

real SPORTS

Collector's Edition

e-Zine

The Authority in Women's SportsSM

Most Important Moments



in Sports

2004

4th Annual Most Important Moments in Sports 2004

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Best Athlete of 2004

Natalie, Abby or Carly



In an Olympic year, memories abound involving pursuits of athletic excellence. Female athletes -- so often out of the spotlight -- relish their opportunity to be seen. As REAL SPORTS evaluated athletes, three women rose above the TV tales and hype and delivered against the very high expectations set for them as they competed in Athens. Unlike last year's list which included Annika Sorenstam and 2004 REAL SPORTS Athlete of the Year, Maren Meinert, a very U.S. centric list developed and serves as our finalists for REAL SPORTS 2004 Athlete of the Year.

STROKE OF PERFECTION

Dating back to 2001, Natalie Coughlin, a 22 year-old, has frequently been covered by REAL SPORTS. In 2001, Coughlin was the NCAA's swimmer of the year. In 2002, her outstanding National Championship included placing 1st in 100 freestyle, 1st in 200 freestyle, 1st in 100 backstroke and 1st in 100 butterfly. But Olympic Glory had not yet been felt.

For swimmers, opportunities to shine to a broad audience come infrequently, so many wondered after Coughlin just missed making the Olympic team in 2000 and when she became ill during the 2003 Championships, would Coughlin deliver in Athens.

To those who know her best, there was no doubt. With an individual Gold in the 100m backstroke in Athens, Coughlin laid claim to first place in the world rankings. Coughlin also won an individual Bronze in the 100m freestyle, a Gold in 4x200

freestyle relay and Silver in the 4x100 medley relay. Natalie's breadth and ability to finish first in both individual and team races at the collegiate, world and Olympic stage, speaks to her tremendous grit and talent.

FUTURE SHINES BRIGHT

Three days before Christmas, Abby Wambach picked up her second straight U.S. Soccer Chevrolet Female Athlete of the Year award, just recognition after being left out of FIFA's finalists. The award acknowledges her outstanding performances throughout the year and it comes on the heels of two additional US Soccer Federation awards, including "Best Late-Game Heroics" where Wambach delivered the final goal in overtime to lift the U.S. team to Olympic Gold,



coming ahead of Heather O'Reilly's goal which put the U.S. in the Olympic Final and Eddie Pope's tap-in against Mexico and "Best U.S. Soccer Goal" for her goal against Iceland, edging out Lindsay Tarpley's Olympic goal and Landon Donovan's goal against Panama.

Wambach presented a daunting challenge to opposing teams as she anchored the U.S. national team with 31 goals in her last 30 matches. Wambach also achieved a double-double in 2004 by adding 13 assists to her tally, demonstrating her commitment to team play.



WHEATIES BOX

It's has been twenty years, since Mary Lou Retton's smiling face graced the box of Wheaties. The event that captivated a national audience and inspired girls across the country has but one footnote – it was a boycotted Olympics.

Carly Patterson's Olympic All-Around Gold medal performance has no such footnote. But no mistaking it, there were reminiscent cold war antics played out by athletic foes.

This time around, the Russian diva known as Svetlana Khorkina was battling head-to-head with Patterson.

One might mistake the young sixteen year-old as any other high school student, given her 4'9" frame. But size means nothing as it relates to heart, determination, grit and confidence, all of which Patterson used to reach the ultimate international stage for women's sports.

Martha Karolyi, U.S. women's team coordinator, compared Carly Patterson to former Olympic stars Nadia Comaneci and Mary Lou Retton for USA Gymnastics and said: "She brings that extra touch to competition. Nadia had that quality and Mary Lou had it.". With her favorite apparatus being the Balance Beam, belief in possibilities seems to dominate Patterson's thinking.

We knew Patterson was an extraordinary athlete when at the 2003 World Championships she ignored what turned out to be fractures on both sides of her elbow and a damaged ligament, which ultimately required several hours of surgery, to continue competing and winning the team and individual All-Around. But her selection as the 2004 REAL SPORTS Athlete of the Year reflects her ability to embrace the pressure of a country focused on Olympic excellence. Patterson embraced the spotlight and delivered when in her sport, it matters most. [RS]

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4th Annual Most Important Moments in Sports

For photo and editorial coverage of every moment, join TEAM REAL SPORTS and receive the special MEMBERS-ONLY printed edition by mail!

#1 Passing of Soccer's Torch – On December 7, 2004, Mia Hamm, Julie Foudy and Joy Fawcett say goodbye to the sport they helped build.

#2 Carly Patterson Wins Olympic All-Around – On the world's biggest stage, this sixteen year-old delivered when it counted the most.



