high, it's not enough for the league to fairly remunerate female players for the talent they bring to women's basketball. The challenges with revenue even go further. Some of these factors are low media coverage and the lack of marketing investments. This all makes it harder to get the WNBA brand out there and produce revenue, including through ticket sales and merchandising. This is another evident piece to why the league is as small as it is.

A few years ago, there was NCAA Division-I player of the name Raina Perez, a standout at North Carolina State. She announced that she would attempt to compete in the WNBA league

if given the chance after she graduated in 2022. After starring in college and nearly guiding North Carolina State to the year's Final Four, Perez hoped that she would make the league and continue her dream of playing professionally. But with the league being so small, she knew the chances were slim when looking to start a purposeful career in this competitive league. Perez stated, "I've dreamed of playing in the league since I was a young girl." Perez, at the time, was 23 years old: "I found out this year just how hard that is. No matter how good you are, you've got to find a situation that is just right" (Streeter, 2022). Unfortunately, Raina Perez went undrafted and had to look for other options to make a career for herself. She was tossed around through the league as a free agent, that is, a sports player who is not bound by a contract and so is eligible to join any team, but nothing stuck. This eventually led her to pursuing a career overseas in Italy, which is the result for most young talented female athletes wishing to enter the league.

At the end of last year's WNBA season, the league did show signs of expansion for its players and rookies. It was announced in 2023 by WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert that the league would be looking to expand to the Bay Area (NBA, 2023). They are looking to create a new team that will begin playing in the 2025 season, making it the first new franchise to join the league since 2008. This team would be a



sister team to the NBA franchise team, the Golden State Warriors. This means that they would be marketed together and work together as one to grow each other's platforms. This success is one step forward for the WNBA, but there is still a lot of unfinished business to complete to make the league suitable for more women looking to compete at the professional level.

Although the WNBA league size is remarkably small, with twelve teams and a total of 144 players, it has contributed to the empowerment of women in athletes and has served as a platform for them in professional sports. Today, the league is very competitive and the best of the best compete, but there should be room for more. There are a lot of skilled female athletes around, but there is just not enough room for them.

#### *5.4 Volume of Money Available*

As shown above, most problems addressed have to do with the limited amount of money available to the WNBA. The fact is that there is too little revenue being produced. The revenue creates the funds for the league to invest, spend, and earn. Without this initial start-up of money available, there can be no effort towards growth. Fortunately, since 1996, the league has grown and expanded. This has been because of revenue increases over the years, but the league is still lacking as it only generates \$60 million a year for the season (Janvrin, 2023).

The revenue and the money produced within the WNBA come from different areas, such as ticket sales, media broadcasting, and sponsorships. Although there are more areas that produce money for the league, these are key pieces that contribute to the overall volume of funds. Although these areas are great sources of income, there are still shortcomings, especially when compared to the NBA. These shortcomings make the league more difficult to operate and invest into, and, ultimately, constrict it to its current small size.

In 2021, it was recorded that the average attendance for a WNBA game was 6,535 audience members. During the finals and tournament time, the attendance average rose to about 400,000 viewers per game, including viewers joining broadcast feeds (Robinson, 2021). These numbers are important to the revenue being produced because they correlate to the money earned from attendance. For example, when a fan plans to attend a game,

they buy a ticket, roughly \$47, go to the concession stands, and purchase merchandise (Janvrin, 2023). All of these factors add to the revenue.

It's when you compare the attendance and sales to the NBA that you realize just how completely distant from one another they are. The NBA averages a game attendance of 17,760 each game. During the finals, the number increases tremendously to an average of a little more than 20 million viewers per game, including broadcast viewership (Robinson, 2021). The average ticket price for an NBA game is \$94 (Janvrin, 2023). The differences in numbers should make it clear that the NBA has the upper hand, all because of their high game attendance. Higher attendance increases revenue; it's as simple as that. As a result, the NBA generates \$10 billion in revenue yearly, and we see that represented throughout its massive league.

The next main source of revenue comes from media broadcasting rights which does not appear to produce much publicity for the league, but contributes an essential piece to the league's finances. The WNBA earns revenue from media broadcasting rights by selling these rights to TV networks and streaming platforms. These deals help expose the league and players to wider audiences, while bringing in a constant cash flow. This is a major win-win for the league because sponsor deals increase viewership, and viewership increases sales, bringing in more revenue. The broadcasting revenue then allows the league to invest back into the players, facilities, marketing, and other areas that help expand it (Janvrin, 2023). Overall, if the league can work to maintain and increase the value of their media broadcasting rights, it can help improve the financial health of the league and make it grow.

One of the last major sources of revenue are sponsorships. Sponsors are supporters who invest in the league and its growth. These sponsorship partners can be varied, as long as they represent an image or message that the league wants them to represent. For example, Nike is a sponsor of the WNBA and a great example. As a sponsor, Nike provides funding and gear to the league, while the league showcases Nike. It is a logical sponsor, given that its mission is "to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world" (Nike, 2023). So, therefore, Nike is reaching its female audiences by showcasing its sporting brand

within the WNBA, and the WNBA gains the accessories and attention from it.

