

“Betting on Women”: A Feminist Political Economic Critique of Ideological Sports Narratives Surrounding the WNBA

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Abstract

Using a critical political-economic approach informed by socialist feminist methodology, this analysis enriches previous research concerning sports media representations of women’s basketball. Prioritizing the narrative material provided by those who have experienced the NBAs unequal treatment of its women’s league through the establishment of what was deemed the “market rate” for such a product allows one to critique the secondary status of women’s sports and its normalization. Influenced by Hemmings’ historiographic approach to feminist storytelling, I contend that narratives can be central to critical political-economic analysis by comparing the contested politics of the present with the supposed “truth of the past”. An example of this insight emerges from the stories of Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi detailed in *ESPN’s 30 for 30* podcast episode titled “The Spy Who Signed Me.” By extending the focus of political economic analysis into realms of subjective, material experience, this approach seeks to empower counter-resistance narratives created by professional WNBA players while also acknowledging the structural barriers that limit their agency at meso and micro levels. While the experiences shared by Bird and Taurasi are unique to the specific historical circumstances in which they occurred, they are critical in challenging patriarchal narratives concerning the WNBA within mainstream U.S. sports media.

It is common knowledge amongst fans of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) that the league’s relatively short season (compared to other professional leagues) delivers only a part-time job for many players. The WNBA itself is rather open about this fact, featuring a page on their official website displaying a list of WNBA players and the teams that they play for overseas. While it may seem that U.S. players are dedicated to their domestic league, recent cases of poor treatment and low pay have jeopardized the WNBA’s status as each player’s primary employer. At the beginning of the 2015 WNBA season, Diana Taurasi, a former recipient of the WNBA league’s most valuable player (MVP) and star player for the Phoenix Mercury, notified her team that she would be sitting out the entire season at the request of UMMC Ekaterinburg (UMMC), the Russian Premier League team she had been under contract with at the time. While Taurasi had been paid the

WNBA league maximum in 2014—\$107,000 in total—her deal with UMMC paid her \$1.5 million (Fagan, 2015, para. 5). What was particularly notable about Taurasi's situation was not the offer itself—which many WNBA players have received and declined—but rather the fact that she was the first to accept such an offer from an overseas team (Fagan, 2015). However, after a decade of physically rigorous year-long playing schedules with short to non-existent off-seasons, Taurasi announced that she would not play in the upcoming WNBA season because of the physical burden commonly experienced by female basketball athletes: “If there is one thing women basketball players rarely get to do, it is make sure they can improve on their weaknesses because of the year-round grind” (Fagan, 2015, para. 32). *B/R Mag* reporter Fader (2018) observed how in her interviews with multiple WNBA players “over and over, they use the word ‘product.’ Product, product, product. But the more they use that word, the more it makes one forget that they are people” (para. 19-20).

The 2019 WNBA season saw various superstars such as Breanna Stewart, Sue Bird, Angel McCoughtry and the aforementioned Taurasi side-lined with injuries (Spruill, 2019). While emphasis on the physical strain of overseas play dominated sports media narratives, stories such as the injury experiences of the then current Aces player Kayla McBride suggested that players feared losing the potential for international employment if identified as injury prone. Despite being ranked as the third overall pick in the 2014 WNBA draft, McBride only made \$48,000 in her rookie season (Fader, 2018). While playing in Hungary in 2015, McBride broke her foot and found herself unable to pay for surgery and feared telling her team at the risk of being cut. After getting surgery for her foot in February, she had two months of recovery before having to compete in the 2015 WNBA season beginning in April. For McBride, the rush to return did not primarily come from a desire to aid her WNBA team. Rather, it reflected the need to assure international teams that she was worthy of being offered a contract once the WNBA season concluded. McBride notes how her swift return led to another broken foot injury in 2016, this time costing her of her overseas salary. However, playing internationally is not an option for all players, especially given the oppressive working and living conditions in various destinations. Former WNBA player Cappie Pontdexter, who had played in Russia, Turkey and Australia describes how: “The overseas jobs aren't the same. It could not be a lot of money. It could be horrible living situations” (Fader, 2018, para. 36). Indeed, many players have expressed the desire to remain in the U.S. year-round if financial security could be guaranteed. While former National Basketball Association (NBA) Commissioner Stern organized the WNBA with the intention of bringing female athletes back to the U.S, the long-held secondary status of the WNBA (in relation to the NBA and other sports leagues) within mainstream sports media undermines this supposed goal (Townes, 2019).

Perhaps the most prominent debate highlighting the secondary treatment of professional female athletes in the United States, including WNBA players, centers around pay inequity. Comparing both of the top paid players in the NBA and WNBA reveals the wide gap in salaries between the two leagues. Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry, the NBA's highest salary-earner, received \$34 million dollars for the 2018–2019 NBA season, dwarfing the WNBA's top earner, Phoenix Mercury's DeWanna Bonner, who earned \$127,500 for the 2019 season (Yuille, 2019). Comparisons of salary averages between leagues further illustrates the large gendered pay gap within professional basketball. Players in the NBA earned an average of \$7.7 million for the 2019–2020 season, while WNBA contracts for the 2019 season averaged around \$116,000 (Huddleston, 2019; Young, 2020). Additionally, recent policies, such as the NBA's rising of the maximum NBA G-League salary to \$125,000 for elite-level male high school prospects, suggest that market-based

determinations are not equally applied to each league (Fader, 2018). Thus, further analysis of the capitalist logic that is mobilized to subjugate marginalized sporting laborers, both nationally and internationally, is required if we wish to critique the economic arguments and biological assumptions which are normalized within U.S. sporting discourses. Doing so will enable reform of the ways in which athletic performance and its rewards are conventionally measured.

