Why the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) is a Failing League and What Should Be Done to Improve It

by

Noelle Mannen

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science
(Honors Associate)

Presented August 23, 2021
Commencement June 2022
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Noelle Mannen for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science presented on August 23, 2021. Title: Why the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) is a Failing League and What Its Failure Says about Women’s Sports in the United States

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The WNBA is a league that has been characterized by struggle ever since its inception in 1996. The biggest reason for nearly all of its problems lies with one source: money. The WNBA simply does not have enough money to make it a functionable professional sports league. As a result of this, the players are wildly underpaid; there are only twelve teams in the entire league each with only twelve roster spots, making it nearly impossible for many qualified female athletes to ever make a team; it is difficult to promote games and other events, among many other difficulties. The precarious state that the WNBA is in speaks volumes about women’s sports in the United States as a whole, and the way in which female athletes are treated in comparison to their male counterparts. Through independent research and comparative analysis of existing statistics and research in both the WNBA and the NBA, I am able to paint a clear picture of gender inequality between the two leagues, as well as provide commentary on what this says about disparities between men’s and women’s sports in the United States overall.

Key Words: basketball, gender, inequality, sport, money

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Introduction

The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) is a league that has been characterized by struggle ever since its inception in 1996. The biggest reason for nearly all of its problems? Money. The WNBA simply does not have earn enough profit to be a functional professional sports league. As a result of this, the players are wildly underpaid; there are only twelve teams in the entire league each with only twelve roster spots, making it nearly impossible for many qualified female athletes to make a team; and it is difficult to promote games and other events, among many other difficulties.

The precarious state that the WNBA is in speaks volumes about women’s sports in the United States, and the way in which female athletes are treated in comparison to their male counterparts. Although some of the WNBA’s struggle can be attributed to the misogynistic nature of American society, especially within the world of sports, there are several areas in which further investigation reveals room for improvement on the league’s behalf. In this thesis, the following topics will be covered, with both the current reality as well as some potential solutions addressed: Size of the League and Potential Expansion; Popularity and Viewership; Pay; Comparison with Other More Successful Women’s Leagues around the World; Failed Teams and Leagues, and What to Learn to from Them; Social Justice/Activism; Skill/Rule Differences from the NBA; and Facing Negativity and Criticism while Fighting Off Irrelevance. While several of these subtopics possess quite a bit of overlap with one another, each one presents unique perspective on the struggle of the WNBA and what could potentially be done to alleviate this struggle.

Once again, most of the issues all bounce back to the source of so many people’s problems: money. Moving forward, the WNBA must find ways to generate more revenue which
in turn will allow them to work on other solutions to their many problems, like adding more
teams to league, paying the players more, creating more advertising and visibility for the league
to name just a few. It is an extremely complex puzzle with countless moving pieces, but all the
more important for this thesis to take a closer look at a few of those pieces and put them together.

**Size of the League and Potential Expansion**

One of the most glaring issues upon first glance at the WNBA is its insufficient size. While the National Football League (NFL) and the National Hockey League (NHL) have 32 teams apiece and the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Baseball (MLB) have 30, the WNBA has a mere twelve teams in its entirety. One only has to think about how
difficult it is for a male athlete to attain a high enough level of ability and success to be able to
play in one of these leagues; now imagine how much more difficult it would be if the leagues
were to become smaller than half the size they are now. This is why it is nearly impossible for
most talented young women’s basketball players coming out of college to find a spot in the
WNBA, despite the fact that they may be more than qualified.

In addition to the fact that there are only twelve teams in the league, each team is only
allowed twelve roster spots to fill, meaning “with only 144 players in the league, there is plenty
of untapped potential” (Bullock 2017). With a draft that only features three rounds with twelve
picks in each round, that means that only 36 women are drafted each year. That number already
seems small in comparison with the seven rounds in the NFL draft or the 40 rounds featured in
the MLB draft, yet this number is not representative of how many of these players actually make
a team in the WNBA. Although the maximum number of players that could play in the WNBA is
144, it is rare that these many players are actually on rosters. The minimum number that each
club must have on their roster is eleven, thus, many teams only carry eleven players due to salary cap situations rather than the maximum number of twelve. The current salary cap for each WNBA team is $1,339,000, with each player earning distinct salaries (Jennings 2021). With some of the bigger stars taking up large portions of the total amount of money, many teams simply cannot afford to carry a twelfth player on the roster, causing them to make the decision to only carry eleven.

This affliction of the league makes it one of the most difficult professional leagues for players to get their foot in the door. It is accepted that the majority of draftees will not make a roster. Despite the initial excitement of draft day, it is often only those players drafted in the first round who are able to remain on that team’s roster. Those players drafted in the second and third rounds frequently face cuts or trades immediately upon their entrance into the league. Taking a look at former Oregon State women’s basketball players, both Aleah Goodman and Mikayla Pivec were some of the top college players in their classes, with both getting drafted in the third round of the draft. Both players made it deep into the training camps of their respective teams, but both eventually faced cuts and had to explore other options. For Pivec, this meant playing internationally and for Goodman, this meant starting a college coaching career. If the league were to have 30 teams like the NBA, these two individuals almost definitely would have made a team, yet the small size of the WNBA inhibits the opportunities for many young, promising players.

It is also important to keep in mind that with only twelve teams, the playing of games can get, for lack of a better word, boring. As is the case with the NBA, the WNBA is divided into a Western Conference and an Eastern Conference, but with only twelve teams total, each of these conferences only has six teams. Every team must play every other team in the league multiple
times in just a four-month span. One can only imagine that every team knows their opponent like the back of their hand when it comes time to play, because there are so few teams and players whom they can study and learn the playing styles of.

Another critical situation to keep in mind is the structure of the playoffs. In the NBA, eight teams from each conference compete in the playoffs, with the conference champions facing off in the NBA finals; meanwhile, the WNBA holds a different structure. Eight teams with the highest record, regardless of conference compete in the playoffs; only the last two teams standing make an appearance in the WNBA finals (CNN NewsSource 2021). First of all, this means that three quarters of the entire league make the playoffs in the WNBA. In most sports of any level, making the playoffs is an extremely difficult task and a notable feather in any team’s cap, however, with this high of a percentage making the playoffs, not only does this degrade the achievement to some degree, but it also means that a few of the last teams to make it in are most likely not very qualified to be competing at that level.

Even in the NBA playoffs, the discrepancy between an eight-seed from a conference and the one-seed in that conference can be quite obvious and can result in a clean sweep, and that is with only about half of the league qualifying for the playoffs. Therefore, the last team to make it into the WNBA playoffs most likely is far behind in skill and success from the top few seeds. The first two rounds of the WNBA playoffs are single elimination, with the 8-seed playing the 5-seed and the 7-seed playing the 6-seed, followed by a second round that features the 3-seed playing the lowest seed alive and the 4-seed playing the other winner from the first round; after this, the winners of these games take on the top two seeds in a best of five series for the semifinals and the winners face off in another best of five series for the finals (WNBA). This is a recent playoff format that the league adapted, and one that has proved to be problematic due to
confusion. For some who are used to the simpler NBA format (in which each series is best of seven and there are no BYE games for any seed), it may be difficult to understand the WNBA playoffs, or they may even find them unappealing altogether. It is crucial that the WNBA makes the format for their playoffs more known and better communicate and promote the structure - so that fans can be more comfortable with the format, or else they may need to look to change it once again to become simpler.

Beyond a lack of enthusiasm for the playoffs, the league is prevented from reaching its full potential for other structural reasons. This is primarily due to the small size of the WNBA, which is not adequate for a professional league. As alluded to so far, the current carrying-capacity of the profits made by the league limits the opportunities of many qualified players, creates a cut-throat culture in which players are constantly concerned about their jobs, and inhibits the potential of the league to attract more fans and viewers. The most logical next step is expansion; however, this is of course easier said than done. Another possible route is the start of an entirely new league of women’s professional basketball league in the United States.