Today, sponsorships are still a vital aspect of revenue for the league. It relies on them heavily. Even individual players find themselves pursuing deals to increase their opportunities and income outside of those within the league. For example, just in 2021 highlight player Candance Parker collaborated with major brands like Adidas, CarMax, Gatorade, 2K, and other brands. Because of these deals, "her annual off-the-court pay is more than double her total playing salary across her 15 years in the WNBA" ("Candace Parker," 2023, para 2). Parker became the highest-paid league athlete during this season and made eight million dollars in endorsements alone, a much better living compared to the base salary pay.

Ticket sales, media broadcasting, and sponsorships are important for the WNBA. They are a crucial piece for the funding and money available within the league. It is critical that these sources of revenue grow over time because they contribute to the growth and success of the league. They also play a pivotal role in the driving success of women in sports.

### 5.5 Salary

As a member of the WNBA, you get paid a salary. With this salary, players are paid in semi-monthly installments by the team, meaning they receive a paycheck twice a month (Mox, 2020). This salary is built upon the funds produced as revenue. These amounts are then distributed to all 144 players, members of the coaching staff, and other employees of the league. League salary for players is based upon years of experience. In saying this, players with zero to two years of experience earn a minimum salary of \$57,000. Three-to-five-year players earn a minimum salary of \$71,000. Six to ten years earn a minimum of \$85,000. Then lastly, players exceeding eleven years of experience are guaranteed a minimum salary of \$119,000 ("WNBA Salary," 2023). These are just the minimum earnings a player can receive. For example, a player can look to negotiate higher salaries based on their performance, marketability, endorsements and other factors ("WNBA Salary," 2023). And often, many players do, so they have other sources of income outside the base salary from the league.

For instance, a big incentive for players are endorsements, as noted above. Many players receive endorsements, that is, sponsorship

deals, from big brands like Nike, Adidas, Puma, Google, YouTube, and more. These brands pay players an additional income to wear their brand logo and promote it. You could say, players who have access to these deals have an advantage economically, because they are using their image to increase their worth. Not only do these endorsements help the individual athlete, but they also specifically contribute to the player's personal profile and reflect back positively on the WNBA itself. That then attracts more attention to the league which, hopefully, allows it to gain more support and increase overall revenue.

As mentioned, for a rookie entering the WNBA, the lowest salary starts at about \$57,000 per year ("WNBA Salary," 2023). The overall average salary of a WNBA player is roughly \$102,751 per year (Janvrin, 2023). In contrast, NBA rookies are making roughly \$953,000 per year, which exceeds the WNBA rookies and average players by a factor of seventeen (Adelphi University, 2021). This major income gap between the two leagues is where gender pay inequity issues become apparent. It's not so much that the men are making more than the women, but the difference is simply outrageous, which makes it an equity concern. Additionally, when you look at the average NBA player and their salary, they are making roughly \$9.6 million (Janvrin, 2023). These numbers make evident the disparities between women's and men's basketball at the professional level.

Just recently, in 2023, there arose a salary inequity issue that raised many questions within the WNBA. Although this did not involve the players, it involved head coaches and very much impacted the players and their point of view. The Phoenix Mercury, a WNBA team, had just recently hired head coach Nate Tibbetts. This was very exciting news for Tibbetts, and he was honored to be in the position to coach great talent. But shortly after this news was released, it was announced that Tibbetts would become the highest paid head coach in WNBA history. This news struck the media, and many fans, players, and coaches were in disbelief. Most could not believe that a man who had never coached women's basketball would be the highest paid head coach in the league. His salary surpassed head coach Becky Hammon's, who had recently won an WNBA title for her team and who currently makes one million dollars per season. Prior to accepting his position, Tibbetts was an assistant coach for men's basketball: he had eighteen years of professional coaching

experience under his belt for men's basketball. Although the league and Nate Tibbetts were criticized given his lack of experience, the WNBA still pays him an income over one million dollars, making him the highest paid head coach (Greenberg, 2023).

In sum, the WNBA suffers from issues of fair compensation. Players and staff are experiencing these difficulties first-hand. It is especially hard to stomach when one knows that the NBA's male athletes are offered higher salaries for the same job that requires the same skills and qualifications.

### 5.6 Media

Since the WNBA's establishment in 1996, media has played a major role in making the league what it is today. Media, including broadcasting and the internet, provides entertainment and opportunities to produce revenue, grow audiences, and facilitate fan engagement. To do this, the league uses platforms like television networks, social media, traditional print outlets, and video games. These platforms have not only supported the league but also have been an additional help to players and their growing profiles as they market themselves as individual athletes.

Television coverage of the WNBA has been a great achievement over the years. Broadcast television, one of the earliest forms of media coverage, has allowed fans to access the games and athletic highlights on various levels. It was on June 27, 1996, that NBC Sports announced it would serve as the WNBA's first national broadcaster. At the start of the 1997 season, the WNBA had teamed with NBC and officially started their partnership (WNBA, n.d.). Today, the WNBA has expanded to other big online streamers. Some of them include ESPN, ABC, CBS, CBSSN, and ION (WNBA, 2023). As a result of this expansion, the WNBA has increased its overall viewership and revenue. The league has been able to attract more viewers invested in women's basketball. Also, with the development of streaming, especially within the last five years, it has become easier for fans to watch games on mobile platforms.