This article highlights two specific socioeconomic issues concerning WNBA players: the apparent justification for their low pay through biased economic measures and television ratings; and the necessity for WNBA players to sell their labor power overseas in culturally unfamiliar places such as Russia. In addressing these issues, I will explore the normalization of women's secondary status within the culture and coverage of mainstream sports media. Discussion will be set within the history of professional women's basketball in the United States. Here, the recent gains made by the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) in their settlement with the NBA in January 2020 will be acknowledged. Conclusions will reflect upon the recent decision to restart the WNBA season in late 2020 amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

Within this article, I utilize a socialist feminist political economic perspective to critique how mainstream U.S. sports news media justify the secondary status of women's sports. In particular, the overseas playing experiences of the aforementioned WNBA players, Diana Taurasi and Sue Bird, will be considered. Media reports of their decision to play internationally in Russia, based upon interviews for an *ESPN 30 for 30* podcast titled "The Spy Who Signed Me," [1] illustrates the allure of overseas play for WNBA athletes. Detailing their experiences playing for Spartak Moscow's women's basketball team during the late 2000s and early 2010s, both WNBA superstars noted that economic and social treatment, specifically by the team's owner, exceeded the compensation and attention received from playing professionally within the United States. I will contextualize these narratives within a feminist storytelling epistemology that highlights the importance of subjective evaluation and recognizes how mainstream media coverage of women's sports such as the WNBA has undermined the experiences of female athletes within the United States. Furthering our investigative lens to consider the experiences of WNBA players will not only critique gendered discourses with the authoritative veneer of "economic" validity, it will also help combat oppressive messaging from interests that protect the financial exploitation of professional female athletes.

Narratives justifying the secondary status of women in U.S. sports media

The narrative battle over representation cannot be discounted; it entails the articulation of cultural codes through media texts that in turn influence how we perceive and assign meaning to things. Sports media in particular have been identified as "one site where patriarchal cultural hegemony is being challenged" in relation to traditional understandings of the "role of sport in the reinforcement of common-sense ideologies which assert the superiority of men" (Hall, 1985: 110-111; see also Whitson, 1986). Indeed, given the history of marginalization faced by WNBA players (and other professional female athletes), they are all too familiar with the arguments used to demean their efforts. With her declaration to strike, Ogwumike (2018) foreshadowed the common logic that was used to dismiss the WNBPA's demands: "They'll say it's just 'economics'" (para: 14). While the struggle over equal pay is perhaps a long and arduous path, Hall (2013) highlights that cultural meanings are never "fixed" and are open to changing societal conventions.

In this context, Hemmings' (2005) historiographic approach to feminist storytelling can be a central contributor to critical political economy analysis. While the assumed goal of most historical work is to construct an accurate representation of past events, Hemmings (2005) combines history "with the practice of genealogy" which "has proven particularly amenable to feminist and queer work seeking to emphasize that all history takes place in the present, as we make and remake stories about the past to enable a particular present to gain legitimacy" (118). By expanding political-economic analysis into realms of subjective experience, this approach gives force to counter narratives created by professional WNBA players while also acknowledging the structural barriers limiting the agency of such athletes. To this end, the dominant narrative presented by the NBA—that of the WNBA's unprofitability and unpopularity—must be detailed in order to situate the personal accounts of WNBA players within this dominant framework of meaning.

Exposing the marginalizations inherent in television ratings and analytical statistics can only be constructed through locating alternative forms of underappreciated or neglected value. Thus, from a socialist-feminist perspective, examining the relationship between the NBA and WNBA goes beyond comparisons of salary or athletic ability. Berri (2019) extensively details the similarities between the early NBA and WNBA, specifically regarding team instability, and even notes that the WNBA is growing faster than the NBA did at an earlier stage. However, it would be more fruitful to critique how traditional statistical or economic metrics are developed to favor capitalist interests and to naturalize the structured superiority of male sporting performance (Kane, 1995; Messner, 1988). One such example of an objective measure often invoked to justify the low pay of professional female athletes is that of television ratings. However, as Meehan (2002) observes: "The political economy of ratings...demonstrated the key role played by the market for commodity ratings and traced the structural forces that constructed ratings as truly *manufactured* commodities whose content depended on changing power relations within that market" (215). Indeed, rating technology was rooted in observing and locating the interests of the advertiser's valued audience: wealthy white men. Another use of so-called objective measures has been outlined by Messner (1988): "the fact that major sports are organized around the most extreme potentialities of the male body" enables oppressive conditions in which "sports media can employ statistics as objective measures of performance" to argue that women are not as popular or good as men in sporting endeavors (p. 206).

Toward a socialist feminist political economy of communication in sport

As tempting as it may be to undertake the battle against masculine hegemony in sports by utilizing traditional quantitative measures of merit, socialist feminist scholarship offers avenues through which to recognize the embodied experience of women athletes within the context of "colonizing knowledges" (Smith, 1999). Jaggar (1983) has noted that a goal of socialist feminism is to investigate the subordination of women in relation to "types of productive activity not ordinarily considered economic" (139). In this respect, popular sports media narratives centering around male dominance and superiority marginalize stories detailing women's accomplishment in sports.

Within a socialist feminist framework, political-economic considerations are brought to the forefront in analyzing the social relationships of activities that often get neglected within "traditional" methods of economic accounting and popular media narratives. Steeves and Wasko (2002) highlight how socialist and Marxist thought are central to locating and combating the structural forces reinforcing the secondary status of women: "Feminists influenced by Marx and

Engels agree that a historical understanding of the capitalist mode of production and the accompanying class structure help explains women's oppression and suggests a solution as well" (22). For example, in her seminal book *If Women Counted* (1988), Waring questioned the systematic calculating of national accounts and exposed how economic tools such as gross domestic product neglected the labor of unpaid women and underestimated or ignored the productive contributions of nature-based resources. From this insight, it can be argued that attempted alterations of economic and statistical measures determining the "market value" of female athletic labor should be informed by the unique material experiences of those who have been historically categorized by social scientific systems (Smith, 1999).

McDonald and Birrell (1999) note how stories can operate as political and cultural tools: "Narratives matter because they do ideological work which has material consequences. And counter-narratives matter because they offer resistant visions while creating spaces for the mobilization of political action" (295). Regarding the importance of storytelling in critical feminist methodologies, rich narratives can holistically acknowledge the unavoidable reality that every personal account will "have multiple subjectivities that require levels of negotiation" requiring "a need for interdisciplinary research to understand the difference forces that inform our decisions" (Riordan, 2002: 10). Indeed, there has been historical tension between Marxist, class-based scholarship and feminist, gender-based scholarship, specifically with regard to each orientation's identification of the "primary social division of concern" (Steeves and Wasko, 2002: 19). Given the former's emphasis on labor-related exploitation and political oppression, women have often felt that their experiences were excluded or neglected by economic analysis (Riordan, 2002). For example, legal and economic scholarship has examined structural aspects of pay inequity between NBA and WNBA players, but such work does not consider the experiences that are created as a result of unequal societal conditions within sporting industries (Berri, 2019; Ettienne, 2019). Despite reductive tendencies, economic and legal analyses provide meaningful insight and resources for advocacy in the fight to combat the exploitation of female athletes. However, the study of female athletic labor (including media representations) requires a theoretical perspective which can encompass gender (and other identity-based subjectivities) within its analysis while also acknowledging the financial imperatives that shape the differential treatment of male and female athletes.