Mia Hamm take a corner in her final U.S. National team game. The U.S. defeated Mexico 5-0 on December 7.



Diana Taurasi and Barbara Turner celebrate UConn's three-peat on April 6.

#3 NCAA Women's Final Four – Event Spectacular – Ratings Bonanza – And oh yeah, UConn three-peated as National Champions.

#4 WNBA's First Commissioner Val Ackerman Retires – As the last pro-league standing from the barrage of leagues started after the 1996 Olympics, Ackerman has a place in history.

#5 Swimmers Seek Fame and Fortune – Amanda Beard chooses to pose for FHM, for many a clear distraction from her abilities as an Olympic swimmer.

#6 The Goods – Maria Sharapova proves blondes with racquets can win it all, Wimbledon, WTA Championships and the respect of the tennis community.

#7 Pure Dominance – USA Softball runs the table with a 9-0 run in Athens by allowing only one run to be scored against them.



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Youth and experience helped the U.S. Soccer team outlast Brazil in the Olympic Gold medal match.

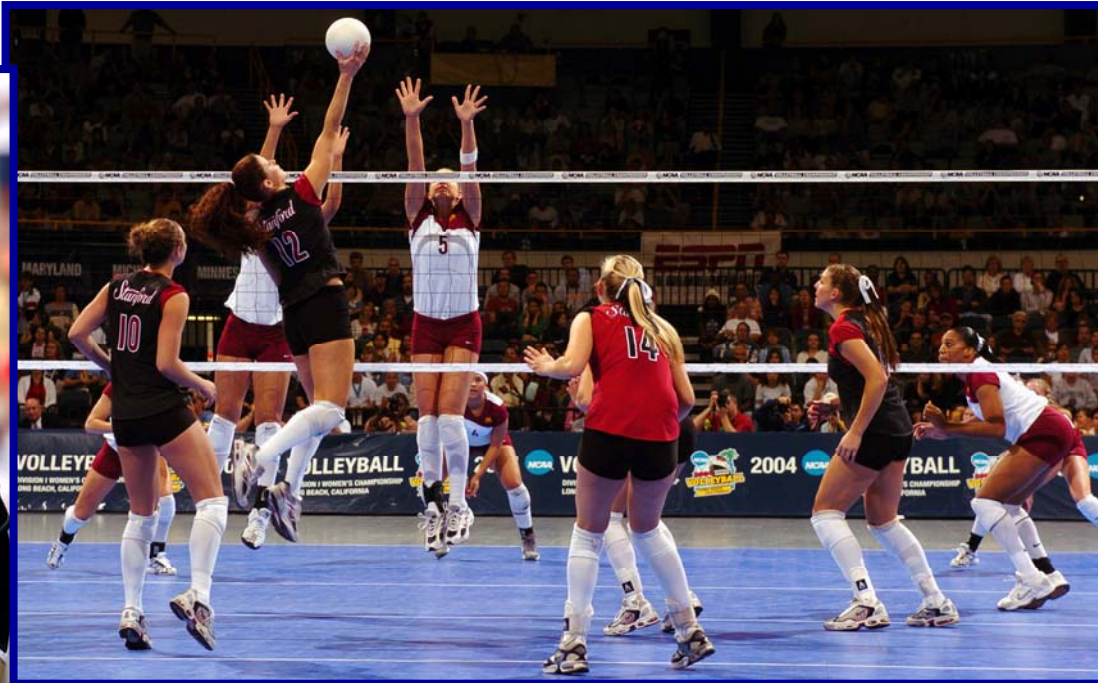
#8 U.S. Soccer Wins Gold – U.S. National Soccer team wills itself and outlasts the Brazilians to ensure the '91ers go out on top as Olympic Champions.

#9 One of the Boys – Annika Sorenstam's performance, including winning 10 of 20 tournaments entered, included a repeat invitation to the Skins Game.

#10 Challenges to Title IX Continue – Title IX has allowed female college sports to thrive, but high school issues continue, including the current Supreme Court review of Roderick Jackson's case. [RS]

Title IX's Power

College Competitions Continue to Thrive



Photos By – Clockwise
 Matt Brown; Kevin C.
 Cox; Bryan Terry;
 Larry French; center –
 Jamie Schwaberow,
 all © 2004 NCAA
 Photos.



National Championships – Clockwise
 Volleyball – Stanford defeats
 Minnesota 3-0 on Dec. 18; Soccer –
 Notre Dame defeats UCLA 4-3 on
 penalty kicks on Dec. 5; Softball –
 UCLA defeats Cal 3-1 on May 31;
 Lacrosse – Virginia defeats Princeton
 10-4 on May 23; and CENTER: Field
 Hockey – Wake Forest defeated
 Duke 3-0 on Nov. 21.

