

WNBA's Sixth Season Is 30 Years In The Making

by Barry Rubinstein

(NAPSA)—In six years, it has showcased the best and brightest athletes in its realm, doubled in size and won over a broad and loyal fan base both at home and abroad. But as the WNBA prepares to toss up its signature oatmeal-and-orange ball for the 2002 season, it humbly recognizes an event that took place 30 years ago—without which there might not have been cause to tip off that first ball in 1997.

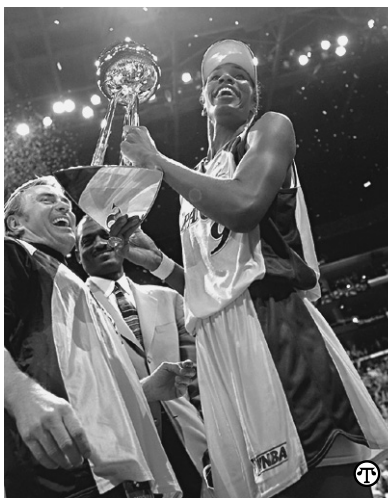
That event was the 1972 enactment of Title IX, the sweeping legislation that banned sex discrimination in schools and literally leveled the playing field for women's sports. Almost three-quarters of the players now in the WNBA were not even born when Title IX came into being, but none can deny it as the thunderclap that watered the fields upon which these athletes now play.

"The enactment of Title IX was clearly one of the landmark events in women's sports," said WNBA President Val Ackerman. "Without question, it has created opportunities for women in sports. It has certainly contributed to the spectacular growth of women's college basketball over the last 30 years, which in turn helped make the WNBA possible."

It is fitting that, in the same season the league recognizes the 30th anniversary of Title IX, it welcomes perhaps its most talented rookie crop, led by a quartet who played for the 39-0 NCAA Championship Connecticut squad.

Four UConn Huskies were selected among the first six picks of the WNBA draft, including Naismith Player of the Year Sue Bird, taken No. 1 overall by the Seattle Storm. Swin Cash, Ashja Jones and Tamika Williams were selected by the Detroit Shock, Washington Mystics and Minnesota Lynx, respectively.

The rookies and their teams have their gazes locked on the defending champion Los Angeles



Now entering its sixth season, the WNBA owes its existence to legislation passed 30 years ago.

Sparks, powered by regular season and Finals MVP Lisa Leslie. But the Sparks, who broke the string of success forged by the four-time champion Houston Comets, have no intention of letting anyone else taste the sweetness of victory.

This summer, 32 WNBA games will be nationally televised, and the WNBA's Summer Love Sweepstakes will run every week throughout the season. All fans have to do is tune in to the nationally televised games and watch for a special code that could be the pass to prizes like a trip to Hawaii, a trip to the WNBA All-Star Game or a \$10,000 scholarship fund.

The Sparks will be challenged as the season heats up; the return of 2000 MVP Sheryl Swoopes—who missed all of 2001 after an ACL injury—figures to pull the Comets back into the hunt. The New York Liberty, Sacramento Monarchs and Charlotte Sting all boast veteran squads who could make this one of the most competitive campaigns in the WNBA's growing history book—including that first chapter that took 30 years to write.