While recognizing the importance of class-based subjectivity, socialist feminism refuses to discount marginalized identities (such as gender, sexuality, or race) as a secondary influence of oppression in relation to an individual's economic status. According to Jaggar (1983), socialist feminists "believe that an individual's experiences are shaped by her class, race, and nationality" (134). She further notes how socialist feminism disregards debates about locating the "more fundamental" source of oppression between social categories in favor of identifying "a theoretical account of these different types of oppression and the relation between them with a view to ending them all" (Jaggar, 1983: 134). Instead of assuming that class-based discrimination can be a catch-all explanation for each embodied experience, specific investigations must follow once a new text or setting becomes the subject of research interest. Without contextualizing economic observations within pre-existing arrangements of social power, explanations risk underestimating the inequalities created by systems of patriarchy, white supremacy along with capitalism. Typically, as Steeves and Wasko (2002) explain, political-economic approaches "include both economic *and* political analysis, with methods drawn from history, economics, sociology, and political science" (19). With regard to the WNBA, investigating justifications for pay must go beyond simply looking at

television ratings or comparative numerical figures to consider historical and structural factors which have enabled the relatively poor treatment of WNBA players (and female athletes in general).

Feminist sport narratives within critical political economic critique

Critical political economy is holistic in nature; researchers view “the economy as interrelated with political, social and cultural life, rather than as a separate domain” (Hardy, 2014: 9). Murdock and Golding (2005) argue that political economists “are centrally concerned with the balance between private enterprise and public intervention,” particularly the power relationships determining the private and public distribution of resources (p. 61). Political-economic approaches also seek to engage with “basic moral questions of justice, equity, and the public good” as opposed to profit-oriented “technical issues of efficiency” (Murdock and Golding, 2005: 61). Synthesizing feminist storytelling methodology with a critical political economic critique of female athlete income status offers an opportunity to “move from an emphasis on *things* (such as low pay, gender violence, and female illiteracy) to *words*, including both verbal and visual symbols in texts” (Barrett, 1992; Steeves and Wasko, 2002: 23-24). Additionally, the historical basis of political economic inquiry provides a contextual setting for analyzing narratives and revealing “the unexamined stories of attempts to build alternatives to the dominant commercial system that fed into wider resistance movements in society” (Mosco, 2009: 9). Investigating personal testimonies within their political economic contexts provides insight into the subjective, representational forces shaping the experiences of WNBA athletes. Furthermore, these narratives further our understanding of historical and present-day inequalities and point to how one might craft alternative realities for women in sporting contexts.

Expanding the theoretical horizons of critical political economy requires a full appreciation of the WNBA’s history, including media promotions of the league’s presence. Critical examinations of justifications for the secondary status of women’s sports should reconstruct the historical basis upon which patriarchal arguments find their support. However, as Hemmings (2007) states, the goal of this approach “is not...to propose a singular alternative history we could hold in common,” but to develop “tactics of memory that might allow us to challenge some of the political erasures that these stories effect” (Hemmings, 2007: 75). To explore the experiences of WNBA athletes forced to play overseas for higher wages, narratives from players who have played in Russia (Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi) are used as exploratory texts. They reveal the unique subjectivities that emerge from the structurally framed secondary status of professional female athletics in the United States.

The political-economic elements of stories shared by players can be drawn upon to uncover the subjective biases of decisions regarding the financial calculations of salaries in professional sports. While the experiences of Bird and Taurasi do not present a definitive alternative standpoint for female basketball players, they do reveal how many WNBA professionals find themselves better career opportunities within non-market-based sports systems. What can be derived from Bird and Taurasi’s testimonies, however, is their shared understanding of how the interests of female athletes, specifically in the WNBA, are discriminated against by biased U.S. sports media narratives. Later, I will reflect on the January 2020 collective bargaining agreement that led to the avoidance of a potential WNBA player strike for the upcoming season amidst the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic. This account brings to light concerns about the lack of professional autonomy and political economic freedom experienced by women’s basketball players.

However, familiarization with the WNBA's positioning in the establishment of professional women's basketball in the United States is required before one can understand the current conditions facing WNBA players.

A brief history of professional women's basketball in the U.S.

Founded in the mid-1990s, the WNBA was not the first professional basketball league for women in the United States. While women's basketball was played at the collegiate level during the late 1800s, the All-American Red Heads formed in 1936 competed against men (in games with men's rules). They are regarded as the first, if not the most notable early professional women's basketball team (Staffo, 1998). During the 1970s, implementation of Title IX banning gender discrimination in federally funded educational programs and the addition of women's basketball into the Montreal Olympic Games sparked interest in the creation of a domestic professional league. In the late 1970s and early 1980s (respectively), two short-lived women's basketball leagues, the Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL) and the Ladies Professional Basketball Association were established. However, both would cease operations in 1981 because of "high salaries, low sponsorship revenues, and team owners without significant investment income". The lack of television contract revenue was an especially telling factor (Edelman and Harrison, 2008: 4). Throughout the 1980s, no meaningful attempt was made to organize a women's professional basketball league. Talented U.S. women who wished to continue playing basketball at a professional level were forced to find employment overseas, often in Europe or Asia (Staffo, 1998). In a *USA Today* interview in 1990, an assistant executive director of USA Basketball estimated that around 500 U.S. citizens were employed as basketball players in foreign countries (Becker, 1990). Indeed, one could pinpoint this trend as significant in normalizing the notion that women playing basketball in the United States would also play internationally.

Despite the lack of professional options, women's basketball grew in popularity. The U.S. women's Olympic team secured its second gold medal in 1988 and posted a 52-0 undefeated record against collegiate and international competition in 1995 (Staffo, 1998). Such success did not go unnoticed. In 1992, then-NBA Commissioner David Stern stated in an interview with *The Washington Post*: "It seems unfair that our women are likely to win the gold, and then they have to go to Italy and Japan...We sure would like to see some way...for this team to get some more recognition in the United States" (Aldridge, 1992, p. F8). Stern further noted the possibility that the NBA could involve itself in subsidizing a women's professional league. As the mid-1990s approached, two big competitors formed to build upon what was perceived to be a tipping point of popularity for women's basketball. They were the American Basketball League (ABL) in September 1995 and the WNBA in April 1996 (Edelman and Harrison, 2008; Ettienne, 2019). While both organizations were owned and controlled by men, the independent nature of the ABL and its subsequent failure in relation to the WNBA set in motion a model of women's professional basketball under political and financial subjugation to the patriarchal NBA.