Their Commitment, Their Legacy... But Not Their Terms

Three 91ers say goodbye, but expectations were different.

By Michael Lewis

On a sunny, Sunday afternoon on July 10, 1999, some 90,125 fans crammed into the Rose Bowl to witness women's sports history as two great women's teams slugged it out during 120 minutes of scoreless soccer that was ultimately decided by a dramatic shootout.

Who can forget the image of Brandi Chastain -- forever immortalized in photos and magazine covers -- celebrating her winning penalty kick after taking off her jersey before a record national TV audience to watch a soccer game.

Fast forward to an un-southern California-like chilly, Wednesday, evening on Dec. 8, 2004 some 25 miles south of Pasadena to the Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif., where 15,549 fans in the 27,000-seat capacity stadium watched three living American soccer legends say goodbye to the beautiful game.

With veteran defender Joy Fawcett watching from the sidelines, Mia Hamm and Julie Foudy had their moments under the moonlight, walking off the field one last time late in the U.S.'s dominating 5-0 victory over Mexico.



In any other situation, history has shown that all the fuss about women's soccer is likely to fade into the background. But there is reason to believe this year it will be different.

REAL SPORTS magazine ran this image in its fall 1999 issue ... the sub-head spoke volumes for the expectations.

Can anyone remember watching live Hamm walking off the field wearing the jersey with the last name of her husband, Chicago Cubs shortstop Nomar Garciaparra?

If you don't, join the club. The game was played at 8 p.m. PST -- that's 11 p.m. in the east -- as most of the country was asleep, and it was shown on ESPN Classic, fourth in the cable network's pecking order. Sure, fans got an opportunity to read about the game on the internet or in their newspaper or watch highlights on TV.

But it was hardly the fitting send off for three women who helped make such an impact on the game and women's sports nationally and internationally.

The game was the final match of a 10-game Fan Celebration tour, as it was called. U.S. Soccer, contractually obligated to hold a tour if the U.S.



During the second-half of Hamm's last game, she had some fun by wearing a jersey special to her and Nomar.

won the Olympic gold medal, said it organized the games in only two weeks. The final game was sandwiched between two events booked well in advance -- MLS Cup (Nov. 14) and the NCAA Division I men's College Cup (Dec. 12-14) at the HDC, U.S. Soccer's training center.

"We think it is a wonderful way to celebrate the conclusion of these players' careers," U.S. Soccer spokesman Jim Moorhouse said.

Well, that depends on your point of view.

Hamm, Foudy and Fawcett wouldn't comment about it on the record.

But Carla Overbeck, co-captain of the 1999 world championship team, did.

"I think it's a shame," Overbeck told the San Diego Union-Tribune. "These are players who basically built women's soccer, not only here but around the world, and they're not doing anything extravagant for their final game. Everything that these women have done for soccer, they need to be recognized in something other than 8 o'clock on a Wednesday night.

"I just think it's unfortunate that the federation doesn't see the importance of sending them off with style and class. I mean, they've been playing for this team for 17 years. It's embarrassing."

What the generation of Hamm and company accomplished certainly wasn't embarrassing.

Have they left the game in better shape than when they began?

Without a doubt.

Remember, the 91ers and their comrades were forced to use hand-me-down uniforms from the men's team in the early years.

They went on to set a virtually unmatchable standard for soccer success with their international honors the past 14 years. That included two world championships (1991 and 1991) and a pair of disappointing third-place finishes (1995 and 2003), plus two Olympic gold medals (1996 and 2004) and a silver medal (2000).

In other words, the Americans are to women's soccer as the Brazilians are to the men's game.

They are expected to win. No excuses, please.

While the history is rich and glorious, it is the future of the women's game in the United States that concerns observers that raises the most questions.

The return of the Women's United Soccer Association is at least a year away. Former Yahoo! sports director Tonya Antonucci has been appointed CEO of Women's Soccer Initiative, a non-for-profit entity that will direct the league's relaunch efforts. She will work at a deliberate, but steady pace to make sure the new league won't fail.

As the year ended, many signs pointed to U.S. Soccer giving coach April Heinrichs a three-year contract extension through the 2008 Olympics. Her current deal ends in 2005.

"I think we are at a turning point right now," Fawcett said. "If there is no league, decisions need to be made as far as how much U.S. Soccer wants to put into it and continue to make women's soccer grow. I think that we can continue to be the best with the players that we have and the youth leagues that are out there today. Right now it could go either way. I am hoping that they continue to put a lot into it and continue to make it grow. It will be difficult if there is not a league, but it needs to be done to keep up with the rest of the world.