On the topic of expansion, the league has shown some hesitation. This is likely due to the fact that from its eight initial teams that began 25 years ago, it expanded to 16 teams in 2000; five of these teams quickly went bankrupt and were forced to stop due to financial difficulties, only leaving eleven teams that are active in the league today, as well as the Atlanta Dream, added in 2008 (Zucker 2021). This has left WNBA commissioners, both past and present, reluctant to make any moves towards expansion, while instead focusing on the health and success of the teams that are currently already in the league.
With most of the teams on sturdy financial grounds and with the COVID-19 pandemic starting to show up in the rearview mirror, the current WNBA commissioner, Cathy Engelbert, might set a new course. She had this to say about potential future expansion of the league:

It’s certainly on the list of things that I’ve been thinking about down the road. It’s interesting to note how competitive and how deep the talent in the league is. It’s certainly something that, as we’ve come out of this pandemic, hopefully next year that we’ll prepare to start talking about. I think if we have a very successful season this year, this time next year, we can certainly start talking about what expansion would look like, how many (teams), and the timeframe over which that would occur (Hansen 2021).

This is most definitely a promising sign that expansion is on the horizon, as both the league and women’s sports continue to gain some momentum in modern American society. It also makes expansion seem like the most likely solution to the lack of size of the WNBA, as opposed to starting a new league or a different solution.

With expansion on the mind, there are many options to explore.

What cities or environments would be best for new WNBA teams to thrive in order to achieve the goal of avoiding any kind of financial challenges that plagued the lost teams of the early 2000s? Although there are several articles with varying opinions on the top potential homes for WNBA expansion teams, there seems to be a consensus that the Bay Area would be one of the best places to start a new WNBA franchise for many reasons. One such article includes six very convincing arguments in favor of the Bay Area as a WNBA city: first, the incredible amount of wealth in the area should be more than enough to support the market for a team there; the connections with social media in Silicon Valley could prove extremely advantageous for a progressive league like the WNBA; next, there is a healthy sports fan base in the Bay Area,
especially for basketball thanks to the presence of the Golden State Warriors there; the WNBA has grown to be one of the most progressive professional sports leagues in cases of social justice, making a progressive area like the Bay a very suitable fit; there are sufficient facilities already in existence in Oakland that would be an ideal home for a WNBA team; and lastly, the presence of the most recent NCAA national champions and one of the most successful college women’s basketball programs in history, the Stanford Cardinal, could prove to be a great stepping stone for a successful WNBA team (Bailum 2020).

This does nothing to include the fact that Joe Lacob, the current owner of the Golden State Warriors, previously owned the San Jose Lasers. This was a professional women’s basketball team of the American Basketball League. While both the team and the league folded after just a few years, Lacob refers to being a part of creating a women’s team as a great experience to this day, and from all accounts, it was a project that he was extremely involved in and passionate about (Purdy 2017). This shows potential that Lacob could perhaps become the owner of a Bay Area women’s basketball team once again, and this time, hopefully with better financial ground to stand on. This pre-existing relationship with the Golden State Warriors could also prove to be beneficial to the success of a new WNBA team in the area. Although there are other cities that seem promising, this seems like the most logical first location in the expansion process that the WNBA so desperately needs to begin its growth.

At the end of the day, the WNBA must expand to survive. This will provide spots for players who deserve to play on the biggest stage of women’s basketball in the United States, as well as to foster more attention for the league around the country in places that have hundreds of miles between them and the nearest WNBA team. Just as any human must adapt to achieve survival, so must the WNBA, and the present day appears to be providing the perfect opportunity
to begin this expansion process. With times changing and social justice at the forefront of many hot topics, the WNBA has capitalized on becoming a leader in these movements, gaining fans, attention, and popularity along the way (as well as perhaps a few more enemies).

The United States is ripe for an expansion of the league, with places like the Bay Area, Philadelphia, Houston, and many more with environments that could help a new franchise thrive. Regardless of where these teams end up, a WNBA with even just 20 teams, still ten fewer than the NBA, would provide opportunities to several more talented individuals and would bring the women’s game to eight more cities around the country. Ideally one day, the league will feature 30 teams like its male counterpart with more than twelve roster spots apiece, but for now, the first and only step that can be taken is to begin expanding.

**Popularity and Viewership**

Despite the difficulties that the league has faced throughout its 25-year history, the WNBA appears to be undergoing a recent rise in popularity, likely in correlation with the societal climate in the United States as well as the rest of the world. It is no secret that one of the greatest obstacles that the WNBA has spent years trying to overcome is how to garner enough attention and support to not only help the league to survive, but to make it thrive. Most would argue that they are far from the goal of thriving, but a look into the rise of popularity and viewership in recent years shows immense promise that they are headed in the right direction. This could be seen as a microcosm for American society as a whole as it has been continuing to work towards equality and improving on the social justice areas in which it is lagging.

The topic of viewership is an important one when it comes to any professional sport. Although these men and women are referred to as athletes, they are, in fact, entertainers as well.
It is a reality in the sports world that the better the viewership, the better the television deals, the more money the league brings in, and eventually, the more money the athletes get paid. One of the common arguments, as mentioned in the “Pay” section of this thesis, as to why WNBA athletes get paid so little in comparison to their male counterparts is that they simply do not bring in as much money, from ticket sales, merchandising, and of course, television deals and viewership.

Although the issue is far more complex to be explained by this argument alone, there is some truth to be found in the disparities between viewership and popularity of men’s and women’s basketball in the United States. For example, the 2019 NBA season resulted in a total revenue of $7.4 billion and the 2019 NBA finals had an average viewership of 15.14 million, while the 2018 WNBA season generated $60 million of revenue with an average viewership of 231,000 viewers per game (Jope 2019). It is important to keep in mind that the NBA has 30 teams and a season often features roughly 1,300 games, while the WNBA’s twelve teams usually only play around 240 games (Jope 2019). With a little math, that works out to nearly $5.7 million in revenue per NBA game and approximately $250,000 in revenue per WNBA game. Regardless, there is most definitely a vast difference in both popularity and viewership between the two leagues. This has a lot to do with the fact that the NBA is a much more established and stable league with a longer history that has allowed it to reach the point it is at today. There is of course no guarantee that the WNBA will ever reach the same level of the NBA in these departments, but recent trends show that the patience has paid off and improvement is beginning to shine through in these areas.

Upon closer inspection of the television deals within the two leagues, it becomes quite clear that there are further disparities between the two leagues, and it also reveals why WNBA
viewership may be harder to improve. In 2013, ESPN signed a ten-year television deal to be the home of the WNBA through the 2022 season, agreeing to pay $12 million per year to the league. While this may seem like a lot to the average person (and so may $25 million, which is what ESPN began paying the league each year starting in 2016 following renegotiations), this remained just “one one-hundredth of what ESPN pays for the men’s league” (Hart 2020). This is an incredible difference between the two leagues which can account for quite a large percentage of the difference in revenue that was mentioned previously. It is important to note that this was for the rights to 37 WNBA games in the 2020 season – a 13 game increase from the previous year -- leaving the rest of the games for other television broadcasters to pay for the rights to broadcast (Hart 2020). Further progress in the streaming department came in 2021, as Amazon bought the rights to 16 regular season games in a multiyear deal to stream on Prime Video each season (Porter 2021). This deal not only opens to gateway for many viewers to watch the WNBA, as Amazon Prime is one of the most popular stream services in the United States, but it was another deal that put more money into the league’s funds. Aside from ESPN and Amazon Prime, which most would deem relatively accessible when it comes to trying to watch a live sporting event, the rest of the WNBA schedule is divvied up between CBS, Oculus, Twitter, Facebook Watch, Paramount Plus, the WNBA League Pass, and local television networks, which can prove to be quite difficult for people to find or gain access to at times (Byford 2021).