Given ABL's one-season head start over the WNBA, owner Steve Hams aggressively pursued players on the U.S. Olympic team to ensure that elite-level players would be unavailable for any upstart league. Furthermore, Hams stated that "the league planned to pay each of the U.S. Olympic team players \$125,000 a year, maintain a league average salary of \$70,000 a year, and institute a league minimum salary of \$40,000" (Edelman and Harrison, 2008, p. 6). While moderately successful and well-backed compared to former attempts at professional women's basketball

leagues, the ABL could not realistically compete with the NBA-backed WNBA. The latter used NBA arenas and branding associations to create the perception of a big game spectacle. The WNBA drew nearly twice the crowds on average as the best attended ABL games, which seemed amateurish in relation (Duru, 2015; Staffo, 1998). Ironically, while dwarfing the ABL's financial resources, the NBA capped WNBA salaries to a maximum of \$50,000—far below what top stars in the ABL were paid (Staffo, 1998). However, despite the ABL's reputation as a player-oriented league, top stars such as Nikki McCray defected to the WNBA. She took a \$100,000 pay cut while arguing that the WNBA offered more exposure and sponsorship opportunities compared to the non-nationally broadcasted ABL (Duru, 2015; Edelman and Harrison, 2008). Furthermore, while the ABL attempted to partner with the WNBA for an inter-league all-star game, the NBA denied any request for cooperation, wishing instead to compete with the ABL directly (Edelman and Harrison, 2008). The ABL gradually hemorrhaged star players and lost its competitive talent edge over the WNBA by the conclusion of its second season. League owners filed for bankruptcy in December 1998 while the ABL was in the midst of its third season. Thus, the WNBA secured a monopoly over professional women's basketball in the U.S. Against this background, the current struggle of WNBA players has remained seemingly unchanged, especially in regard to the trend of playing internationally. The failure of the ABL and the organization's player-oriented vision left no alternative to the NBA's profit-oriented, patriarchal model.

Male-oriented norms of sports success and the “market” evaluation of WNBA labor

The NBA ensured that the WNBA would be victorious against the scrappy ABL. However, this backing was rooted in financial and labor relationships that would determine player compensation and evaluation in relation to the interests of the men's league. In 1986, the WNBA was “formed by the NBA Board of Governors” under a single-entity formation controlled and owned by the NBA (Brown et al., 2016: 31; Ettienne, 2019). As McCann (2010) notes: “The NBA devised the WNBA with the stated purpose of embodying a completely centralized entity, with league ownership of teams and with WNBA players subject to rules unilaterally imposed by the WNBA” (42-43). WNBA players themselves were not passive as they organized to create the WNBPA in 1998, the first labor union entirely composed of female athletes (About the WNBPA, 2020). Ratification of the first collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between the WNBPA and WNBA concluded in April 1999 with significant gains for the league's players. Rookies gained 75% minimum salary increases and veterans 100%. Additional benefits included year-round health insurance, pension plans, guaranteed contracts and claims to a share of licensing revenue (Edelman and Harrison, 2008). However, certain concessions, such as the current NBA-mandated four-year college requirement and/or a 22-year-old age barrier for WNBA eligibility were written into the first CBA (Duru, 2015). Furthermore, as Edelman and Harrison (2008) explain, the WNBPA found itself in a weaker negotiating position compared to its male counterparts: “The WNBPA was unable to bargain as aggressively as most men's sports unions because WNBA teams regularly threatened to either shut down the league or lock out the players if the WNBPA did not agree to certain terms proposed” (10). As a result of the meager salaries paid by the league, WNBA athletes found themselves unable to entertain the idea of an extended lockout and thus were often rewarded with minimal pay increases from CBA negotiations.

For example, after the first CBA expired in 2002, the new CBA signed in April 2003 implemented a new free agency system for the league and returned “player group licensing rights to WNBA players,” but little was changed about the low pay structure (Edelman and Harrison, 2008: 10). In the same year, the NBA Board of Governors voted to shift the structural organization of the WNBA from a single-entity model to a “distributed club ownership model” resembling U.S. men’s professional sports leagues (Brown et al., 2016: 31). Despite granting WNBA franchises the ability to be independent and pursue a non-NBA related ownership group and location, many teams remained operationally and financially in a state of “quasi independence”. They remained tied to their parent NBA team’s corporate structures (Duru, 2015: 576; Kaiser, 2004). The 2003 organizational shift can be partially explained by the legal prominence of anti-trust concerns regarding single-entity league organizations at the time. However, NBA executives also allowed free market logic to regulate the behavior of the unprofitable WNBA enterprise (Kaiser, 2004). For one dual NBA/WNBA team owner at the time, the changes ensured that “the teams will be accountable when they weren’t totally in the past and that accountability will result in better decisions and better results” (Carpenter, 2003: C1). Invoking similar patriarchal capitalist logic, then-WNBA Commissioner, Val Ackerman, asserted that organizations were free to conduct “a real honest assessment...about the prospects in their markets” when determining their value in the eyes of investors and local sponsorships (Carpenter, 2003: C1). However, the U.S. market for women’s basketball, especially in relation to player salaries internationally, undervalues such labor and justifies this by using statistical measures and television ratings which favor male sporting performances and interests.

Messner (1988) highlights how the participation of women in male-dominated sports, often “organized around the most extreme potentialities of the male body,” creates a rhetorical space in which “equal opportunity” drives “the sports media’s dominant framework of meaning for presenting the athletic performances of female athletes” and becomes “a new means of solidifying the ideological hegemony of male superiority” (206). In particular, “the sports media can employ statistics as objective measures of performance” and thus argue that women are not as talented or popular as men in major athletic endeavors (Messner, 1988: 206). One example of a male-oriented measure is the media obsession with women who can perform a slam dunk [2]. While commonplace in the NBA, only three WNBA athletes, Lisa Leslie, Candace Parker and Brittney Griner, have dunked during a game (McDonald, 2012; West, 2019). Leslie and Parker, nicknamed the “dunking divas,” were enormously popular during their WNBA careers relative to less flashy, traditionally talented women physically unable to dunk. Reflective of the NBA and WNBA’s consistent undervaluing of its female labor, the third and fourth WNBA CBA contracts, signed in 2008 and 2014 respectively, saw slight increases in rookie and max-level player salaries. However, veteran contracts, capped at \$51,000 in the third CBA, would decrease by \$1,000 in the 2014 agreement (Brown et al., 2016). As Berri (2019) indicates, resistance against increasing WNBA pay emerges despite the fact that the relatively young league is growing at a faster rate than its male predecessor. To understand the cynical projections consistently deployed by NBA executives to characterize the growth and profitability of the WNBA, one must position WNBA’s operations within the NBA’s overall strategy of transforming itself into a globalized “multifaceted marketing and entertainment conglomerate” (Andrews, 2006: 95).