Hamm agreed. "Brazil has set a new standard for the rest of the world," she added. "Without a league we are going to have to lean on the federation a bit more. Hopefully we will be talking about a potential league next year or the year after where they do not have to bear most of the financial burden. Right now it's too critical not to make that type of commitment. They have set the standard for all other federations, and that has enabled us to get where we are."

Even with the great strides made, there is still a long way to go internationally. Take, for example, the embarrassing situation that transpired in the 2004 FIFA women's player of the year balloting by National Team coaches and captains.

Many seasoned observers of women's soccer felt that U.S. striker Abby Wambach, off a magnificent Olympic

performance (four goals in five games, including the gold-medal game-winner in extra-time) should have been FIFA player of the year.

In fact, Wambach, the runaway winner in U.S. Soccer's voting for women's player of the year (by fans, media and U.S. Soccer officials), incredibly did not make the final three on FIFA's list.

Germany's Birgit Prinz, Brazil's Marta and Hamm did.

Marta, is a spectacular 18-year-old who stood out in two international events -- the Olympics and the Women's Under-19 world championship (earning MVP honors in that) – who has a nice, long career ahead of her.

Hamm, 32, who was at the dusk of her career, obviously received votes on her reputation and career, not for her year's work as any educated observers could tell she was on her last legs in the Olympics.

Prinz, 27, the 2003 winner, earned the award again, although she faltered when it really counted on the world stage in the Olympic tournament. After burning China and frightening the rest of the 10-team tournament field with a fabulous four-goal performance, Prinz could only find the net but once in her four final games, which included a 2-1 semifinal loss to the Americans.

Regardless, the 24-year-old Wambach is poised to become the new face of American soccer. In contrast to Hamm, the reluctant superstar, the more outgoing Wambach enjoys talking and bantering with the media.

More important is her on-the-field production. She became only the second player in U.S. history to score more than 30 international goals in a year (Michelle Akers, to whom Wambach is compared, was the first with 39 goals in 26 games in 1991), finishing with 31 goals in 33 games. Her strike rate is the best for any woman in the world -- active or retired at 83 percent (44 goals in 53 appearances). Akers is the next highest ratio at 68.6 percent, thanks to 105 goals in 153 appearances (she had scored 85 goals in only 94 internationals through 1995 for a 90.4 rate before ailments slowed her down).

Prinz is at 64.5. Hamm (world-record 158 goals in 273 games), is at 57.8.

While 2005 would be a perfect time to see if some of the youngsters could swim in international waters, especially since there is no pro league to get in the way, the federation most likely will pull back.

With the next major tournament a good two years away, the American women were expected to have a light schedule this year with a probable January camp and Algarve Cup in Portugal in March with some international friendlies sprinkled in.

Assuming Heinrichs is retained, it will be intriguing to see how well she gets along with returning veterans Chastain, who led a revolt against the coach last year (representing the 91ers, she went to U.S. Soccer president Dr. Bob Contiguglia and asked him to fire Heinrichs; he didn't) and Kristine Lilly.

Ironically, if Heinrichs doesn't return and U.S. Soccer hired Santa Clara University women's coach Jerry Smith as the new coach, Chastain would most likely retire because Smith, who is married to Brandi, said he would never coach his wife in a serious competition.

Lilly, 33, who has a record 289 international appearances and is only 11 shy of unprecedented 300 caps, isn't just hanging on. She played some of her best soccer in the Olympics, motoring up and down the left wing (including deep into extra time in the semifinals and gold-medal match) while scoring three goals, second only on the team to Wambach.

But there are many questions on whether Heinrichs is the answer to move the young and promising U.S. team with the likes of Heather O'Reilly, Lindsay Tarpley and Shannon Boxx up to the next level, especially after Brazil's brilliant silver medal performance in Greece.

Heinrichs' critics question her tactical knowledge of the game. Instead of taking advantage of the players' skills, she has them use their athleticism to

play a more physical game, which might not be good enough at the 2007 Women's World Cup or the 2008 Summer Olympics. Both events are in China.

One player unlikely to be back is the talented and crafty Tiffeny Milbrett. Stuck on 99 international goals, Milbrett has refused to play unless there is a new coach.

In an e-mail to this writer, Milbrett said she saw "myself for sure returning to the National Team if there is a change of coach and if those changes are going to be right for me. My decision to leave the team was never because I didn't want to play soccer. I can't wait to be able to play again.

"I don't know why all this emphasis is placed on the coach as being the one who takes them to the gold. A coach can be in charge of a team that wins gold but, it's also the coach that can make the players unhappy and in that situation you have to seriously evaluate that."

We likely saw a glimpse of the future in Athens. In the gold medal match, the Brazilians were the better team, at

times dribbling circles around the Americans, who had several veterans hanging on for dear life in the waning minutes before Wambach's 11th-hour heroics.