In conversations with people who are interested in trying to watch more WNBA action, they often had difficulties and resulting frustration from trying to simply find the proper place to stream or just see a game. This is rarely the case with NBA games, which are often easy to find, especially the big ones of the season, so this could be another problem to examine why WNBA viewership is so low in comparison to the NBA. Recently, however, there appears to be some
improvement in the WNBA’s television deals, as seen by the Amazon deal that was made just a few months ago, and the improvement does not stop here.

The WNBA has been rapidly improving in both viewership and popularity over just the past few years. There could be several potential reasons to explain why this is occurring, but there is no speculation whatsoever that it is happening. In just the opening two weeks of the 2021 season earlier this summer, the WNBA saw a 74% increase in viewers from 2020, with an average of 357,000 viewers per game (Hruby 2021). Once again, this number of viewers would most likely pale in comparison to the average number of viewers of the first two weeks of the NBA season, but the 74% increase most definitely would hold its own against any sports league in the world. This growth demonstrates the reality that the WNBA is rapidly growing in popularity and does not really show any signs of slowing down. A comparison between the viewership of nearly 20 major sporting events in 2019 and 2020 revealed that the WNBA finals was one of only three events to show an increase in viewership, with the second highest increase of 15%; meanwhile, the NBA finals experienced a 49% decrease in viewership between the two years (Ayala 2021). Of course, the reality remains that the NBA finals still had more viewers, but this is a clear sign that the WNBA is on the rise, regardless of comparison to other leagues.

Sportswriter Erica Ayala also points out the concept that the rise in popularity of the WNBA could be attributed to an overall increased interest in women’s sports. She argues this is especially true in college women’s basketball, made evident in the celebrity of young star Sabrina Ionescu as well as television ratings for the 2021 NCAA Women’s Final Four, which had some of its highest ratings ever to name a few examples (Ayala 2021). There appears to be a growing American interest in women’s basketball in general, not just in the WNBA, and this partnership between the NCAA and the WNBA could prove to be highly beneficial to the
popularity and viewership of both leagues. As the WNBA continues to develop and potentially expand, only time will tell if it is able to maintain this exponential growth in popularity and eventually reach a point where the league is able to truly thrive, but in its current state, it must improve for the sake of the players and its future.

Pay

Equal pay for women is an issue that has permeated American society as a whole for decades, and the WNBA has not been excused from this. In the end, the WNBA is a business which means, just like any for-profit industry, it all comes down to money. How much money the league is able to bring in drives how much pay they are able to dole out to their players. To this day, the WNBA serves as one of the most glaring examples of unequal pay in the United States when comparing it to its male counterpart that is the NBA. The average salary for an NBA rookie for the 2019-2020 season was $820,000 and the average salary for all NBA players was $2.5 million, while the average WNBA salary overall was $75,000. Hold this thought, then compare the highest paid player that season, Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors, who earned $40 million with DeWanna Bonner of the Phoenix Mercury, the highest paid WNBA player that season, who earned $127,000 (Shintani 2020).

The immense disparity in these numbers speak for themselves. Nobody expects WNBA players to make as much as NBA players, not even the players themselves, but what concerns the players more is the fact that approximately 50% of the NBA’s league revenue is given towards the players salaries, while only 20% of WNBA league revenue, which is already a fraction of the NBA’s, goes to the players’ salaries (Ellentuck 2018). Many of the WNBA players do not make a livable wage during the season to last them the entire year, causing many of them to head
overseas to play year-round, risking injury and limiting any offseason. Achieving equal pay for women in any aspect of American society has proved quite the difficult task. Data taken last year showed that on average, women in the United States make 84% of what men make, and this number has remained relatively steady for the past 15 years (Barroso, Brown 2021). The WNBA may be one of the biggest equal pay challenges of all, but regardless of comparison with the NBA, the much more attainable goal that the WNBA should be reaching for is simply paying their players more.

In 2020, the WNBA made a big stride towards improving the crucial topic of pay for its players. In a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) formed between the WNBA and its players’ union, the players are promised maternity leave as well as other reproductive benefits such as adoption, surrogacy, fertility treatments, etc.; they are promised “premium economy class” while flying in season as opposed to the coach seat they previously were given, as well as full hotel accommodations; and most importantly, the base salary for the players was increased to $130,000 – which is far higher than the average salary of $75,000 in 2019 – and also increased the total potential compensation for the players by 53% with additional incentives, prizes, and bonuses (Young 2020). With all of these compensations, some of the WNBA’s stars could earn close to $500,000 (Young 2020).

This is clearly a huge step in the right direction for the WNBA. A wage of $130,000 is far more sufficient and livable than a wage of $75,000, and the overall improvement in the treatment and care for the players under the new CBA makes it look like night and day when compared with the old agreement. This new deal could lead to far fewer WNBA players feeling the need to travel overseas during the offseason and play year-round, risking injury, fatigue, and overall emotional health, as was discussed more in depth in the section about professional women’s
basketball leagues found overseas (Shintani 2020). Progress is progress, and there should be no mistaking that this is a huge win for the players in the WNBA and an incredible step that the league took. It cannot be forgotten, however, that this should be just the first step of many, and also that the league must find a way to pay for these increased salaries and improved benefits. This money does not just appear out of thin air. The fact remains that in the 2019 season, the WNBA generated a mere $60 million in revenue compared with the 8.76 billion generated by the NBA, and the WNBA must figure out a way to sell tickets, fill seats, widen their fanbase, and generate more revenue if it is going sustain this new CBA and continue to build off of it in the future (Shintani 2020). There are a few specific changes that must be made if this is going to be a reality for the WNBA.

The issue of pay is essentially the culmination of all other issues that have been plaguing the WNBA since its inception 25 years ago. The WNBA needs more fans which means they must get creative and make some changes like lengthening their season and playing more games. In order to do this, they must add more teams, and only when they find solutions to the wide variety of issues will they achieve true financial stability and have the ability to pay their players the higher salaries that they should be earning.

First, the issue of the length of season is one that often gets left out of conversation. Yes, WNBA players get paid a fraction of what their male NBA counterparts do, but their season also only lasts 36 games over approximately four months, while NBA players typically compete in 82 regular season games, twice as many, over the span of eight or so months (Coolkingsingh 2020). Somebody who works for an entire year in any profession should make twice as much as someone who works for six months, that is just common sense. Most NBA players make far more than twice as much, but people advocating for more equal pay between the two leagues
often forget this key fact. They often claim that the women work just as hard as the men, which is no doubt a fact, but the reality is that their season itself is half as long and they play half as many games, which should be reflected in the paychecks.

So, the solution to this? Add more teams to the WNBA and rework the season schedule so that the players can be employed for a bigger chunk of the year, and then they will have to be paid more for their labors. Those who work part-time jobs often have to work multiple jobs, which is sort of the situation that WNBA players are in, whereas NBA players work more of a full-time job that lasts for much more of the year and earns them far more money. It is also important that the completely different lengths of season between these two leagues also greatly skews the comparison between league revenue. The WNBA plays slightly over 200 regular season games with a maximum of 35 playoff games in comparison to the approximate 1,230 regular season games that the NBA offers in addition to a maximum of 105 playoff games, which means that there are that many more games that the NBA is able to gain revenue from (Coolkingsingh 2020). This comes down to simple math. If the WNBA wants to play its players more and stop being a part-time job, then it must lengthen its seasons and increase the number of games played, which will in turn increase revenue and allow the league to pay its players more.

The WNBA is in the midst of attempting to solve an extremely complex and important puzzle. The puzzle is making the WNBA a stable and celebrated professional sports league in the United States which is synonymous with being well-endowed economically. The struggles that the league currently faces all comes down to the fact that it does not have enough money, it does not make enough money, and it does not pay its players enough money. That is the bottom line.