The WNBA within dominant ideologies of U.S. sports media

As opposed to supporting the WNBA as a means of creating professional opportunity for women at home, the NBA enjoys a “symbiotic relationship” with the women’s league (McDonald, 2012: 213). The WNBA and its minoritarian audience are minimal compared to the NBA’s male-centric fandom. Maintaining control over the women’s league enables the NBA to produce products for niche audiences at a low cost. Furthermore, the NBA can use equal opportunity criteria, such as the ability to dunk or draw high television ratings, as evidence that WNBA players are objectively not as good or as entertaining as NBA players. As Messner (1988) explains: “Equal opportunity within this system provides support for the ideology of meritocracy while at the same time offering incontrovertible evidence of the ‘natural’ differences between males and females” (206). However, methods of quantification which attempt to capture levels of merit or achievement must be examined for any potential bias—just as one might critique the male-oriented statistical evidence used to normalize male athletic superiority. Discussing the gendered nature of television ratings, Meehan (2002) has noted that “the commodity audience was differentiated into the valuable and desired audience of white men produced by the network that won the ratings contest versus the niche audiences begrudgingly produced by networks that lost the ratings contest” (216). In particular, the most valuable audience segment—white males aged 18-34 reflected capitalist patriarchal interests that often marginalized the identities of those performing in the WNBA as well as feminist, queer, and racial community-based spaces fostered by fans during games (Muller, 2007). Advertisers seeking a wealthy, white male audience and producers wanting to maximize their ratings valued white males “as *the* audience” and built systems of measurement centered on locating the media preferences of white men (Meehan, 2002: 216). This white, patriarchal emphasis enables the establishment of “noneconomic assumptions” that influence “beliefs about what sorts of people *ought* to be *the* audience.” Consequently, assumptions about target audiences followed “familiar patterns of discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, and age” (Meehan, 2002: 217).

The minoritarian identities of WNBA players place them in a precarious position with regard to drawing ratings, especially in relation to the much sought after 18-34 male demographic. The arcane manner by which WNBA player labor value is determined is rooted in masculinist systems that neglect much of the embodied physical effort expended during a player’s career journey. For example, the NBA’s refusal to reduce the required age of 22 for the WNBA draft forces aspiring professional female athletes in the U.S. to compete four years without pay at the collegiate level while risking potential injury (Duru, 2015). Perhaps the most notable compensational difference between NBA and WNBA players is the amount of overall league revenue each player base receives. This agreement has historically been skewed; NBA players and owners split revenues evenly while WNBA players are estimated to receive only 20% of total revenue generated by the league (Bogage, 2017; Ettienne, 2019). When proposals for increasing the percentage of revenue available to WNBA players are discussed, justifications for their low pay echo NBA Commissioner Adam Silver’s assertion that the league’s lack of profitability and subsequent drain on NBA resources hinders the potential for pay raises (Berri, 2019). In January 2020, after the longstanding specter of a potential WNBA lockout loomed following the player association’s opting out of the CBA in 2019, the league finally conceded on a deal that sought to equalize owner and player revenues by 2021 (Neal, 2020). Before the January 2020 agreement, the NBA consistently

responded to the WNBA's demands for increased revenue sharing by claiming they were unpopular and unprofitable.

In an October 2018 interview with *B/R Mag*, Silver lamented the WNBA's financial woes: "The tickets are very inexpensive, but even at low prices we're not selling enough tickets to run a viable business. At the end of the day, the consumer always wins, and right now we don't have a winning consumer proposition" (Fader, 2018: para. 39). Silver downplayed need for exposure, suggesting instead that he felt *ESPN* had been generous with its airing of the WNBA. While it appears that Silver is transparently presenting the cost-benefit analysis of his organization's governance of the WNBA, he is in reality fostering a hostile relationship with the WNBA by placing faith in the economic objectivity of patriarchal capitalist interests. A month after Silver's comments about the WNBA, Ogwumike responded with an editorial written for *The Athletic* titled "Bet on Women." Within the piece, Ogwumike reveals the limited nature of information players are given regarding the financial success of the WNBA: "You probably don't know this, but as players, we never get to see the numbers. We don't know how the league is doing" (para. 28).

Indeed, the only agency WNBA players regularly exercise is the opportunity to go overseas and sell their labor for relatively lucrative salaries compared to those the U.S. However, the process of having to skip the off-season (or the WNBA season entirely) to play internationally is a normalized practice that is rarely critiqued in mainstream sports news coverage within the United States. One particular case concerning the overseas experiences of WNBA players, specifically those of Bird and Taurasi, was featured in *ESPN's 30 for 30* long-form podcast titled "The Spy Who Signed Me." Experiences shared by both players throughout the podcast can be analyzed to illustrate the potential insights which emerge from placing narrative analysis within political-economic contexts. This approach helps to critique dominant assumptions within mainstream U.S. sports media while also providing alternative understandings based upon the experiential realities of women in sports – particularly WNBA athletes.

Bird and Taurasi's difficulties domestically and in Dynamo

While the stories shared by Bird and Taurasi on the *ESPN* podcast do not reflect the typical overseas experience of WNBA athletes, especially given their esteemed status, the career arcs of both women provide historical case studies of how the trend of overseas play became normalized and common for nearly every WNBA professional. As superstar athletes at the University of Connecticut's (UConn) powerhouse women's basketball program during the early 2000s, both women won multiple National Collegiate Athletic Association championships, most notably as teammates in 2002. Recalling their time as teammates at UConn, Taurasi notes: "We chartered everywhere, we stayed at the best hotels, we had the best gear, the latest gear" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Recalling her time at UConn, Taurasi highlights how she expected "the pro game"—her next career stop—to be better with regard to resources and compensation.