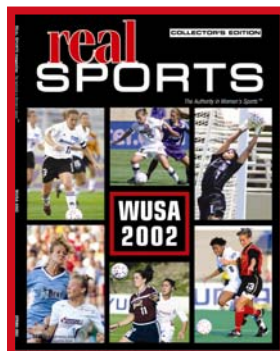
The difference was the U.S.'s grit, fortitude and ability to know how to win, thanks to the presence of Hamm, Fouady and Fawcett. That's not to say the Americans can't win without them. It will be far more difficult not only against Brazil, but the rest of the world as well.

Once the talent-laden Brazilians figure out how to get over the hump, they could be difficult to stop.

That will be just one of the U.S. team's great challenges over the next decade – striving to be creative to keep ahead of everyone else – or else. [RS]

Michael Lewis, who covers soccer for the New York Daily News, has followed the U.S. Women's National Team since 1991 and covered the 1999 and 2003 Women's World Cups and the team at the 1996, 2000 and 2004 Summer Olympics. He can be reached at SoccerWriter516@aol.com.

Past REAL SPORTS Covers Featuring the '91ers



Future for the Fab Three

In their own words

So, what's in store for the Terrific Three of the Fab Five -- Mia Hamm, Julie Foudy and Joy Fawcett -- now that they have hung up their competitive soccer boots for good?

After stumping for John Kerry last fall, someone mentioned a potential political career for Foudy, who laughed it off.

Still, Foudy will remain competitive, no matter what path she pursues.

"It really is an interesting transition," she said. "I go out for a jog, and all of my life I have thought I can't wait to just go out for a jog instead of having to push myself, and I find myself pushing myself. I look forward to channeling that competitiveness into other passions.

"I have done a lot of work with the Women's Sports Foundation and other advocacy issues, so I will continue to (do) that and some not-for-profit work and hopefully someday have a real job where I can bring this competitiveness. I will continue to support the game and do camps and all that kind of stuff. There are a lot of areas where that will come in handy."

Hamm plans to move to Chicago to be with her husband and delve into the Mia Hamm Foundation, which raises funds and awareness for bone marrow transplant patients (her brother Garrett died of bone marrow disease in 1997) and continues the growth in opportunities for young women in sports.



"I haven't been able to be as involved as I would like to be so I can obviously commit more to that," she said. "I have to see what is out there, and not commit to everything at the beginning. I hope my golf game improves, I have family who I haven't been able to spend a lot of time with, and obviously my husband. . . . It's nothing but exciting, and I am just looking forward to it."

Fawcett, who is recovering from back surgery, is considering opening up a pizzeria with good friend and former National Team teammate Shannon MacMillan. Fawcett, who coached the women's team at UCLA before she started a family, is also contemplating a return to that someday.

"Just watching my daughter play, it's been hard with my back right now not being able to help her team out and wanting too," she said. "I am sure I will get back into it eventually, but not for a little while. I am going to put my extra energy into my family right now and see what comes next." [RS]

Compiled by Michael Lewis.

Creating a Revival

Players push for return of women's pro soccer

Tonya Antonucci faces one huge challenge: Revive the Women's United Soccer Association and make sure it will be around for years.

Antonucci, CEO of Women's Soccer Initiative, Inc., a not-for-profit entity that will direct the relaunch of the WUSA, hasn't set any target dates, say 2006, as to when the league will return.

Her goal is "to create a long-term sustainable business model for the relaunch of the league and create something that would bring interested investors and sponsors together to make this happen in a time frame that is not driven by artificial deadlines when it has to be launched."

On the eve of the 2003 Women's World Cup, the WUSA suspended operations, claiming it had lost \$16 million after three years and had a lack of corporate sponsorships.

"I am an optimist and I think there is a bright side to even losing a league," former U.S. national team player Julie Foudy said. "There's three years of great lessons learned. . . . I understand that America responds to big events, but I still think that there is a fan base out there for a league. We clearly made some huge mistakes, but there is an opportunity for another go around."

Antonucci's biggest challenge?

By Michael Lewis

"How to do you cut a bunch of costs?" she asked. "Overspending was one of the big issues in the past league. . . . It is to do it in a way that is going to put us in a position to grow and to be successful as a major sports league in the future.

"If you start out the gate as a minor league, you'd have to accept and be ready for how long for you to grow out of that and could you grow out of that."

The WUSA had franchises in Atlanta, Boston, New York, Raleigh, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Jose and Washington. Antonucci did not know which cities would return.

"It's pre-mature to say," she said. "The actual cities and markets we are doing some research and studies against a set list of criteria of what will make a successful city/market. One of the components is investor-owner interest in a market. We are also looking at competition in that market. Does the demographic that we're targeting in that market exist?"