Fortunately, steps have been taken in the right direction as of late, including the new CBA that came to be in 2020, and this is an incredible victory for the league and every single
player in it, but it most definitely does not mean that anyone is in the clear. The WNBA must be able to back up these promises of improved benefits and increased salaries which means they must find ways to make this money. Thus, the puzzle continues, and the WNBA must take more steps to increase viewership and game attendance so that more revenue can be generated, and the players can get paid their new, higher salaries. The league also must get creative with their problem solving, as it will most likely be necessary to expand the league and lengthen the season if the WNBA is ever to be comparable in any manner whatsoever to the NBA. There has been progress, but the issue of pay is often seen as the WNBA’s biggest fault, and this is a stigma that it must get rid of in order to achieve its full potential.

**Comparison with Other More Successful Women’s Leagues around the World**

Nearly all of the top female basketball players in the United States make the decision to leave the country and play overseas, even many of the stars in the WNBA. Most of them do this because the leagues in other countries often provide better pay, better benefits, and a more stable league overall. Why is this that these other countries seemed to have figured out how to have stable and successful women’s basketball leagues that provide their players with what they deserve? The harsh reality is that many WNBA players have no choice in the matter, which meant that approximately 90 of the 144 WNBA players in 2018 felt they had to play year-round with the WNBA in the summer and overseas in the winter, just to make enough money over the course of the year; many of them mainly value their WNBA careers because they allow them to have a bigger name overseas and sign bigger contracts for more money (Driver 2019). This yearlong schedule of playing professional basketball without rest is a big risk for injury amongst
WNBA players, but again, the risk is worth the reward in these players’ eyes due to all that playing overseas has to offer.

First and foremost, of course, is the better money that is offered to many professional women’s basketball players overseas in comparison to their WNBA salaries. During the 2015 WNBA season, the average salary was roughly $75,000 and the maximum salary was $111,500. Diana Taurasi, a player likely to earn close to the maximum salary, decided to sit out the season altogether and instead play in Russia for the 2015-16 year, earning close to $1.5 million for playing there that one year (Caple 2017). That pay comparison is not even close. In fact, Taurasi’s salary in Russia for one season rivals the annual salaries of NBA players, and secures her far more financial stability not only for that year, but even for her future compared with the $111,500 maximum salary that the WNBA had to offer. Former WNBA player Jordan Hooper stated, “I would love to stay in the states and play one season and one season only and have an offseason where I could get to work out really hard with some trainers and a nutritionist like Lebron (James does),” but this is simply not the reality for WNBA players and never will be with the pay being so much better in overseas leagues (Driver 2019). It seems to be that women’s basketball overseas is more popular and is able to bring in more fans and thus, generate more of the necessary revenue to create successful and sturdy leagues.

It is helpful that the seasons overseas oftentimes last closer to eight months, as opposed to the WNBA season which just lasts slightly longer than the summer. This includes roughly 34 games in only 90 days, including countless back-to-back games, which Las Vegas Aces star Liz Cambage says is something that her team in China never has to partake in (Ellentuck 2018). There are also some other interesting circumstances going on overseas in terms of league ownership and why the leagues appear to be so wealthy, as Diana Taurasi stated that oligarchs
own the teams in Russia as a hobby of sorts, and they do not care how much they have to pay to have the best team in the country (Woods 2019). This clearly could never be the case in the United States or for the WNBA, but these foreign leagues do serve as a model for the pay and conditions that the best women’s basketball players in the world desire and deserve.

They set a standard for the WNBA to strive for, as many of their players want to play in the United States and represent their home country, but the reality of pay makes it difficult for some of them to do so. One of the stars of the WNBA, Skylar Diggins-Smith, has endorsement deals with both Puma and Bodyarmor Superdrink, which allow her to make enough money without having to play overseas, which in turn, allows her to run camps and get more involved in the community of her WNBA team while many of her teammates are overseas (Ellentuck 2018). This would not only be the ideal scenario for many WNBA who would rather not play professional basketball the entire year without much break, but it could also have huge potential to help the WNBA increase in popularity if more of its biggest stars were able to be more interactive with their fans and communities the way Diggins-Smith has been.

Pay is not the only incentive or benefit that many of these players have when choosing to play overseas; the travel and overall life experience that the players are able to attain while playing overseas is something that is absolutely unattainable in the United States. Former WNBA center Carolyn Swords had this to say about her professional overseas experiences:

For me, being overseas each time has been this wonderful, unique little adventure, with ups and downs. But I've learned a lot from living and being abroad. It keeps me on edge - - I'm always stretching the limits of my comfort zone. And I think that's a good thing.

And it helps us bring back valuable experience to the league. (Caple 2017)
Many people choose to travel or partake in some sort of experience that involves them living abroad because it provides experiences and lessons that cannot be found in any other way, and this is no different for WNBA players. Not only are they able to gain life experience and live in different countries all over the world, but they are also able to gain basketball experience and improve their game for the upcoming WNBA season. This is something that the WNBA cannot really emulate for American players if travel and worldly experience is their top priority, however, with better pay, a more spread out season, and other better conditions for the league, far fewer WNBA players would make the decision to play overseas or to play year-round because it no longer would be as necessary to their livelihoods.

The United States often prides itself on being the best in the world in just about every category, and especially in athletics. The medal count at the Olympics is the perfect example of this. Women’s basketball is no exception, and the WNBA boasts about having the best women’s basketball players in the world, but for some reason, the United States cannot figure out how to have the best women's basketball league in the world. There are certain aspects of more successful and more stable professional women’s basketball leagues in other countries that the United States could not really replicate, but there are still a lot of lessons that the WNBA needs to learn from these more prosperous leagues. The biggest of these lessons is that the players will go where the money is. The WNBA needs to find a way to pay its players more, as discussed more in depth in the “Pay” section, so that these players do not have to play in multiple countries all year round.

What seems to be the solution to this? The WNBA needs to play a longer season with more spaced-out games. This is not only for the health and safety of the players, but also so that they are able to make a livable wage for a longer portion of the year, just as they are able to do
during the longer seasons they play overseas. If the United States wants to be the best in the world, the time is now to start making changes for the better in the WNBA and for its players in order to compete with other professional women’s basketball leagues found around the world.

**Failed Teams and Leagues, and What to Learn from Them**

One of the biggest flaws of the league comes when looking at its history: the numerous teams that have folded as well as other professional women’s basketball leagues in the United States that went under in the past do not look favorable for the success of the league. It has been multiple years since a team in the WNBA failed, perhaps signaling the turning of tides for the league, but it most definitely does not mean that this could not happen again in the future. One of the reasons that leaders of the league are slow to expand is out of fear that history will repeat itself without careful planning of the future. These past tribulations beg the question of whether or not professional women’s basketball has solid ground to stand on in the United States. It is impossible to predict the future, but the only certain thing that the WNBA can know is that teams did fail in the past and there are several lessons to be learned from these situations moving forward into the future if the league is to one day prosper.

In just 25 years, the WNBA has had six teams completely fold – the Miami Sol, the Portland Fire, the Cleveland Rockers, the Charlotte Sting, the Houston Comets, and the Sacramento Monarchs – and they have also had five team relocations (Queen Ballers Club 2020). Not only do these constant changes make it difficult for fans to have any feeling of stability or loyalty, but it also signifies that there are some fundamental flaws in the WNBA, whether it be in its structure, its publicity, or something else; there are some improvements that can and must be made for the sake of the league. This begs the question as to what these
franchises were doing wrong; what was it that did not allow these teams to take root in these cities and take off? There were a variety of factors in each case that make this a complex problem to analyze, however, it is a crucial one to find solutions to as the WNBA tries to find stability within its current teams and move towards potential expansion.

