

## THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE WBL TRAILBLAZERS

**The game has come a long way ... this phrase is repeated often, but** a long way from where? From what vantage point do we gauge the growth of the game? Many refer to the early years of the WNBA as their starting point, but the history of the WBL as the first viable women's professional basketball league must become common knowledge. They should be the reference point by which to correctly measure how far women's professional basketball has come.

There is a rich history of women's basketball before Title IX was enacted and before the WBL. We acknowledge those who came before us. Players, coaches, and administrators were changing an athletic landscape that would set the stage for Title IX opportunities.

When someone shakes up the status quo, the moment that first step is taken, it leads to change. Usually there is push back and sometimes lack of acceptance or success. Once the door is open, the possibilities become imminent. After inclusion and opportunity mesh, there is a social and political impact, that cuts through cultural, racial, gender, and even economic boundaries. This leads to a paradigm shift and in short, progress ... **"first step takers"**.

This question was asked at a HOF induction ... **"can history be written without them in it"**? For the members of the **WBL**, the answer is NO. This is true for many reasons. The passage of Title IX afforded the opportunity, and they were in the right time and "space" when girls and women's sports were emerging. The stage was set, the cast of players primed, and the race was on to be the **first**. As part of this contingent, these young women did not know how things would play out as they entered college in record numbers and seized the educational opportunities of a new law that subsequently included athletic opportunities. One fed the other and it was athletic skill and academic criteria that garnered the scholarship. This new female enlightenment became an important catalyst in the advances that came swiftly on every level from high school to college, international competition to the first women's professional basketball league, and on to careers in and outside of sports. So NO, the history of women's basketball, women's sports, women in education, women as agents of social change cannot be written without these Title IX and WBL Trailblazers, nor can it ignore the roles they have played from those moments to present day. They were the **"history makers"** who seized seminal moments that boosted the trajectory

of women in sports and higher education. The results of both have manifested in exponential growth and breakthrough achievements in every career opportunity once occupied predominantly or solely by men.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE LEAGUE AND AFTERWARDS

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS – THE FIRST SEASON OF THE WBL (1978-79)

In a league founded without “marquee players”, WBL founder Bill Byrne predicted “24” stars would emerge within the year ... and they did. Unheralded players soon became the faces of the league in its inaugural season and the talent pool was set. Chicago, Iowa, Milwaukee, and Minnesota represented the west and Houston, New York, New Jersey, and Dayton the east. Lack of name recognition did not equate to lack of ability. Among these stars were former All-Americans, Olympians, players with international experience, **significant African American women** who had been off or under the radar and had just broken social AND **racial** barriers, and other outstanding collegians. Out of the blocks in the first women’s professional basketball game in U.S. history, it was a breakout **African American star, Debra Waddy-Rossow** who took the league by storm scoring a game high 30 points in this historic inaugural game. They made the first year arguably the best year as far as igniting excitement and showcasing a “product” that was high quality, put fans in the stands, grabbed the attention of all media outlets, male sports stars, and spawned a group of nicknames that would rival any in men’s sports ... Machine Gun Molly, Radar, The Bandit, The Blonde Bomber, Rita E, among the most notable. Young kids, college kids, and professional men and women donned their favorite player’s shirt or made signs supporting them. There was a new game in town, and it was women’s professional basketball. The league’s best players had emerged, and the fans connected to these young, unassuming inaugural stars. It would be a love affair that would span for the next two years and beyond.

The Houston Angels would win the first league championship defeating the Iowa Cornets. Rita Easterling was league MVP and Allstar Game MVP.

### LET’S DO IT AGAIN – THE SECOND SEASON OF THE WBL (1979-80)

The anticipation was high for many reasons, not to mention the **arrival of Annie Meyers** and college stars Nancy Dunkle, Anita Ortega, Pearl Moore, Adrian Mitchell, Charlene McWhorter, Retha Swindell and others who had come off successful college careers. Surprise star Liz Silcott rounded off an exciting group of players. Meyers had been busy trying out for the Indiana Pacers of the NBA and becoming the

**first woman to sign a pro contract.** Other noteworthy players had held out for the Olympics only to watch that dream pass with the U.S. boycott. Still the talent level increased and the teams grew from eight to fourteen. They were met with a stern determination from the “founders club” who had “set the ball in motion”. The competition was welcomed, and important for the greater good of the league. The first- year players had come to the league without any fanfare and created a place for women to pursue their dreams. They began to look beyond the horizon and realize they were also laying a foundation for the little girls in the stands. It would soon become evident that the league attempted to grow too fast, including playing coast to coast. The Dallas Diamonds, San Francisco Pioneers, St. Louis Streak, New Orleans Pride, California Dreams, and Washington Metros immediately added solid competition and produced new stars. The signs of some of the franchises’ troubles were visible, but no one was throwing in the towel. Another year came and went, successes and failures along with it, and all eyes turned to the third year and resolving whatever issues that were threatening the league’s survival. Model franchise, the Chicago Hustle again led the way in television and media coverage, fan attendance, and experience in the front office. Sadly, the same could not be said of all the teams.

The New York Stars would win the second- year league championship defeating the Iowa Cornets. Ann Meyers and Molly Bolin were league Co-MVP’s and Charlene Jackson was the Allstar Game MVP.