Last year the WUSA held festivals in Blaine, Minn. and Carson, Calif. to keep interest in the league alive. [RS]

Eight is Enough

Val Ackerman Moves On

By Mel Greenberg

Unlike the proverbial cat that has nine lives, WNBA president Val Ackerman decided in late October after another successful summer that eight seasons were enough to be at the helm of the women's pro basketball league.

Many expect the next president to come from the business sector of either the NBA or WNBA infrastructure. Ackerman, however, mentioned during her press conference in the fall to discuss her departure that it was



Scott Creelman, president of Spalding, Diana Taurasi, Jack Ward, Chairman and CEO Russell Corp., David Stern and Val Ackerman celebrate on Dec. 15 the announcement of the largest equipment deal in sports.

Although the only president the league has known since its inception has targeted Feb. 1 for her departure, Ackerman may be around a while longer until her successor is chosen.

In fact, the former academic all-American who graduated Virginia in 1981 is in charge of the committee that will choose her successor.

important for the head of the WNBA to have some knowledge of the women's game.

"After all, when I sit there on a given night, I know when I'm watching a good game and when I'm not," Ackerman said.

Photo credit: © 2004 NBAE by Jennifer E. Pottheiser/NBAE via Getty Images

Her main reason for leaving is it's time to give more attention to her own family where Ackerman has two young daughters (Emily, almost 12, and Sally, almost 10), entering their formative years.

However, to hear the outgoing league president talk about reaction in the family to her decision, apparently her daughters and husband, Charlie Rappaport, have gotten used to the multitude of nights Ackerman has been on the run, crisscrossing the nation, extolling the virtues of WNBA to potential sponsors, team owners, TV executives, and various business groups.

"When I told my oldest daughter what I was going to do, she stammered and said back to me, 'You're going to do what???' Ackerman said with a grin at a recent lunch in New York City. She also mentioned that she still expects to be involved with the WNBA's survival.

"I'll still be around in a lot of little ways that may not be that noticeable," Ackerman said with a sly grin.

Some think that her exit now is a sign the league may not last much longer.

That doesn't seem to be the situation, however.

A collective bargaining agreement with the players association remains in place, which guarantees to contain costs in salary levels.

It's not that Ackerman wants players to be underpaid. She envisions that as sponsorships and revenue increase along with income from other business streams, the funding will eventually be in place to improve the players' financial situations.

Six of the 13 teams have been said to have made a small profit this season, while losses of the others have been said to be manageable.

"This is a very low cost business," Detroit Shock coach Bill Laimbeer said last summer about the WNBA's financial health.

Ackerman has consistently predicted with confidence that the WNBA will be totally profitable by 2007.

And after shrinking from a total of 16 franchises several years ago to 13, the WNBA membership chart is about to reverse itself with Chicago soon expected to be announced as an expansion team for the 2006 season. That's a Midwest market long desired by the league. Reportedly, the owner will not be the NBA's Chicago Bull.

Ackerman, a native of Pennington, N.J., who also was a field hockey sensation at Hopewell High, was an unknown to most of the public when NBA Commissioner David Stern announced her appointment to the presidency in August of 1996.

Because the league was launched by Stern and the NBA, that is where the league's survival has always been credited.

Because of the NBA's sponsorship affiliations – a recent mega deal was negotiated in early December with equipment giants Spalding and Russell – along with its TV muscle for support, the combination has enabled the WNBA to last the longest of any women's professional sports leagues, including previous attempts in basketball, as well as softball, and, in recent years, soccer.

But to hear those involved tell it, Stern and his owners may have pushed the launch button, but Ackerman has been the pilot that has kept the WNBA aloft.

“We're losing our lifeline (Ackerman),” said three-time Olympian Dawn Staley, who plays for the Charlotte Sting and also coaches the Temple women at the collegiate level in the winter.

“She has fought the battles to make sure we have a professional league in this country. We may be losing our voice, but, hopefully, she has laid the foundation for the WNBA to last forever.”

Houston Comets coach Van Chancellor, who led the Olympians in Athens and is the only one of the original eight coaches still on the WNBA sidelines, was even more forceful.

“Every player, every coach, every worker anywhere who has been in the league for any length of time can forever be grateful to Val Ackerman,” Chancellor said. “Without her, there would be no WNBA.”

“David Stern and the owners many have started the WNBA, but she had the foresight, and vision, and will to make it work,” Chancellor added.

Even longtime agent Bruce Levy found time to be complimentary when interviewed by the Sports Business Daily.

“I can't imagine anyone replacing her,” Levy said. “It's no secret that I've had my battles with her over the years, but I've come to see she is working not only for [NBA commissioner] David Stern and the NBA, but for women's basketball overall.”