There are also lessons to be learned from the extinct leagues. These include the Women’s Professional Basketball League (WBL), the league that got the ball rolling for women’s professional basketball in the United States between 1978 and 1981; the Women’s American Basketball Association (WABA), which was founded by Bill Byrne in 1984 after his WBL failed and did not last even one full season; the National Women’s Basketball Association (NWBA) came to be in 1986 and had zero games actually played in its one year existence; the Liberty Basketball Association (LBA) was announced at the end of the 1980s and based its brand off of playing on a 9’2” hoop with the players in skin-tight uniforms, and it lasted only one game before its collapse; the WABA’s second attempt between 1993 and 1995; and finally the American Basketball League (ABL) formed in 1995 with the WNBA close behind in 1996, and the two leagues competed for two seasons before the WNBA was left victorious, if one could call it that (Bowman 2012). That is a lot of failure. In fact, the WNBA looks extremely successful with its 25 years of existence when comparing it to its predecessors. The league must continue to learn from all of these failures, however, both teams and leagues, because it feels too far from stable or successful at the moment.

One of the most mysterious failures of the WNBA was the folding of the Houston Comets. Once one of the most popular and successful teams in the league’s early years, it took only a few more years for the powerhouse to crumple and fall out of existence. One of the original eight teams created when the WNBA was founded in 1996, the Comets got off to a fast
start, with one of the first “Big Threes” in Tina Thompson, Sheryl Swoopes, and Cynthia Cooper. They won the first four titles of the WNBA’s existence all in row, making them one of only five professional teams to ever do that; during this run and in their successful, but non-championship years that followed, the team’s average game attendance ranged between 9,703 and 12,602 fans which is nearly double what many teams average (Walker 2016). This hot start of the Comets may have been the golden ticket for the WNBA to survive longer than any of its predecessors, as they helped women’s basketball catch the eye of many American basketball fans at the time. So with all that went right for the Houston Comets and the immense impact that they were able to have on the culture and game of women’s basketball in the United States, what went wrong to lead to the eventual downfall of the franchise?

First of all, the team eventually stopped winning championships. They slowly began to win less and less, causing fewer fans to come to games, but there were a handful of circumstances that coincided to lead to the team’s folding, as Leslie Alexander, the owner of both the Houston Rockets and the Houston Comets at the time, decided to sell the team in 2007 to Hilton Koch; Van Chancellor, the only coach the Comets had had and the winningest coach in the WNBA retired in 2007; and the recession of 2008 did not help matters economically for the franchise or the league, which decided to suspend operations in Houston in December of 2008, resulting in the complete dissolution of the team (Walker 2016). Many criticize this decision on the WNBA’s part, claiming that they did not give enough credit to all that Houston did for the game of women’s basketball as well as for the initial success of the league.

Today, the jerseys of Sheryl Swoopes and Kim Perrot hang from the rafters of the Toyota Center, the home of the Houston Rockets. Yet, there is no franchise to hold all of the history and all that the Houston Comets did for the game of basketball (Walker 2016). If the WNBA wants
to continue to survive and eventually thrive, they must use all assets at their disposal to their advantage. Although the circumstances surrounding Houston in 2008 were tough, the market for women’s basketball was clearly there based on the immense support the team received in its early years, and the Houston Comets was a team that had a lot to offer the league in terms of history and legacy, yet they made the decision to close down operations there. In fact, Houston is a commonly suggested city for expansion due to the ripe potential for a team there. Perhaps financing the team seemed impossible at the time, but in hindsight, it seems like a mistake for the league, and one that they will have to avoid repeating with other established franchises if they hope to achieve full potential of the league in the future.

There is a common saboteur amongst all of the folded teams in WNBA history: the NBA. When the WNBA was founded, it was founded in partnership with the NBA. This was problematic as that the new franchises had to be located in NBA markets. They also had to be owned by the NBA team’s owner in that city; that rule changed in 2002, as many of the owners were struggling to keep both of their teams alive during the economic consequences of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, and of course chose to focus their efforts on the NBA franchise (Sports Teller 2020). Ultimately, the Houston Comets, the Portland Fire, the Miami Sol, the Cleveland Rockers, the Charlotte Sting, and the Sacramento Monarchs all had NBA owners that made the decision to no longer support both teams. Once the teams were sold back to the WNBA, the league was unable to find owners for any of them during these trying war-focused times. In hindsight, it was most likely a mistake to have WNBA franchises owned by NBA owners rather than people who were fully dedicated to a WNBA franchise, however, it is impossible to say if the league would have ever been able to get off the ground without such a close partnership with the NBA in its early years. Both of the NBA owners of the Orlando
Miracle and the Utah Starzz made the decision to sell back their franchises following the rule change in 2002, however, these teams were the lucky ones and were able to find new homes as the San Antonio Silver Stars and the Connecticut Sun respectively. The Connecticut Sun are still in existence, but the Silver Stars endured a name change to the San Antonio Stars followed by another relocation in 2018, when they became the Las Vegas Aces (Queen Ballers Club). Simply put, a very high percentage of the WNBA franchises put into the hands of NBA owners did not stay in those hands and ended up paying the price for it. This is quite the dilemma, however, as the partnership with the NBA did help to financially kickstart the WNBA in a way that no other professional women’s league in the United States had the benefit of before.

Now that the WNBA has relatively stable ground to stand on, it is crucial to learn from this moving forward, especially as the idea of expansion becomes more and more of a reality in the near future. It is prudent to acknowledge both where WNBA teams started and whose hands they are entrusted to. Some of these folded WNBA teams were relatively successful during their limited existences but were not given the proper environment to grow. In fact, the Portland Fire was remembered by players and administration alike as being quite successful, and all involved in the franchise were taken off guard when the WNBA decided to stop the team’s operations after just three seasons (Portland Trail Blazers 2020). Thus, something in the WNBA’s management of the team must have gone awry, and the franchise in Portland paid the price for it. Moving forward, the WNBA must handle each and every franchise, both present and future, with the utmost care so they may all survive and have the ability to achieve their full potential.

Although these lessons from the WNBA teams of the past are extremely important, there are other equally as important lessons to be learned from the professional women’s basketball leagues that failed to take root before the start of the WNBA. Essentially all of these leagues
shared a lack of funding and stability to get their feet off the ground, something that the WNBA had help from the NBA to do early on, which for these other leagues resulted in only a few seasons of existence or even only a few games (Bowman 2012). A professional sports league cannot exist, nor can it function without the proper financial backing, which is an issue that the WNBA continues to battle with to this day. Despite the fact that it has appeared like the WNBA has increased its popularity in recent years, attendance statistics show that the average regular season game in the WNBA averaged 6,535 fans during the 2019 season, which was far lower than the highest season average which occurred in 1998 during the league’s second year of existence during which teams averaged 10,869 fans per game (Gough 2021).

This decline is not a good sign for the league, especially as women’s college basketball has been improving in these areas. Without fans attending and without immense interest in the league, the WNBA will not be able to make money, and without making money, the league will eventually fold. An interesting fact to note is that during the 2015 season, the WNBA averaged 7,318 fans per game during the regular season, which was higher than the average of 6,749 fans that the NBA averaged during the equivalent phase of league development that occurred during the 1960s (Sandomir 2016). There are, however, completely different eras with technology and social media so it is not a good idea to just compare these two statistics at face value. Regardless, the important lesson for the WNBA is that it needs to find a way to better market itself so that it can stop losing fans and start making more money. Simply put, the WNBA needs to market itself for its basketball, and not only that, but it needs to advertise itself as the best women’s basketball league in the world, and from there, the basketball fans will come (Sandomir 2016). As of right now, the marketing is far too all over the place, and until this is fixed, the WNBA will continue to lose fans and lose money.
There are countless lessons to be learned from the failed WNBA teams and professional women’s basketball leagues of the past. The key lesson lies in that the bottom line for the future of the WNBA is money. All of these teams and leagues, regardless of all of the details, failed because of money. They simply did not have enough money to continue on, or they were costing their owners too much money and not making enough, etc. The simple lesson for the WNBA? Discover how to make money. Then, the league will truly be able to thrive. Of course, this is a task that is far easier said than done, but once again, there is an endless amount of methods that the league can try out to improve its support and thus, make more money. The WNBA is in good hands moving forward with the current president Lisa Borders, who stated “‘I am the No. 1 salesperson in the W.N.B.A. My title says president, but economic viability is my No. 1 job’” (Sandomir 2016). With this kind of leadership at the helm of the league, it is very possible that the WNBA has the potential to avoid repeating the same mistakes of the failed teams and leagues of the past.