Another big media form is social media which has had a tremendous impact on the WNBA on various platforms. The league has claimed presence on popular apps such as Instagram, Facebook, X, and others. This source of media allows the league and players to connect directly with the fans. It even

sometimes showcases live-streaming games and highlight tapes. For instance, just recently, the WNBA has entered into a partnership with X. Because of this collaboration, X live-streams free WNBA games for the audience to watch directly through their app. This partnership gives the WNBA streaming rights for 12 regular season games and although there is little disclosure on the 2021 deal, it netted the league \$250,000 (Rodrigues, 2022).

Date	Game	Time (ET)
Friday, May 6	Minnesota Lynx at Seattle Storm (CC)	10:00 p.m.
Friday, May 13	Indiana Fever at New York Liberty (CC)	8:00 p.m.
Friday, May 20	Washington Mystics at Atlanta Dream (CC)	7:30 p.m.
Friday, May 27	Los Angeles Sparks at Indiana Fever	7:00 p.m.
Friday, June 3	New York Liberty at Washington Mystics (CC)	7:00 p.m.
Friday, June 10	Chicago Sky at Connecticut Sun (CC)	7:00 p.m.
Friday, June 17	Phoenix Mercury at Dallas Wings (CC)	8:00 p.m.
Thursday, June 30	Atlanta Dream at New York Liberty (CC)	7:00 p.m.
Thursday, July 7	Seattle Storm at Los Angeles Sparks (CC)	10:30 p.m.
Thursday, July 14	Dallas Wings at Minnesota Lynx	8:00 p.m.
Thursday, July 28	Minnesota Lynx at Atlanta Dream	7:00 p.m.
Thursday, Aug. 11	Connecticut Sun at Los Angeles Sparks	10:30 p.m.

**Table 3:** 12 Regular Season Games Streamed in Season 2022.

*Note.* Schedule from the WNBA that shows 12 regular season games that were streamed on X in 2022

*Source:* TheNextHoops (WNBA).

This is yet another convenient source for fans and intrigued viewers. Media has also allowed players to gain a voice through their platform, which reflects back on the league. This especially became the case during 2020, when social justice movements broke into the mainstream. During this time, many players were advocating for equality at all levels. The WNBA even dedicated its first weekend of games in 2020 to raise awareness for criminal justice reform and voting rights. For example

in July 2020, players from across the league began wearing warm-up shirts in memory of Breonna Taylor, an unarmed Black woman killed by the police that May, with 'Black Lives Matter' on the front and 'Say Her Name' emblazoned on the back (Ibrahim, 2023, para 10).

They used the media to display their fight for justice to the viewers. This is not the only case: "over the years, the women of the WNBA have consistently banded together to lead displays of collective activism addressing racism, policing, gender pay equity, LGBTQ+ issues, voting, and

reproductive rights” (Ibrahim, 2023, para 5). In sum, the WNBA uses social media to gain viewers, showcase their talent, and communicate with anyone interested in the women’s basketball community.

One of the last big forms of media mentioned are streaming services. Over time, owing to enhancements in technology, especially within the last five years, it has become easier for fans to watch games on mobile platforms. This has allowed viewers to watch from their smartphones, computers, and smart TVs while on the move. For example, Hulu offers live TV options where fans can access games through the Hulu app. All they have to do is download the app and pay the subscription, and then the game is theirs to watch. There are also other streaming networks such as ESPN, Paramount Plus, YouTube TV, and Amazon Prime. These apps are all available in the app store for free (to watch regular games, viewers have to pay a subscription fee) and provide more avenues to stream the league’s games.

The WNBA also offers an app for fans to stream games and more. Once you download the app, you have full access to all games, highlights, behind the scenes footage, and more for just twenty-five dollars. This is a yearly payment and lasts you all season. Compared to the NBA’s app, which is approximately \$22.99 a month, this is very convenient and affordable. The fees for the NBA app add up to over two hundred dollars for the year. This is another addition to revenue being produced making the leagues what they are.

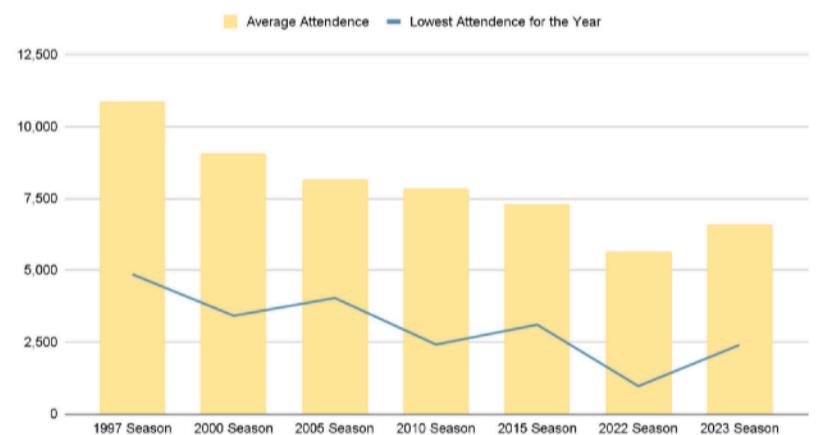
Overall, the media has so much to offer to the WNBA and vice versa. There are more media platforms not mentioned above that still help to bring awareness to the league. There are, for example podcasts, collaborations with influencers, and print media. Although television, social media, and streaming services attract the largest numbers of viewers, they all have worked to increase revenue and viewership, which are two factors that help keep the league running. By leveraging these services, the WNBA is increasing awareness, and gains support.