“And someday, I think people will see the WNBA as the only successful pro sports league launched relatively recently,” Levy added.

The following is the statement that ran in many places when Ackerman was named to head the league:

“Commissioner David Stern announced yesterday that he has charged Val Ackerman with guiding the Women's National Basketball Association.

“First on the agenda will be choosing eight NBA cities to be sites for the teams, a task Ackerman hopes to have completed by sometime in early October. The season will last 10 weeks in the summer with each team playing 28 games, followed by a four-team playoff and league championship.”

By last summer, the WNBA was able to endure a month-long break for the Olympics when the league draws its largest crowds and maintain interest because of the competitiveness of the two conference races, especially in the East.

The playoffs were three-tiered, best-of-three affairs. This summer the championship final will grow to a best-of-five series and if it's anything like the Seattle-Connecticut final, the WNBA will be better for it.

Ackerman has built her reputation through the years. She was well known to the collegiate crowd prior to her WNBA appointment because of the NBA's sponsorship of the annual party of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) during the NCAA Women's Final Four.

She also was known to the NBA business types because of her previous position as a staff attorney when she was hired in 1988. Along the way she had been promoted to several other positions on the business side of the powerful men's pro league.

Ackerman was heavily involved in USA Basketball activities and sought ways to increase opportunities on the women's side. She was a prime proponent of the development of the year-long tour of the Women's Senior National Team leading to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

At the same time that Ackerman was seeking ways to produce a pro league

off a successful gold medal run in Atlanta, another group on the West Coast headed by Gary Cavalli and Anne Cribbs was also seeking to launch a pro operation, called the American Basketball League.

The ABL plan was to operate in the winter. Ackerman had an idea that seemed absurd to many at the time – play in the summer to maximize TV opportunities.

With the WNBA heavily supported by the NBA's machine, it was obvious which of the two would last in the battle with each other, even though most of the superior talent initially went to the ABL because of higher salaries and the winter schedule.

In fact, if persons didn't know who Ackerman was, the publicity blitz with the "We Got Next" campaign that led to the start of the WNBA's first summer in 1997 quickly made her a familiar face when she walked into a room.

"Obviously, they're still around and we're not, so they probably had a good idea," Cavalli said recently.

Until several years ago, the WNBA mantra was "Our cities, our arenas," as in NBA towns whether or not the women's game had a viable fan base in those locations.

The ABL plan was to go where the women's game was popular.

Initially, a place like Houston seemed to be a weird choice for a WNBA

franchise. But with Chancellor at the helm, the Comets went on to win the first four league crowns with Sheryl Swoopes, Tina Thompson, and Cynthia Cooper leading the way in front of sellout crowds, regularly.

Of course, the philosophy meant that Connecticut, which had a popular team in the ABL, need not come calling.

But as the novelty of the WNBA wore off among the man in the street, Ackerman showed the ability to adopt and keep the league moving forward. The collapse of the ABL brought the best of its talent into the WNBA and after several seasons, more teams became competitive. Furthermore, the talent from the collegiate classes continued to make impacts to the point that last year's senior class was a gold mine for teams across the board.

Just this week, New York Liberty general manager Carol Blazejowski, a hall of famer, gawked as Rutgers' freshmen help slay Tennessee and remarked, "This bodes well for the future of our league."

Several years ago, the WNBA business model changed. NBA teams who didn't want sister operations were allowed to dispense of them. Although it meant the collapse of three

franchises over a two-year period, the WNBA decided to open up activity to non-NBA cities and ownerships.

In a move seemed controversial at the time, the Mohegan Indian Tribe was awarded a team in Connecticut to play at its vast casino complex.

The former Orlando Miracle franchise moved North and eventually caught on with the University of Connecticut fans as the Connecticut Sun advanced to the Eastern Finals in 2003. This season, a much younger roster advanced to the overall finals and extended the favored Seattle Storm to the last game. Sellout crowds were at all three games.

So this is where Ackerman departs. The challenge for her successor is to add sponsorships, keep the fan base growing, and keep the players involved in many aspects of the WNBA's vision.

As she noted, "Now we have little girls who can dream of being in the WNBA before they are teenagers."

As long as those dreams can be turned into realities, then the future of the WNBA will be nightmare-free. [RS]



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Title Storms

Olympic Foes – Professional Mates

By Mel Greenberg

A short time ago in an ancient nation far away, they stood on opposing sides that August night in Athens, Greece, one step left to obtain gold and glory for their respective nations.

The WNBA's Seattle Storm coach Anne Donovan, a former Olympic star

Ironically, the United States faced a serious challenge in the gold medal game that night from Australia, a rising power nearly the equal of the Americans because of a sensation in center-forward Lauren Jackson.