While Bird and Taurasi entered the WNBA with much fanfare as first overall picks (in 2002 and 2004 respectively) given their success at UConn, they found themselves with little to look forward to. While Bird goes into minimal detail about her specific experience within the podcast, in an interview with the *New York Times* in May 2016, she commented on the stark transition between college and the WNBA with regard to fan reception, noting how: "There's a weird disconnect between college players and W.N.B.A. [sic] players in terms of how people view us," (Sandomir, 2016: para. 19). As Taurasi explains, she soon discovered after graduating from college that the

WNBA offered little financial or social recognition: “\$45,000? Like, that’s what I’m going to make? That’s what I’m going to make after four years of playing at the most prestigious basketball college...That’s what I’m going to make?” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Indeed, despite being immediately successful upon entering the WNBA as rookies (notably receiving All-WNBA first team honors in their respective first seasons), both players would play overseas in Russia soon after beginning their professional careers. Reflecting on her decision to play overseas in Russia for Dynamo Moscow during the 2004 Women’s Basketball Premier League season, Bird highlights how the offer she received dwarfed any potential contract she could receive in the United States: “I think I was in the 200,000 range...So yeah. For four or five months. Do the math. It’s obviously worth it” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019).

However, the financial benefits offered by playing in Russia required cultural and physical adjustments that both Bird and Taurasi struggled with. While being paid far more than she ever had playing in the United States, Bird noted that communication between her and the coach was strained and mediated by a translator: “My coach spoke zero English, I had a translator next to me the entire time” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Furthermore, she felt socially alienated and physically isolated during her first season playing for Dynamo, noting how many of her days were spent “in my apartment with nothing to do, on my AOL instant messenger, like, hey you guys up?” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). After her first season playing for Dynamo, Bird considered never playing in Russia again; however, she would return for the next season, even after winning the 2004 WNBA Championship with the Seattle Storm. Taurasi, fresh off a similarly successful 2004 campaign in which she was named the WNBA’s Rookie of the Year would join Bird playing for Dynamo in 2005. However, during the podcast, both players recalled negatively the short time they spent playing together for Dynamo, with Taurasi exclaiming: “It was the worst experience ever of playing basketball in my life” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Struggling with the same language barrier Bird did, Taurasi played less than 10 games for Dynamo, highlighting out-of-date facilities, disagreements with the team’s playing style and the coach himself: “The coach we had there, I hated. And the guy equally hated me. So it was a disaster” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Taurasi recounts how as the season ended, she vowed never return to Russia: “I said, I will never, in my life, play here again” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Despite the initial difficulties faced by both players in adjusting to playing overseas, the longstanding economic circumstances leading to the exodus of elite professional women’s basketball talent to basketball leagues in Europe and Asia remained in place. There was a lack of financial incentive for female basketball athletes to remain in domestic leagues such as the WNBA (Becker, 1990). Ironically, Bird and Taurasi would find themselves returning to Moscow soon after leaving Dynamo in 2006; however, they would opt instead to join another team within the city, Shabtai Kalmanovich’s Spartak Moscow Region.

Making women’s basketball “bigger than life”

Under Kalmanovich’s patronage, Bird and Taurasi (as well as other WNBA superstars such as Lauren Jackson and Tamika Catchings) discovered an alternative system of evaluation that rewarded their labor both economically and socially. In terms of salary, both players signed for between 400,000 and 1,000,000 dollars to spend half of the year playing for Spartak—at worst, nearly four times the then-WNBA max salary (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Additionally, Kalmanovich treated the Spartak women’s basketball team, specifically Bird and Taurasi, to luxurious amenities only offered to male athletes in the United States. In the podcast, Bird describes

how: “Everything literally was first class. We’re staying at the best hotels” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Furthermore, Kalmanovich went above and beyond to ensure that Bird and Taurasi’s needs were met, Taurasi notes “...the minute you said anything, it was literally taken care of the next day” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Given Kalmanovich’s personal affinity for women’s basketball, the contracts and external perks enjoyed by Bird and Taurasi reflected his own personal desire to treat his players as elite athletes that were not simply inferior alternatives to superstar male athletes. Taurasi highlights this by noting: “He wanted this team [Spartak Moscow Region] to be the Barcelona of women’s basketball, the Chelsea of women’s basketball. And I think Sue and I were just two of those little pieces that he was trying to integrate into that” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Bird’s own description of Kalmanovich’s charitable management approach explains how he “...loved his family, loved women’s basketball, loved us. Viewed us as performers and entertainers and wanted to share our talents with the world” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019).

At this point in the narrative, it is important to consider the market factors at play within Bird and Taurasi’s careers. How, exactly, did Kalmanovich manage to fund an apparently unpopular product? One news article specifically describes how during games “only a third of the seats are filled, even though everyone gets in for free” (Lynch, 2012: para. 24). In one regard, Bird and Taurasi’s experiences with Spartak Moscow (and of many women who play basketball professionally overseas) are divorced from the male-oriented metrics favored by the ratings-driven U.S. sports media (Messner, 1988). Meehan (2005) identifies the basis of television-oriented evaluations that are used to argue against rewarding women’s sports: “In television’s marketplace of ideas, the only programs that succeed are the ones that most viewers want, consume, and enjoy. And that’s the American way – let the market decide,” (19). If assumptions about the degree of free choice determining the objective popularity of sports remain unquestioned, the system concludes that “the decision reflects what we want, not what some bureaucrat thinks we ought to want” (Meehan, 2005: 19). In Kalmanovich’s case however, his preferences enabled the creation of a special market operating outside of traditional U.S. sports industries.