### 5.7 Viewership

In 2011, a study was done by Suffolk University student, Catherine McCabe, which analyzed whether or not gender plays a role in the viewership of the WNBA. In her findings, McCabe concluded that more women attend

WNBA games than men. In addition, she “found that women had more positive feelings toward WNBA basketball than men (McCabe, 2011). She further noted that this could suggest that women are more comfortable supporting women, and the same could be noted for men. This dynamic is still evident today. This lack of societal support has been detrimental to the league and its success. Without a fan base or an audience, the league can not function as a business. Without these aspects, the league can not make money and the league can not grow. This is why viewership is a contribution to the league.

As seen before through research and history, there are still prevailing stereotypes and biases that surround women’s sports. As for those related to the WNBA, there are perceptions that women’s basketball is less exciting and competitive when compared to the men (Walker et al., 2022): “These preconceived notions devalue female athletes’ hard work and skills, leading to lower attendance rates and diminished public interest”(Amersi, 2023, para 5). This can easily be seen below in **Figure 1** which highlights WNBA average attendance over the years as well as the lowest attendance for that year.



**Figure 1.** WNBA Average and Yearly Attendance. Source: WNBA Historical Attendance Data. (2023)

An example of this has been explored in the *International Journal of Finance*. Scholars examined demand and revenue in sports and asked whether or not the relationship between demand and revenue was driven by the entertainment spectacle of the contest or the emotional attachment derived from wins and losses. They specifically examined the concept of dunking and analyzed whether dunking could increase viewership for the WNBA. However, according to the researcher, they established that it would do more harm than good:

Currently, basketball is one of the most popular games in the world for girls’ and women’s participation. This is partly because basketball is incredibly accessible. To change the goal height



for women would mean that basketball would be dramatically less accessible for women, which would stunt the growth of the game (Walker et al., 2022).

Therefore, changing the game would limit its growth since needs to be easy to play basketball independently. In addition to that, the way women play professional basketball is the uniqueness of the sport. That is what is entertaining to watch. It is played in its purest form, meaning it is clear and crisp (Willis, 2008).

## 6. CASE STUDIES

### 6.1 Obstacles Faced in Motherhood: *Skylar Diggins-Smith and Dearica Hamby*

Motherhood is an especially unique process for women in the WNBA because players have to work to keep their bodies in top shape if they wish to return to the league to pursue a long-term career. But they also are expected to be a

mother to their family and provide care for family members. For most players in the league,

balancing motherhood with the stresses of an athletic career that can take them from home and meaningful relationships can be demanding. But they push on, determined to set an example for not only their children, but other working mothers who might be in similar situations (Axson, 2022, para 4).

Throughout their journey of motherhood, players have displayed mental toughness and hard work, and many have walked this journey on good and bad notes.

One of the players whose experiences were negative is Skylar Diggins-Smith. Unfortunately, she had a very disappointing journey related to how she was treated. For the sake of this case, it's important to highlight it because it's recent news. It's also vital due to the fact that the case received much publicity,

especially within the WNBA community because of what Diggins-Smith put out through social platforms. In 2013, the Tulsa Shock, a WNBA team at the time, drafted Skylar Diggins-Smith. She was a first-round draft pick who was selected third overall. Since the beginning of her career, Diggins-Smith had accumulated an impressive stats resume as a professional player while making a name for herself. Just at the end of her first season, she was awarded to the WNBA all rookie team which consists of top rookies in the league. In 2020, Diggins-Smith was traded to the Phoenix Mercury where she played three seasons. By 2022, Diggins-Smith was setting her career-best numbers. Since then, she has kept adding to her career resume. She has been a six-time all-star and an Olympic gold medalist. But in 2023, the tables turned for Diggins-Smith. In early 2023, she found out that she was pregnant with her second child. Because this pregnancy would take place during the season, Diggins-Smith had to take maternity leave. She wanted to make sure her body was in the best of shape over this time. As she revealed later, the Phoenix Mercury began to distance itself from Diggins-Smith. After she left for maternity leave, the team cut off connections with her, although they still paid her for the duration of the leave.



Skylar Diggins-Smith in 2017. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Diggins-Smith first realized that something was wrong when she was not being recognized on the team's social media page. On her birthday, the team neglected to post their traditional shoutout which is a casual recognition for the players on the team. Later, she was denied access to the Phoenix Mercury facility. Because of this, Diggins Smith spoke up through her social media platform. She tweeted, "They're not gonna acknowledge me this year and it's OK guys," she said. "We're not affiliated unless it's the checks . . . per management. I can't even use the practice facility or any resources" (Hruby, 2023). This left Skylar Diggins-Smith very displeased with the organization. She felt that if she was not making the league money, then she was not needed around. The WNBA never conducted an investigation, and as a result, Diggins-Smith is to complete her tenth season in 2024 but with the Seattle Storm instead of the Phoenix Mercury after entering the league in 2024 as a free agent (Hruby, 2023). This is fortunate for her.