Social Justice/Activism

An identity that the WNBA has increasingly taken on in recent years is social justice advocate. It is an identity that has proved to be a double-edged sword for the success and visibility of the league. With the countless movements and the immense amount of progress that American society has seen over the past few years, it could be argued that the WNBA has been the most vocal professional sports league in the United States when it came to these issues. As is the case with any issue that has people on opposite sides, the league’s vocal and unrestrained involvement in these social justice movements has resulted in both more fans and some entrenched enemies for the league. Just as if someone were to join a team or cause, they would
be rewarded with new teammates or colleagues, but they would also be presented with a whole new opposition that they had not had to deal with prior to this. This is precisely what the WNBA is dealing with at the moment. It is extremely important to note that as women and members of the BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other disadvantaged communities, the players of the WNBA do not have any choice in being activists for their own identities. There is one question that lingers, however: is there a way that the WNBA could continue to balance its activism while also broadening its audience and popularity? This is an extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible task, but it is an important to at least think about.

One of the most famous players from the WNBA who has brought immense visibility to the league is Maya Moore, and much of the attention that she has gained for both herself and the league has been off the basketball court. Maya Moore took center stage for her work in social justice after she made the sacrificial decision to set aside her basketball career and take a step away from the WNBA. Despite having one of the most decorated resumes of any basketball player in history with four collegiate Final Fours, two NCAA titles, six trips to the WNBA finals, four WNBA championships, two gold medals at the Olympics, and one WNBA MVP award all in an eight-year career, Moore made the decision to forego some of her prime basketball years to help a wrongfully convicted man get out of prison (Herring, Paine 2020). Some make the case, including the authors of the aforementioned article, that Moore made a greater impact off-the-field of any athlete of this generation, and perhaps, of any athlete of all time (Herring, Paine 2020).

In the story of her departure from the league, Moore found a cause that to her was more important than basketball. Jonathan Irons, a black man who was convicted of assault and burglary when he was just 16 years old in Missouri, faced a 50-year sentence for the crime; after
23 years in prison, Moore fought to get the ruling on Irons’s case overturned, a case that she learned about and grew close with through her great-uncle’s prison ministry (Barnes 2021). In the end, the ruling was overturned, Irons was set free at the age of 40, and he proposed to Moore the very next day, resulting in a wedding just a few weeks later (Streeter 2021). The pair have committed themselves to continued social justice work, but Moore created a far bigger legacy of activism within the entire WNBA community.

Even back in 2016 while Moore was a captain of the UCONN women’s basketball team, she and her fellow captains made the decision to wear shirts that read “Black Lives Matter” and “Change Starts with Us” following the killing of Philando Castile by a police officer in Minnesota (Barnes 2021). As anyone living in the United States in 2021 could tell you, this became a country-wide protest, and shirts like these were worn by athletes everywhere starting in 2020, but Maya Moore was a trailblazer. She started this legacy of activism back when she was in college and continued to carry it with her and inspire others; the culture of activism and fighting for social justice in the WNBA today can largely be attributed to the example of Maya Moore.

As women, activism is naturally a higher priority for the players in the WNBA, despite the fact that it can often come at a higher price. In the 2020 season, a season in which the COVID-19 pandemic made everything more complicated for all sports teams and leagues, the WNBA made the decision to still play their season through the pandemic, just in an isolated bubble. Many players chose to sit out the season in protest to the social justice issues running rampant in the United States in 2020 despite the fact that it meant they would receive no paycheck whatsoever in comparison to the NBA players who sat out of the remainder of their seasons during the pandemic in protest who merely received a pay cut; meanwhile, the WNBA
players who did decide to participate in their season formed a partnership with the Say Her Name campaign, thus dedicating their season to Breonna Taylor, a black woman who was a victim of police violence, through wearing shirts with her name on it and involving acts of solidarity (Oliver 2020). Through this visual activism during a time of extreme volatility in the United States, the WNBA gained more attention from the American people, both positive and negative.

Despite this risk for making enemies or gaining haters, most of the women in the WNBA really do not see themselves as having a choice in the matter. It is a matter of the identities that they themselves possess as women, and many of them as black women or members of the LGBTQ+ community. They face challenges in their lives every single day when they step off the basketball court, so using their platform to fight for the causes that mean most to them is not an option, it is a life sustaining confrontation with reality. Mistie Bass, a former WNBA player, had this to say about the lives of WNBA players and their daily fight for equality:

“We are a walking protest at all times as a W.N.B.A. athlete. If you think about it, we have so many different stigmas. We’re just constantly in the fight. I don’t think we have ever not been in a fight for equality, for justice.” (Abrams, Weiner 2020).

For these women, fighting the battles of social justice is a requirement of not only their profession, but simply of their lives. Some argue that this emphasis on the fact that the WNBA is a women’s basketball league rather than just a basketball league is its downfall, claiming that marketing itself as a sport and a sport alone may result in more respect and success (Paulsen 2006). For better or for worse, social justice and activism has been at the very core of the WNBA as a league.

Despite the fact that activism in the WNBA is practically inevitable, it is still crucial to consider whether or not this activism benefits the league or inhibits its potential to grow. On the
one hand, there is concrete evidence that there has been an increase in support of the league or that their activism has been proven effective. This could be seen when WNBA players wore “Vote Warnock” t-shirts to show support in favor of Reverend Raphael Warnock as opposed to Kelly Loeffler, a partial owner of the Atlanta Dream at the time who was vocal about her opposition towards their social justice efforts, in the Georgia Senate race, resulting in donations of more than $183,000 from 3,500 different, new donors in just the following two days (Brewer 2020). It is undeniable that using their platform for activism has certainly allowed the league to gain new fans from different walks of life who otherwise would not even consider watching professional basketball due to the overlapping with social justice. On the other hand, there is the inevitable group of haters that has sprung up as enemies of the league due to their opposition to the causes that the WNBA supports. This is what makes activism a tricky subject, as well as a big reason why many leagues or people in the spotlight struggle to maintain a balance within this controversial territory. For example, in 2017, the NFL faced a 10 percent decrease in ratings and surveys showed this was due to the fact that approximately one third of respondents said they were less likely to watch the entire game if players were kneeling or protesting during the national anthem (Platt 2018). Some people are of the belief that sports and social justice should remain in separate realms, however, as human beings who must deal with social justice issues in their daily lives, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and even just female athletes and their allies are not entitled to the same separation, which is no fault of their own. People with these views may steer far clear from the WNBA and any of its events, thus potentially limiting its ability to grow and reach certain fan bases. Some athletes have always been activists and they always will be, even when news reporters tell them to “shut up and dribble” (Platt 2018). Regardless of the number of people that the WNBA attracts with its social justice action, it alienates another group of people
that may have been attracted to the basketball side of things to help sustain the league. There is no doubt that there is no choice for these women and members of persecuted communities to be activists, but perhaps there could be a better time and place for their activism for the sake of the league. Purely looking at financial benefits of the league and saying nothing as to what is right or wrong, it could prove most beneficial to focus solely on the basketball once they step on the court. This does not mean that this is right or fair to these women whatsoever, it is just food for thought when considering what could be most fiscally helpful for the league. When it comes down to it, the WNBA must learn more about how to still have success even with these types of prejudices because if the NFL even lost loyal viewers and fans during that 2017 season due to activism within the league, how will the much less viewed WNBA be able to harness these viewers and fans in the United States?