The one-time teenager who had been tagged as a can't-miss professional



Australia's and Seattle Storm's Lauren Jackson seeks to defend USA's Tina Thompson in the Gold medal Olympic game. The U.S. defeated Australia 74-63.

in her own right, was now on the sidelines as an assistant to Van Chancellor helping to steer the United States in quest of a third straight Olympic triumph.

One member of the American squad was reserve point guard Sue Bird, the former Connecticut sensation who had been one of the keys Donovan relied upon to grow the Storm into a WNBA contender.

prospect, Jackson also happened to be the other major piece of the Seattle attack. In a closely-fought game, the U.S. prevailed.

Then it was time for the trio to reunite, Donovan coached her two stars, who had been previous No. 1 draft picks, as the WNBA resumed its regular season business and moved on to the playoffs. The Storm struggled in the closing weeks.

Photo credit: © 2004 Getty Images / Jamie Squire/Staff

Once the playoffs began, however, Seattle was poised to realize its promise as an elite squad.

The Storm swept the Minnesota Lynx, 2-0, in the opening round of the Western Conference series, the first time Seattle had ever won even a single game in the postseason.

It was an intriguing match-up because a major trade the previous winter saw Donovan deal the sixth overall draft pick and Amanda Lassiter to the Lynx for Sheri Sam and Jannell Burse. She also picked up Betty Lennox from the Cleveland roster in the dispersal draft of the Rockers.

Meanwhile, the Sacramento Monarchs were ending years of frustration in the other Western match up by dispatching the former two-time champion Los Angeles Sparks. It was the first time that Lisa Leslie and teammates had not advanced to the Western finals.

Seattle lost a tough overtime game, 74-72, in Sacramento in the conference finals before coming back to sweep two games at home and land in the WNBA finals.

When the Storm got there, they found an opponent with its own magic, the Connecticut Sun, which had been picked sixth in the East by many when the season began.

It took a while for the Sun to catch on after being formerly known as the

Orlando Miracle. But by last summer, the idea of playing home games in a casino complex was no longer an issue. And suddenly, people in the Nutmeg State had two teams to cheer along with the powerful University of Connecticut program.

A sellout crowd in the Mohegan Sun Arena saw the Sun take the first game of the series against the favored Storm, which had been considered an endangered franchise.

In a thrilling game two as the series moved to the Emerald City, a sellout crowd of more than 17,000 saw Seattle hold off the Sun at the finish as Lennox began to shine. The former Louisiana Tech star repeated her performance in the deciding game and the Starbucks crowd made the Storm the toast of the Northwest with its 74-60 triumph.

Donovan also became the first female coach to win a title after Chancellor led Houston to the first four and Michael Cooper, now the NBA coach of Denver, did the same with Los Angeles, and Bill Laimbeer followed with Detroit.

Jackson praised the 6-8 Donovan as "the best coach I ever had."

Bird also talked about the success of former UConn players in the league.

"You don't just learn to win, you learn how to win," she said of her alma mater.

COLLEGE'S INFLUENCE – CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Winning is something the Huskies did again over arch-rival Tennessee with a third-straight NCAA title and fifth overall as Diana Taurasi finished her career triumphantly. She went on to become the WNBA rookie of the year with the Phoenix Mercury.

No question, the WNBA's survival has enabled school-age girls to dream of a pro career. More dreamers mean more talent, and more talent means the wealth can be spread among the many instead of just a few schools.

Which brings us to a tantalizing moment as the calendar spins to 2005.

When Seattle followed the Detroit Shock, another former endangered species now with a WNBA title, the victory showed that the league is more balanced and the days of the two-team domination of Houston, which didn't make the playoffs for the first time, and Los Angeles are in the history books.

But what about the grip Connecticut and Tennessee has had over the collegiate game?

That also has loosened based on what happened in late December as both teams lost badly on the same night. The Vols lost at Rutgers and the Huskies lost at home to Michigan State.

Ten years ago, the two ignited the collegiate game with their first



Sheri Sam and Sue Bird celebrate a 74-60 win as the Seattle Storm clinch their first WNBA title 2-1 over the Connecticut Sun.

meeting in Storrs, won by Connecticut. Since then, Tennessee coach Pat Summitt and Huskies coach Geno Auriemma have seen their teams reside most of the decade in the top five of the weekly rankings. However, when the two meet in Hartford on January 8, neither will be in the Top 10.

Whether total parity truly exists is still questionable. But to steal from the discussion of Title IX legislation in the early 1970s, the collegiate crowd can set their sights on the Final Four in Indianapolis this April and know that the recent upsets signifies that "opportunity" has truly arrived.

[RS]



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