Skylar Diggins-Smith has not been the only player who has received this unfair treatment during her career.

Another player who faced pregnancy discrimination while in the league was Dearica Hamby, a 2015 first-round draft pick who was selected sixth overall. She has had a nine-year career in the league so far and even won a WNBA championship in 2022 with the Las Vegas Aces. In 2023, just before the start of the season, Hamby ran into an issue with the Aces regarding her pregnancy. She was falsely accused by coach Becky Hammon that she signed her two-year contract extension in the summer of 2022 knowing she was pregnant (Maloney, 2023). Theoretically, this was an issue for Hammon because, with Hamby pregnant, Hamby would not be available to play. Hamby filed a discrimination lawsuit against the Aces and the WNBA with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Following this filing, "the



Britney Griner in 2019. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

league conducted a thorough investigation of the allegations and levied appropriate discipline based on its findings" (Maloney, 2023, para 2). This was done by interviewing thirty-three people and reviewing over emails, texts, and other documents. After the investigation, the case was ruled in Hamby's favor.

After the case was concluded, the league worked to discipline the Aces and coach Hammon for their actions. The league announced Hammon would be suspended for two games for her violations against policies related to respect in the workplace. Additionally, the Aces was stripped of their first-round draft pick in the 2025 draft. Lastly, to make things "right," the league reached out to Dearica Hamby to renegotiate her contract. Hamby was later traded and has signed with the LA Sparks

in California on January 21, 2024. Some claim that she was traded on the basis of her pregnancy. But, after the trade was finalized and settled, Hamby made an official statement that the Aces had treated her unethically and she wanted to enter the 2024 season in hopes of better a beginning (Philippou, 2023).

After analyzing these pregnancy discrimination cases, it is saddening to see the way female athletes are treated because they desire to grow their families. It is disappointing that women receive the short end of the stick in this process, seeing that it affects them the most. The NBA does not even have to think about these issues. Male players do not carry children, and there are no potential consequences for them when they decide to have a child while in the league. The inequalities may not be visible to a wide audience but they are there, and fortunately, both Diggins-Smith and Hamby have decided to speak up for themselves.

### *6.2 Story of the Year: Brittney Griner*

Another issue of interest that caught worldwide attention was Brittney Griner's story. Griner, known as BG, was a 2013 number-one pick. She is currently a ten-year veteran athlete, and since then she has received many accolades. For example, BG is a two-time gold medalist for the women's basketball Olympic team and has been a six-time WNBA all-star. She is definitely on the list of top athletics within the league. Her popularity could even be attributed to the audience she attracted with her story.

After the 2021 WNBA season, BG was set to continue her training overseas. WNBA American athletes tend to go overseas and sign with another country's team during that country's women's basketball season. It's an incentive for players to earn extra cash during the off-season period and stay in shape. This is the case for many WNBA athletes because playing within the WNBA is just not enough to make ends meet. As for BG, she was stationed in Russia. This was a familiar spot for her because she had played there in previous years. The Russian team for which she played is UMMC Ekaterinburg, a professional women's basketball team that has accumulated many wins over the years.

When BG arrived in Russia at the airport near Moscow to prepare for the start of the season, the "Russian authorities accused her of carrying hashish oil in her luggage" (Ganguli et

al., 2022, para. 4). Hashish oil is a cannabis drug that is consumed by smoking, vaporizing, and eating (Vandergriendt, 2019). According to the Russian authorities, a service dog had sniffed the substance. This type of substance is not permitted on Russian soil whatsoever, and anyone whose luggage contains this substance will face legal consequences. BG was detained for further investigation. During the investigation, Russian authorities found vape cartridges containing hashish oil, and BG was found guilty of possession of an illegal substance (Ganguli et al., 2022). On February 17, 2022, the WNBA star was arrested and detained until further notice. Although she was found guilty, she was not formally charged. It was decided that a hearing would take place on May 19, 2022, and Griner spent those months in a Russian prison.

Once the news of BG's imprisonment hit U.S. news, many fans and people unaffiliated with the sort advocated for her release. There were many letters sent to the President of the United States on behalf of her release: "Dozens of civil and human rights groups wrote a letter to Biden urging him to help secure the release" (Goldman, 2022, para. 1). Some of these groups were the Human Rights Campaign, the National Organization for Women, and National LGBTQ Task Force (Goldman, 2022). This placed a lot of pressure on President Biden since Griner's advocates felt the need to stand up for BG and get her back to America.

After those two long months passed, there was controversy over the situation of BG's release. Half of the world wanted her released, and much of the other half believed she broke the law in Russia and that's why she deserved her imprisonment (Law, 2022). But, the U.S. sought to intervene and investigate themselves. In conclusion, they declared that BG had been wrongfully imprisoned by Russia. Even though the U.S. government now considers her to have been wrongfully detained, that did not mean Russia would change its official stance on her detainment, but it meant that the U.S. considers the legal proceedings to be irrelevant to her case (Quinn, 2022).