### **THE FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL – THE THIRD & FINAL SEASON OF THE WBL (1980-81)**

New stars arrived while one of the league’s biggest departed ... **Exit Annie Meyers and enter Carol Blazejowski and the highly touted Nancy Lieberman (Lady Magic). Rosie Walker, Inge Nissen, Holly Warlick,** and other top collegians filled rosters in hopes of bolstering a crippled league. However, the writing was on the wall. The Iowa Cornets, home to second year league Co-MVP Molly Bolin and two- year finals runners-up folded along with the first and second year WBL champions Houston Angels and New York Stars. Enter expansion teams Philadelphia, New England, and Nebraska. Key players came and went, and the stars on these teams found themselves looking for a new home and spread out over the league, original coaches and team personnel departed, paychecks were not honored, teams walked out in protest, original and expansion teams struggled, and the league stumbled, but finished the year. No one knew what the future would hold, but everyone hoped against hope that together, the league could be saved, but it could not sustain. Three teams made it the entire three years ... Chicago, New Jersey, and Minnesota though not completely intact. Other professional leagues emerged and co-existed with the WBL and lured away some of its stars, but in the end, it was over ... gone with it the dreams of a generation that had taken the baton and run as far as they could to leave their mark and impact on the future.

The Nebraska Wranglers won the final championship and Rosie Walker won league MVP honors. Nancy Lieberman was the Allstar game MVP.

## THE AFTERMATH – LIFE AFTER THE WBL (1981-1996) (1996-Present)

Immediately after the WBL played its last season, the women scattered but remained relevant. Several fledgling leagues popped up over the next fifteen years and some even played in and promoted the leagues that followed. Finally, in 1996 the ABL gave us hope that women's professional basketball would be here to stay. The WNBA, with the backing of the NBA would launch in 1997 and both leagues vied for the best players of the time until the ABL folded and their stars jumped to the WNBA. Where were the WBL Trailblazers during this fifteen- year period? They were "in the midst" of it all. Many had become coaches who would coach ABL and WNBA players, top collegians, high school, AAU, middle school, and Olympians. They would become biochemists, college professors, athletic administrators, doctors, business- women, lawyers, realtors, wives, and mothers, and initiate the goal of the Title IX legislation to level the playing field for women. They would slowly disappear into the mainstream and while no one recalled their contributions to the explosion of female empowerment, they always knew that because of their pioneering spirit, they had helped set all of this in motion. Yet, this dull ache was always hovering underneath the surface ... lying dormant until someone mentioned that they had no female role models, that the ABL was the first women's professional league, or the smaller ball was debuted in the WNBA and countless other misnomers. After a twenty- five - year reunion of the WBL members, it brought back the need to tell the story of a once thriving league that did so much more than become the playground for a group of groundbreaking "firsts". **They had passed it on ... paid it forward, set the bar, raised the bar, laid the foundation, broke the mold, and their handprints were all over the landscape of social change that made the opportunities of every generation after them more accessible.** Induction into the **WBHOF as Trailblazers of the Game in 2018 gave some solace, but also served to inspire them to tell the story of their journey through their own eyes.** The time has come for these women to come out of the shadows and be recognized for the role they played and still play in the ever changing, ever improving plight of women in every realm.

## HIDDEN FIGURES

The contributions of the WBL are important but remain locked in obscurity and are often overlooked. Once the history of the first women's professional basketball league is told in full, it will be a compelling story of how the members of this league have "passed it on ... and paid it forward" for over forty years and counting. They have always had the best view from the start and watched it unfold as direct participants.

Why would anyone not go back and learn about their origins? Whose shoulders are you standing on? Completing a documentary, getting a permanent display in the WBHOF, induction into the NMBHOF, and the Smithsonian will help tell the story through the eyes of the living legends of the WBL and offer a factual, firsthand account to answer questions about these "hidden figures". They are the only ones who can bring so much important history to light and in doing so connect the dots directly to the sport today. This cannot be done without a beginning and all the parts in between. What we know or maybe more importantly "don't know" changes the whole experience when looking back at history.

**"NOT ASHAMED TO TELL IT ... I NEVER LEARNED TO SPELL IT, NOT F.A.I.L.U.R.E." Maya Angelou**

To say that the WBL was a failure is to ignore it as the first viable women's professional basketball league in the United States that is second in existence only to the longest running and current one, the WNBA. Consider the historic and social relevance of the WBL and that generation of contributors and game changers it produced. Do we also label all the attempts at starting a women's league failures as well? Each one helped make the climb a little easier. Each group of women shared the same dream and tackled many of the same obstacles. We all look at the WNBA and see ourselves in the players. They carry our dreams with them, but do not speak our names. They feel uplifted, but do not know the source. They continue to soar to new heights, but do not know who gave them wings.

The WBL is not the league that failed ... it is the league that **propelled**.

Help make it the league that prevailed ...

1975 – WPBA – never launched	1991- LBA
<b>1978-81 – WBL – 1<sup>st</sup> viable league</b>	1993-95 - WBA
1980-81 -LPBA	1996-98 - ABL
1984- WABA	<b>1997-Present - WNBA</b>
1986 – NWBA	

**"THE IDEA IS TO WRITE IT SO THAT PEOPLE HEAR IT AND IT SLIDES THROUGH THE  
BRAIN AND GOES STRAIGHT TO THE HEART".**

**... MAYA ANGELOU**

**"HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR US TO RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE OUR HEROES AND  
SHE-ROES!**

**... MAYA ANGELOU**

**"THERE IS NO GREATER AGONY THAN BEARING AN UNTOLD STORY INSIDE YOU".**

**... MAYA ANGELOU**

**"So, I write ... expound and expand ... and say the same things in different ways,  
with the hope that the message will land on the hearts of the listeners and that "our"  
voices will be heard.**

**If they hear us, maybe they will see us, and acknowledge ... just acknowledge."**

**...Elizabeth Galloway-McQuitter**