**Skill/Rule Differences from the NBA**

One of the major arguments that critics of the WNBA like to reuse over and over again is that the game is just not as exciting as the NBA. They say that the women are less athletic, there are not enough dunks, and males in particular like to claim that they could beat these female professional athletes with ease. If one were to click on any post on ESPN’s Instagram page that features any kind of WNBA content, they would be able to scroll through thousands and thousands of comments of people saying, “No one cares?” or “Who is that?” In fact, this is the case on many posts from a wide variety of women’s sports, however, we will take a deeper look at this negativity and criticism as a whole in the next section of this thesis. For now, we will focus on what the actual, concrete differences between the men’s and women’s games are, and if
there is anything that can and/or should be changed by the WNBA in order to make the game more appealing to a wider audience of viewers.

Male bodies and female bodies are different. Studies have shown that males often weigh more than females and also tend to have both more upper-body strength as well as lower-body strength (Wolf 2010). It is also obvious that men, on average, tend to be taller which also means a larger wingspan and a longer stride. Regardless of these physical realities, however, there may be another factor that is far more important in the athletic development of males as opposed to females. Wolf discusses that gender biases towards women and their athleticism, strength, etc. often hinder their athletic development and of course, lead to even further advantage for men on the playing field (Wolf 2010).

Wolf points out that as female sports have become more popular and girls have been more supported in their athletic pursuits from a young age, female athletes just continue to both look and perform in more impressive ways over time (Wolf 2010). For example, more and more female basketball players are beginning to have the ability to dunk on regulation hoops, which would have been unheard of a few decades ago. Simply put, women have had to overcome the idea that many of the ideal attributes that go along with success in sport – like strength, aggression, and power – are seen by many as not being feminine, thus making women have to choose (Sebold 2020). Fortunately, times are changing, and this is becoming less and less of a reality, which is why women appear to be catching up to their male counterparts in a variety of ways. It is unlikely that women will ever be the same as men when it comes to athletics, so perhaps looking into changing some rules in the women’s game could help to increase viewershhip and support.
There are slight differences between the men’s and women’s games already, including slightly smaller balls for the women, a slightly closer three-point line, and a slightly shorter court, but all of these are pretty much unnoticeable when it comes to game time. There has been one idea that has been circulating for some time now as to how the women’s game could change to be more exciting and more like the men’s game. This idea is that the rims should be lowered for the women from the regulation ten-foot height. Upon first glance, this idea seems somewhat ridiculous, primarily due to the fact that nearly all basketball played beyond the age of ten years old is played on ten-foot hoops, by both men and women alike. Changing the height of the rim would be quite the opposite of the other differences between the men’s and women’s game because it would be completely noticeable and would have the potential to drastically change the women’s game.

The question that remains is if this drastic change is precisely what women’s basketball needs to level the playing field with the men, or if this change would be too drastic and lose all the momentum that women have been gaining in the last few years. Geno Auriemma, the long-time coach of the women’s basketball program at the University of Connecticut and one of the biggest names in women’s basketball, suggested that the rims be lowered seven inches in order to generate more scoring, improve field goal percentages, and ultimately, to attract more viewers of the women’s game (Schonbrun 2012). His thinking at the time was quite out-of-the-box and many believe that having rims of different heights is logistically unrealistic, but many also believe that his thinking may be headed in the right direction if the women’s game is to see improvement in popularity and viewership.

Male basketball players at the college and professional levels have the luxury of getting to play above the rim, which means dunks, tip-ins, put-backs, and higher field goal percentages.
In the women’s game at these levels, even making a lay-up from right next to the basket is a more difficult task because the players are farther away. Thus, this idea from Auriemma, who is just about the closest thing to a true expert on women’s basketball, would help to solve this problem and alleviate the discrepancies between the two games. Of course, a change of this magnitude is far easier said than done, but it is definitely one that should be on people’s minds headed into the future.

There are countless other ideas and rooms for changes that nobody has even considered as realistic whatsoever. For example, take a look at the Savannah Bananas – a college, summer league baseball team that prioritizes entertainment and even makes some drastic rule changes to the game of baseball, and how has that worked out for them? – they sell out every single game, they have gained a platform that has achieved national recognition, and they receive constant feedback from people saying they would watch baseball more often if it was always like the way the Bananas play (Gonzales 2021). Many say that Major League Baseball should take notes from this team, and perhaps some radical, forward-thinking changes are precisely what the WNBA needs as well.

One idea that has been thrown around a fair amount is the possibility of the WNBA playing at a different time of year, especially around the time that is traditionally viewed as basketball season (Szczepanek 2017). In other words, the way in which the WNBA competes during the summer may not be in its best interest. Although there is some logic in thinking that having little to no competition with other major sports leagues will yield higher viewership and popularity for the WNBA, there is also the potential that moving the season to the fall and winter time, when the NBA also starts, would increase viewership as this is when most people view it to be “basketball season.” This is also when college basketball and high school basketball teams
play, so it seems somewhat odd that the WNBA is the only American basketball being played outside of this time of the year. There is no guarantee that this would improve viewership, it could even decrease with the heightened competition, however, there is the chance that it could help get more basketball fans watching while they are already tuned in. There has even been talk of having some WNBA games played right before NBA games, sort of in high school fashion, so that there is a chance that more people will tune in before the NBA game (Szczepanek 2017).

Another idea touched on in this same article is revitalizing the jerseys, logos, and overall looks of the existing WNBA teams, which is precisely what the league did this past years with both a new logo and ball for its “Count It” theme to celebrate the 25th season, as well as three brand new jerseys for every single team in the league (Voepel 2021). They were also some of the first WNBA jerseys that clearly featured the names of the teams on the fronts of the jerseys, rather than a sponsoring company or some kind of advertisement, which WNBA star Liz Cambage says is one of the biggest reasons why nobody would want to buy or wear the old jerseys (Ellentuck 2018). These new jerseys made by Nike garnered a lot of attention from fans and potential fans alike, proving that changes like these could be extremely beneficial to the visibility of the league.

Essentially, the WNBA is a struggling league that has seen some improvement in just the last few years. Where did most of this improvement come from? The answer is change. New jerseys, new talent, new television partners, new publicity campaigns, new stars, you name it. Yet, the league continues to underpay its players, it continues to be too small to give opportunities to all those who deserve it, and it continues to struggle to fill the seats at arenas. Perhaps the answer lies in continuing the changes but making them bigger and grander. This is a gamble that could result in failure, but with high risk comes high reward. Society will continue to
grow and change over the next few years, and only time will tell if the WNBA will continue to rise in popularity the way it is now or if some drastic measures must be taken, the likes of lowering the rims, in order for the league to not only stay afloat but become a competitive major sports league in the United States.