Following a hard-fought battle, President Biden and his administration were successful in bringing BG home. Unfortunately, this was after she had spent nearly ten months in Russia's prison. To get her free, a trade deal was made that would swap BG for Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer, which outraged the public. It also did not help that Russia was at war with Ukraine and the U.S. was not on their side. Despite all of

that, BG still participates in the WNBA, and the league is proud to have her back. For the 2023 season, BG's stats were a bit lower compared to her last competing season in 2021. But she still managed to accumulate big numbers for her team in the 2023 season (WNBA, n.d.).

In saying all of this, this case study highlights the struggles of WNBA players on various levels with BG as an example. The first key piece mentions the struggles of even having to go overseas. WNBA athletes do not get the luxury of a prosperous salary, so, therefore, many go overseas. When the off-season hits, over 100 players from WNBA teams compete professionally abroad to supplement their incomes (Berber & Turco, 2011). When these players decide to go overseas, it gives them the opportunity to not only seek profits, but they also get a chance to keep their bodies in shape, develop their skills, and gain unforgettable experiences. On the flip side, this can be a stressful and demanding period for these athletes because when the season ends in September, they do not get an extensive break before the grind starts again. WNBA players get a four to five month break before their overseas season begins (Voepel, 2022). Also, the WNBA season rolls back around in April and May, where athletes attend training camps, and some of the players are not even back yet from their overseas stay (Driver, 2019). The constant physical activity for this long stretch could cause players to burn out and become mentally drained, especially in the long run.

The second biggest struggle highlighted within the case study recognizes the struggle of a woman, a Black woman to be exact. Although many supported BG and wanted her back, there was still a large portion of Americans who did not. There were even some who did not even recognize her or the situation as a whole. Some even suggested that the fact that BG was Black was the reason for the lack of immediate attention. For example, BG's story relates to the concept of "missing white woman syndrome," where "a white girl or a white woman who is taken captive or arrested or something like that elicits tons of sympathy from the American public in a way that women and girls of color do not" (Lane, 2022, para 18). Although this is a theory, it is obvious that the fact that Griner is Black played "a huge part of the lack of attention to her case" initially (Lane, 2022). Perhaps this could be a result of why the WNBA league gets insufficient attention. As noted, in

2022, Black women made up 70 percent of the league (*WNBA Players by Ethnicity 2022*, 2022).

## 7. SOLUTIONS

### 7.1 HR and Policies

Human resource departments are systems that advocate for employees. As for the WNBA, their human resources (HR) advocate for the players, coaches, and staff (Washington Mystics, 2024). They are vital in the recruitment process, employee relations, legal compliance, and in creating a safe positive environment. They work to promote and address inclusion and diversity. To do this, the WNBA has various HR systems for every team's department, which is beneficial to players and other staff members because they have on-site resources available at all times (WNBA, 2024).

Although the WNBA has HR representation, there are still a lot of issues to be solved. To enhance the league and eliminate these issues, especially those around gender inequality, the league should work to enforce existing policies and educate employers as well as employees. HR policies are guidelines that help manage and protect employees. This is essential for the league because it serves minority groups who are longstanding targets of discrimination. But the overall importance of knowing and insisting on enforcement of these policies can help women and other members of the league advocate for themselves. The goal is to stop discriminatory treatment and prevent further occurrence of such treatment by knowing what is illegal discrimination within the workplace. Some policies that could be emphasized are the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. All of these Acts are geared towards protecting vulnerable employees:

1. *Civil Rights Act of 1991*: "Amends several sections of Title VII to strengthen and improve Federal civil rights laws and provide for the recovery of compensatory damages in Federal sector cases of intentional employment discrimination" (Federal Trade Commission, 2024). The Act "provides appropriate remedies for intentional discrimination and unlawful harassment in the workplace" (Mondy & Martocchio, 2017). As a result, it makes the workplace safer.
2. *Equal Pay Act of 1963*: Prohibits "discrimination on account of sex in the payment of wages by employers engaged in commerce or in the production of goods for

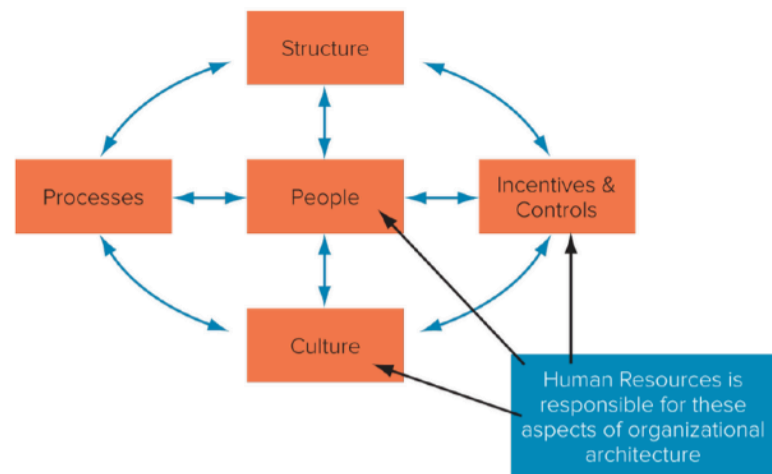
commerce" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1963). Therefore, employers cannot pay women less than men if both employees do work that is substantially the same. There are four exceptions that permit unequal pay for equal work, and they are the seniority system, merit system, systems that measure earnings by quantity or quality, and other factors other than sex (Mondy & Martocchio, 2017).