As implied by the podcast’s title (“The Spy Who Signed Me”), Kalmanovich’s financial success was heavily assisted by his past activities as a KGB spy during his years living in Israel (Harding, 2009). While sentenced to a nine-year prison sentence in Israel for espionage in 1987, connections with the newly formed Russian government allowed him to negotiate his release in 1993. Throughout the next decade, he would find financial success as a concert promoter in Russia and reportedly was involved in the African diamond trade (Lynch, 2012). Kalmanovich would get involved in basketball management during the late 1990s, finding success with the Lithuanian Basketball League’s Žalgiris Kaunas and eventually taking ownership of Spartak Moscow Region’s women’s basketball team in 2006 (Lynch, 2012). Despite the lack of an established market for a superstar women’s basketball team, Kalmanovich’s cash infusions were an expression of his appreciation for the sport and his athletes: “For Kalmanovich, the team was a vanity project. He poured millions into it, knowing he would never turn a rouble [sic] in profit” (Lynch, 2012: para. 18). From the perspective of those who played for Spartak Moscow’s team, the situation Kalmanovich created gave elite athletic achievement in women’s sports an elevated sense of value apart from the market norms dictating WNBA salaries and the secondary treatment of players. Taurasi reflects on Kalmanovich’s grand appreciation for women’s basketball, stating: “He [Kalmanovich] made everything bigger than life. And at the time women’s basketball needed someone to make it bigger than life. And that’s what he did” (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Kalmanovich’s investment into creating a women’s basketball juggernaut did not lead to profits, but

it did lead to victories. From 2007 to 2010, Spartak Moscow won four women's EuroLeague titles and cemented themselves amongst the historically greatest basketball teams. However, during these years, they also played in WNBA seasons with constant reminders of their secondary status.

Within the podcast, the alternative offered by Spartak Moscow is juxtaposed to the experiences Bird and Taurasi had in the WNBA. Taurasi recalls how unpleasant traveling on commercial airlines is for players throughout the domestic season: "You get back to the WNBA and you're just like lugging all your shit around getting on a terrible American Airline flights [sic] at 4:45 a.m" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Playing for Spartak Moscow, traveling was quite a different matter. Bird and Taurasi share a story highlighting how Kalmanovich was able to change an Aeroflot flight time through his connections and influence in order to ensure that the team made a scheduled game on time. Bird explains: "Shabtai called Aeroflot. He called the airline, and he had a flight moved back two hours. A commercial flight. He had a commercial flight moved back two hours" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). In an analogy for the intended U.S. audience of the *ESPN* podcast, Taurasi follows by noting how it resembles "calling Delta and being like, you know what we need this flight to LaGuardia to leave at 11:00 tonight. Okay. Thanks. We'll talk to you later" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Additionally, the types of budget hotels offered to players by their WNBA teams compared poorly to the first-class lodging offered by Kalmanovich. Taurasi recalls how the air conditioners in the rooms she stays in during the WNBA season are "really loud, but all it does is really just make the room like sweatier" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). While a maverick owner such as Kalmanovich may offer simple solutions for these commonly reported problems by WNBA athletes, league policies have historically prohibited the use of charter planes and required teams to be conscious of the types of amenities offered to its players (Rand, 2019).

Placing Spartak Moscow within the history of women's basketball

As previously discussed, it is assumed that professional women's basketball players, especially those playing for the WNBA, will have to play for an overseas team soon after the WNBA off-season begins to make economic ends meet, often at the expense of regenerative rest that many male athletes enjoy during their own professional off-seasons (Fagan, 2015). Taurasi's description of her one-week rest between playing in the U.S. and Russia highlights the routine nature of having to play soon after the WNBA season ends: "I was just like this is what I do. WNBA ends, I get my seven days to hang out with my family, pack all my shit up, get on that Aeroflot straight to Moscow. I'm good" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). However, in the midst of Bird and Taurasi's tenure with the team, Spartak Moscow's ability to lavishly treat its players would dwindle following the assassination of Kalmanovich in November 2009 (Harding, 2009). Taurasi recalls the day of his death vividly during the podcast, describing how she saw the scene of the shooting as she was driving by: "The Mercedes that was there for, you know, for our whole careers that we drove in a million times...Gunshots everywhere, just completely shot up, police, ambulance. And there he was hunched over dead" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Killed in a shooting while sitting in his car in Moscow, what had been shocking to the players who had known Kalmanovich as a gregarious owner and family man was opposite of the story presented in mainstream news outlets of a former Russian spy who faced a predictable fate. A headline in *The Guardian* about Kalmanovich's assassination on the day of the event read "Former KGB spy shot dead in Moscow" (Harding, 2009). However, the criminal aspect of Kalmanovich's past is not emphasized in Bird and Taurasi's

overall recollection of him. They instead feel conflicted in acknowledging his contribution to their own financial success as professional athletes.

In the concluding sections of the podcast, Bird and Taurasi reflect on the personal and professional impact Kalmanovich's financial investment had on their overall careers. Taurasi states that the situation with Kalmanovich is "crazy to think about" and notes how significant it is that "just this one person who took an interest in women's basketball" allowed her the opportunity to retire in her late 30s when no other domestic professional avenue could (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). When asked by the interviewer if they would have felt any differently knowing about Kalmanovich's problematic background, both players valued the person they knew and acknowledged how he propelled their careers. Bird responds that while it would have been disturbing to have found out while he was alive, ultimately, "it would be hard, because he did mean so much to us in all these other ways, and we never saw anything like that. You know, never" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Taurasi follows, noting how she could only judge him "on the basis of how he helped my career and that's all easy for me to say right because he did nothing but help me" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). But she does highlight an inner personal conflict in which she feels that it is not entirely right to not change her feelings about Kalmanovich based on his crimes – stating: "I don't know...The good person in me says yeah, you know, of course it would. I should feel different. I don't know if I would though. I really don't" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Even after his death, both Bird and Taurasi remained loyal to Spartak Moscow (now managed by Kalmanovich's widow, Anna) until 2011 and 2010, respectively. While both players would soon join forces again for UMMC Ekaterinburg (another Russian team and ironically Spartak Moscow's rival), they acknowledge that the team environment fostered by Kalmanovich in the late 2000s had a lasting impact on their career earnings while also serving as a crystallizing moment in regard to the overall treatment of professional female basketball players. Following these final sections of the podcast, *ESPN* sports reporter and former college basketball player Kate Fagan suggests that Kalmanovich's legacy allows one to understand, comparatively, the dynamics of how poorly female athletes are paid in the United States: "The way we treat female athletes here is disrespectful...we should be embarrassed that the best experience Taurasi and Bird have where they felt most respected was by apparently an ex-KGB officer who was eventually shot dead outside of the Kremlin" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019).