**Facing Negativity and Criticism while Fighting off Irrelevance**

One of the most glaring obstacles that faces not only women’s basketball of all levels, but all women’s sports in the United States is an overarching theme of negativity and heightened criticism. This stems from the reality that a lot of individuals, particularly male individuals, do not respect female athletes in nearly the same way that they respect male athletes. All it takes is a scroll through the comments on any post from ESPN on Instagram that features a female athlete, and you will be greeted with countless comments of hate and criticism. This misogyny or belief that males are superior, similar to equal pay, is an issue that permeates American society far beyond the realm of sports. The world of sports, however, remains one of the most visible and obvious places where misogyny like this takes place. This is an issue that the WNBA does not particularly have any major fault in, as it is just a condition of American society at this point, but there are certain steps that the WNBA can take to help their league more accessible for fans of all kinds, thus making them less prone to hate and criticism. If the WNBA wants to continue down its path of activism, social justice, and change for the better, then this is perhaps the best opportunity for them to do so. The WNBA has the platform and the potential to take the lead on this greater societal issue of misogyny and not only improve the treatment of their teams and players, but also improve the overall treatment of and outlook on women in the United States.
The catch is that this may look a lot different from the ways they have been approaching this issue in the past and a lot different from what they have in mind for the future.

There can be all kinds of reasons for people to dislike and/or disrespect the WNBA, many of which are not the easiest of reasons to argue with because they do not make much sense. For example, an article from the Connecticut Sun’s Ben York brings up and refutes five of the “dumbest” reasons that people say for why they do not like the WNBA, including that many average people look down on the skill of the women and think that they could beat them in games of one-on-one, the WNBA gets too much promotion from the NBA and it is annoying, the game is played too much below the rim, the league is not growing, and lastly for some people, the WNBA just simply triggers them and makes them angry (York 2018).

As far as the game of women’s basketball has developed, these women are elite athletes, and it would take an extremely talented basketball player, male or female to beat them in a game of one-on-one. Also, many of these women are in no shortage of height or size either, like Brittney Griner who is 6’9”, meaning that would be an extremely difficult matchup for any average person, regardless of skill. Whether it is ego or misconceptions formed from stereotypes, many of these people do not seem to realize that “the WNBA employs over 120 of the best basketball players (…[not] ‘female’ basketball players) in the known universe” (York 2018). As for those who feel that the WNBA is too promoted by the NBA, the partnership between the two leagues has been a huge boost for WNBA viewership and survival altogether, and it is something that should actually be strengthened and utilized more in unique ways to ideally help the WNBA one day become self-sufficient. When looking at the argument that claims that the WNBA plays the game below the rim, one must concede that this is, in fact, the case for most WNBA players. Aside from a very select few who can dunk on rare occasion, the majority of the game is played
below the rim, but this very much does not make the game any less exciting than the NBA. Actually, if you can dunk then that is very well the easiest thing to do in basketball and requires very little skill. This is a big reason why the three has become a bigger and bigger part of the game of professional basketball, especially in the NBA, which is a form of playing below the rim. Therefore, many people find the game of someone like Stephen Curry, an elite three-point shooter whom you will rarely see dunk a basketball, to be one of the best and most electric players in the NBA, and the skills of the women in the WNBA should be looked at in the same manner, even though they are not able to always dunk (York 2018). For those who say the WNBA just makes them angry, there could be a lot going whether it is their ego, sexism, jealousy, or some other cause for this unwarranted negativity. There is very little the league can do to fix this problem since there is nothing they did to cause it, however, this source of negativity can also be looked at in correlation with other topics discussed earlier like social justice/activism or focusing too much on being “women’s” basketball players rather than just basketball players, which can alienate some fans and limit the target market of the league. Lastly, York refutes the reason of the WNBA not growing, which is once again a poor reason to dislike something, by revealing that 2017 overall attendance was the highest it had ever been, and average game attendance was the highest marked since 2011; the impact made on social media also continues to grow at an exponential rate across all platforms with followers, likes, and impressions all showing immense increases in just one year (York 2018). York provides just five reasons that are often given by critics of the WNBA, but all of them come down to a culture of disrespect towards the players and the game that they are playing.

Unwarranted criticism and negativity will likely be an enemy that the WNBA will have to face for years to come. As mentioned previously, there are some measures that the league
could take to alienate fewer people and broaden the audience that they are targeting, like taking less aggressive and visible stances in controversial issues during games themselves or prioritizing marketing itself as a basketball league and that is it. Even if these measures are taken, there will still be those critics and haters who will find a way to find something wrong with the league or belittle the accomplishments of these women.

There is one silver lining to be found in this. The ultimate enemy of the WNBA is not hate or criticism; the ultimate enemy of the WNBA is irrelevance. As the old adage says, “No publicity is bad publicity.” If people are speaking badly about the WNBA or trying to tear it down, they have the league’s name on their mind and in their conversation. This negativity may take its toll, there is no doubt about that, yet for every person who shares a negative remark about the WNBA, there could be five more people who see it and get inspired to watch a game for themselves. The WNBA should be more scared of apathy from people as that is what would lead to irrelevance which is what would lead to the eventual downfall of the league. Women’s sports are still relatively new, and in a society like the United States that is still in the process of shedding its patriarchal and male-dominated roots, there is still quite a bit of lingering misogyny. In the words of Mary Jo Kane, the head of the University of Minnesota’s Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport,

If the baseline for comparison is where women’s sports were in the early stage of Title IX, the W.N.B.A.’s cup runneth over. While there is no back-room conspiracy to suppress interest in women’s sports, women’s sports are still an afterthought and not considered core to the brand of sports. But having said that, at least they’re in the conversation. (Sandomir 2016).
She points out how women’s sports have come such a long way alongside society as it has come a long way in regard to women’s rights, and this will continue to improve over time meaning the unwarranted hate will reduce. Therefore, as long as the WNBA can continue to do what it can to prove these people wrong and remain in the conversation, then it will survive.

**Conclusion**

At this point in time, the WNBA feels far from being a stable, self-sufficient, or thriving league. In fact, people could even say that it is a failing league, especially when compared to the flourishing NBA. This is not even close to getting a good look at the whole picture. There is quite literally zero precedent for a successful professional women’s sports league in the United States for the WNBA to try to follow; with that in mind, the league has done quite well with all the years that it has managed to exist and all that it has been able to accomplish. Through wave after wave of adversity, the league has overcome most likely more than any American male sports league has had to, even just in its 25-year history. Despite the tricky circumstances that come with the territory for the WNBA, there are still several major flaws in the structure of the league and the way in which it is doing business that are limiting its ability to grow, develop, and achieve that security that has been so elusive. A league made up of only twelve teams and 144 roster spots is not sufficient to provide opportunities to the new generation of female basketball players that is overflowing with talent. Even the players who are fortunate enough to make a team often do not get paid a livable wage to last them an entire year, with only a small fraction of league revenue going to the players. The season takes place primarily during the summer months and only lasts half the length of the NBA with half as many games played. The league faces a
constant struggle to fill seats, to get viewers, and to gain enough revenue to come close to breaking even. It also battles seemingly endless criticism, disrespect, and hate.

All of these are pieces of the puzzle that the league must begin thinking outside of the box to solve. Although the WNBA could do what it can to expand its target audience, it could also hone in on a more focused target audience, pushing increased engagement, attendance, viewership, etc. from that target audience. In other words, focusing on the quality of the fans rather than the quantity may be a better approach. It must market itself as high-quality basketball to those looking for sports, affordable entertainment for those simply looking for something to do, and a league worth putting time and money into. It also must look reduce the number of people that it alienates or removes from its target audience, unless it does choose to harness a more focused target market, in which case, the league may be able to continue its vocal activism and work for social justice initiatives. The league needs to pay its players more, so they do not have to play overseas, and instead can remain in their team’s cities and put on camps and events to engage the community more and more in the franchise. As revenue increases with techniques like this or still others that could be even more unconventional, then the league will be able to expand to new cities, further broadening its target market and ideally being able to make even more money and create even more opportunities for the young female basketball players who should be playing professionally here in the United States. Continuing down the same path that it is on does not bode well for the WNBA and its future. Piece by piece, the WNBA and all those involved with the league can work through this puzzle and continue to improve it one step at a time. The WNBA has the unique opportunity to become the first truly successful professional women’s sports league in the United States, and to set a precedent and example for all female athletes and leagues to come.
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