3. *Pregnancy Discrimination Act: Works to "amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit sex discrimination on the basis of pregnancy" (Federal Trade Commission, 2024). In other words, the PDA "prohibits discrimination in employment based on pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions" (Mondy & Martocchio, 2017). The overall principle is for all working applicants to be treated the same based on their ability or inability to work. Therefore, if a woman is pregnant or has had an abortion, she is protected from being fired, refused a job, or being promoted. She also can not be forced to take a leave of absence (Mondy & Martocchio, 2017).*

### 7.2 Employee-Focused Policies

To add to this, the league should work to center its focus around the people who make it up. This will help bring the results the league wants, which is, ultimately, to grow. In saying this, when you put people first, "they are empowered to show up as their best selves and are supported to maximize their potential and excel in their roles" (Seely, 2020, para. 6). If players feel they are an important part of the WNBA, they bring out their best performance. An enhancement in performance could potentially attract more interested spectators and grow the league.

Not only will focusing on the players and other employees help grow the league, but it will also help the league be more equitable, specifically within itself. If the league is centered around those who make it up, the players will know that the league cares for their well-being and because the league cares, they will support them in any internal challenges they may face in regard to inequity issues. **Figure 2** below is a model that illustrates how to operate an organization around the people. The model focuses on four areas. They are structure, incentives/controls, culture, and processes.



**Figure 2:** Strategic Role of Global HRM. *Note.* Employee-Centered Organizational Structure. *Source:* McGraw Hill, 2023, p. 274.

First, the structure is the way in which an organization functions to reach its goal. For the WNBA to do this, they must incorporate a structure that values the athletes within the league first. This would require HR functions, processes and systems to be built around and create value for the participants in the league.

Next, is the incentives/controls. This revolves around the compensation package and awards received within an organization. For the athletes' benefit, maybe the WNBA could find ways to offer more incentives for performance or games played or even allow more for those who are personally selected into the all-star game. This could also be helpful when considering the huge compensation gap that has been an issue.

The third aspect for the people or athletes is culture, the values, beliefs, attitudes, and systems that influence employees in an organization. The WNBA could improve its culture this by supporting athletes so that the league is attractive and safe for women. The league actually has done this with Brittney Griner. They supported her and when she was detained in Russia. During this time, the league had t-shirts made in honor of Griner and even placed her initials on the court. With that said, this can be a key factor for the WNBA and players that go overseas because with so many players earning more money across the world, it would be assuring to know that the league has laws to protect their female athletes no matter where they play because of their culture.

Then, the final aspect are processes, what is being put in as well as what is being put out. This includes customer services, HR functions, and systems they use to recruit and train employees. Considering their processes can be helpful for the league because if they can

ensure that training is done across the board, and people are held accountable when laws and culture are violated, ultimately, the people will be more invested in the organization.

If an organization such as the WNBA can work to connect these areas back to the people, the organization will prosper. It's the relationships and investment between the people and organization that will help a company thrive (Yale University, 2023).

In summary, it is crucial that WNBA HR professionals incorporate these techniques into their systems. With so many responsibilities, it will help ensure the league is fair. In the end, the people are the ones who run the organization. This is exactly what the league needs in order to take steps in a fair direction. But there is hope. In 2024, the league's players association published its mission statement:

The WNBPA leverages the collective wisdom and vision of WNBA players and fully commits to affirming, defending, and advancing player interests on and off the court. Through collective bargaining, protest, public service, community engagement, and educational programming, we tirelessly challenge the workplace and societal conditions that stand in the way of our vision of what is possible for our lives and the future of basketball. Moving as one, we prevail. (WNBPA, 2024)

Although there are new missions in place, what's most important is enforcing and carrying out what is being stated.

### *7.3 Social Awareness*

As for solutions outside of laws and regulations, the WNBA should work on social expansion and awareness. In order to gain an audience and more fans, the league needs to find ways to interact and grab the public's attention. This could be challenging for the WNBA when you consider that the league is limited in teams. Therefore, accessing a nearby arena to hold games can be difficult. But the league needs to do this. They still need to find ways to promote themselves from afar if they want to catch people's attention and increase overall earnings. The first proposed solution is that the WNBA enhance their social media platform. For example, the Instagram media page has about two million followers (Instagram, 2024). But this number compares badly to the NBA page which has 87.4 million followers (Instagram, 2024). So, the league needs to focus on increasing those numbers, not just the ones presented through Instagram, but by boosting numbers across the

social media landscape. The league could conduct a study to find out what the most attractive social media platform is and then use that information to market to their target audience.

Speaking of marketing, a suggestion that could help enhance the WNBA's image is the collaboration with the NBA, of which there is only a little bit today. Both leagues could work to market one another through collaboration. For example, the NBA hosts an all-star event that takes place every year. This event highlights top athletes and allows them to showcase their talent. For this year's event, the all-stars took a new direction. Instead of just having a three-point contest where shooters compete, the league sought to bring in a match-up between NBA's best Stephen Curry and WNBA's best Sabrina Ionescu. The idea for this competition was sparked through social media when the WNBA star challenged Curry to a match up. Overall, the contest did get approved and the audience loved it: "The audience peaked with 5.4 million viewers from 10-10:15 p.m. ET during the Stephen vs. Sabrina 3-Point Challenge" (NBA, 2024). This was the biggest audience the night had attracted since 2020.

This was a big win for the WNBA and their brand. Being able to compete in this competition allowed the WNBA and Ionescu to reach an unusually large audience. It opened an opportunity for them to promote the league and bring awareness to women's basketball. Although Ionescu did not win the competition, she scored incredibly high with a total of 26 points, which matched the high of any NBA player in the men's competition that night (NBA, 2024). This competition showed that the women in professional basketball are just as skilled as the men. Once again, this was a big moment, and one that both players will continue to have for the better of benefit of both leagues.

In saying this, the WNBA has an upcoming draft with some potential top draft picks from the NCAA Division I level. One is Iowa superstar Caitlin Clark, who has made a mark for herself and changed women's basketball. If the league can find ways to promote and showcase the next steps of these stars' careers, they can attract a lot of attention. There has already been talk about bringing Clark and her three-point skills out to the NBA contest next year.

### 7.4 The Next Generation: Caitlin Clark

Iowa University guard Caitlin Clark is the face of women's basketball today, and her name is soon to be announced at the WNBA draft of this year as potential number-one pick. When referring to Clark, many know her for her impressive range from the three-point-shot. But she could also be easily recognized as the best player in Division-I Women's Basketball. This is because of the records she has set and the awards she has accumulated over time. For example, just recently, the star competed in an incredible performance of the year when she became the Division-I women's basketball's all-time leading scorer. It was on February 15, 2024, that she broke the record that was previously held by Washington's Kelsey Plum (a present-day WNBA athlete guard) seven years ago (EkaPle, 2024). Her remarkable performance has grabbed much attention and has grown the

awareness of women's collegiate basketball and the importance of women's sports.

Clark's success and achievements are very beneficial to the WNBA and its organization because of the attention Clark carries with her platform. Just a few months ago, Clark announced that she would be declaring for the WNBA for the 2024 season. As expected, Clark's decision caught the media fast and placed a lot of focus on the WNBA draft on April 15, 2024. Looking forward, it can be predicted that viewership for the draft will increase compared to previous years, especially considering Clark's record of increasing attention. She even did this at Iowa, where she increased sales and produced sell-out crowds. Just as the season began, the Iowa women's basketball team hosted a home opener in an exhibition match over DePaul on a Sunday afternoon at Kinnick Stadium in front of 55,646 fans: "The Crossover

at Kinnick was the first ever women's basketball game to be played outdoors in a football stadium and set a NCAA single game record for most attended in women's basketball history" (NCAA Media Center, 2023, para. 1).

Caitlin Clark is the perfect athlete to increase awareness of the league and grow it, though it must be noted she is a white woman. But with the fan base she carries, many will be interested to see how her career plays out in the professional league. This is already being seen through WNBA Indiana Fever ticket sales because that team gets the number draft pick and can easily get Clark as their first pick, which she is expected to be. The Indiana organization knows that Clark can increase sales and grow their organization directly. Because of this, Indiana ticket prices have increased, and tickets are selling fast (Feinberg, 2024). Overall this is great news for the league. Awareness and revenue are increased just because of one individual player.

Although a long shot, another proposal that could help the league is to create another WNBA team in Iowa. Clark has created a



Caitlin Clark in March 2024. Photo credit: John McClellan via Wikimedia Commons.

big platform for women's basketball in Iowa at the collegiate level through sell-out crowds and more. Potentially, with the new establishment in this area of growing support towards women's basketball could be an offering towards greater success for the league.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The WNBA has undergone an astonishing evolution over time. Despite historical disparities, there has been major growth since 1996. For instance, it was just in 2023 that the league announced that it would expand to the Bay area and have a team collaborate with the Golden State Warriors, an NBA team (Maloney, 2023). In other words, the teams would partner to help promote and receive benefits from each other. As for the announcement, this was a huge step for the WNBA, which initially began with just eight teams (WNBA, 2012). Because of this new development, there ultimately should be growth for the league with the new team investment. This news of a new team was also a step closer to equality for the WNBA league. Now instead of twelve teams competing, there are thirteen. Which is one closer to the men's thirty in the NBA.

Although growth and change are slowly occurring, the league has hopes for a bright future. It is a monumental establishment for female athletes seeking the sport of basketball, and there are no other offerings at the professional level like it. Therefore, this organization must continue to thrive because of the opportunities it gives to female players. The WNBA should not be taken for granted. Because, just over a century ago, these opportunities did not exist. Overall, as the world changes and new generations enter the league, the WNBA will emphasize the growth of women in athletics. The league should also continue to impact its audience and society by standing up to social issues around the world such as discrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, and more. ❖

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