Within experiences shared throughout the podcast by both players, the sentiment that Kalmanovich provided opportunity where there was none domestically (in the U.S.) is often reported. Bird remarks how Kalmanovich "was you know, I was going to say providing, but he was allowing us to like have a career, and make tons of money doing it" while allowing her the possibility "to take that home, and have a life" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). Taurasi echoes Bird's sentiment about Kalmanovich in a similar statement concerning the advancement of her career and financial stability, "it's like in large part due to Shabs" (Romer and Avirgan, 2019). As a testament to Kalmanovich's lavish management and affinity for his team, Spartak Moscow players, after the infamous owner's death (and without the exorbitant financial resources), acknowledged his contribution toward improving the standards of women's basketball. For example, Becky Hammon, who played for the team during her last year as a professional basketball player in 2012, stated: "I think Shabtai really laid the foundation of how this organisation [Spartak Moscow] runs things" (Lynch, 2012: para. 29). She also notes that this had led to changes in the culture of other professional teams as well: "He really kind of changed the culture of all women's basketball. Since Kalmanovich got involved, other women's teams had to step up their game. So now we're getting

paid a lot better because of what he did years ago.” (Lynch, 2012: para. 30). Indeed, despite Kalmanovich’s character and the unique professional situation created by his management of Spartak Moscow, his contributions show how an alternative reality can empower the creation of new narratives that might expose the socioeconomic realities of discriminated groups such as female athletes. Regarding the aforementioned case, Fagan observes that “understanding Shabtai and Spartak and Sue and Diana’s place in that team” helps to challenge the secondary status of women’s sports that is reinforced by traditional forms of evaluation in mainstream U.S. sports media (Romer and Avirgan, 2019).

An uncertain political economic future for women’s basketball

Soon after the release of the *ESPN* podcast in November 2019, Bird and Taurasi gave another interview—this time on television for *CBS This Morning*—discussing how they felt about the January 2020 CBA the WNBA had signed with the players’ association. Acknowledging that attitudes toward playing in the WNBA had become increasingly negative, they both described how the tide was potentially turning and that the new WNBA contract was a step forward. Taurasi also expressed her hopes for a viable domestic league in the U.S., stating: “We [Bird and Taurasi] spent 10 years there playing. We want to keep people here” (Brown, 2020: para. 4). While this statement can be perceived as rebuking the quality of play overseas, it also reflects Bird and Taurasi’s career experiences within the wider history of more favorable overseas conditions of play, specifically with Spartak Moscow in the late 2000s. This suggests the potential for a different system that does not operate on the NBA’s terms. However, there are limitations to how much proposed reform of the WNBA can be divorced from the profit-oriented motivations of the NBA. In the CBS interview, Bird indicates as much saying: “We understand that. We’re a business” (Brown, 2020: para. 10). Similarly, WNBPA President Ogwumike spoke in terms of compromise when discussing the January 2020 CBA, particularly with regard to the promise that players would seek “to improve the business with strategic planning and intentional marketing that will keep the WNBA front and center year-round” (Neal, 2020: para. 8). This agreement (also desired by WNBA players themselves) implicitly concedes that the choice to compete overseas should be unavailable. League players will be obliged to support themselves financially by playing basketball domestically. Time will tell if the league continues to support the reformist efforts of WNBA players. Many will have doubts given the NBA’s earlier promises in the early 1990s to foster an environment that would encourage U.S. women’s basketball athletes to play domestically rather than overseas (Aldridge, 1992).

One rhetorical tendency to be suspicious of is the league’s continued use of market-based language that clouds over its messaging about its partnership with the players. WNBZ Commissioner Cathy Englebert, an important party to the negotiations between the WNBA and WNBPA, states that while she was “adamant on the 50-50” split, she also expected “league and players work together to market this league so we can share revenue with the players. We have to hit some targets” (Neal, 2020: para. 10). Engelbert’s market-oriented language should be a cause for concern, although this should not undermine the real gains made in the January 2020 contract between the WNBA and WNBPA. The maximum base salary is slated to reach \$215,000 (up from \$117,500) while the salary cap will increase 31% within the first year, making the overall amount of money a team is able to spend on its roster around \$1.3 million (Neal, 2020). Merit-based cash bonuses were also boosted through end of season awards and the planning of special competitions

to increase the financial rewards available to players. Other gains are also noteworthy—mainly with regard to the acknowledgement of quality of life concerns that have persisted throughout the WNBA's short existence. Some of these include family planning benefits and veteran reimbursements for child-related costs as well as upgraded premium economy or comfort level seats that will ensure that the players can travel more comfortably on commercial airlines. Furthermore, post-career guidance and career counseling with a particular emphasis on offering paths for those who wish to coach professionally in the future are worthwhile benefits. They will partly redress the socioeconomic imbalances between male and female athletes that are central to the patriarchal sports culture of the U.S. (Messner, 1988; Neal, 2020). It should not be forgotten that the concessions made by the WNBA reflect the shared struggles that have emerged out of long-neglected narratives of women. These struggles continue for players to this day.

A few months after the January 2020 contract agreement, the coronavirus pandemic globally paused the operation of professional sports, affecting women's basketball leagues worldwide (Hurd, 2020). The strain caused by COVID-19 redefines the progression timeline originally imagined with the January 2020 contract while presenting immediate challenges to women currently employed as professional basketball athletes. In June 2020, the WNBA announced a plan similar to that of the NBA. The 2020 season would begin with a 22-game "protected bubble" format (where all players and operational staff are temporarily quarantined in a location and play games without fan attendance). This would be located at the IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida and start July 24 (Golliver, 2020: para. 2; "WNBA announces plan to tip off 2020 season," 2020; Voepel, 2020). Much like their male NBA counterparts who face a similar situation of uncertainty with regard to playing professional sports during a global pandemic, WNBA athletes have decided to sit out the bubble season whether in protest about health risks, other personal health reasons or for advocacy-related concerns. Some of the players doing so include Liz Cambage, Renee Montgomery, Jonquel Jones, Kristi Toliver, Maya Moore and Natasha Cloud (Byrum, 2020). While the extreme level of physical uncertainty is potentially new to NBA players, WNBA players have found themselves well prepared for a situation in which the proposed season is perhaps best avoided altogether.

The WNBA has done quite a bit to help garner positive publicity for its upcoming season, including dedicating it as a platform for its players to express concerns about social justice issues. However, most importantly, the announcement of the 2020 WNBA season contains a reminder from WNBA Commissioner Engelbert on how it is important to continue on: "We are finalizing a season start plan to build on the tremendous momentum generated in the league during the offseason" ("WNBA announces plan to tip off 2020 season," 2020: para. 3). In an act indicating a potential change of tide, the WNBA further promises in the announcement that all players shall "receive their full pay and benefits during the 2020 season" in spite of the operational disruption and shortened season caused by COVID-19. Upon deeper analysis however, essential information is omitted from the WNBA's official announcement—particularly the fact that players who choose to opt out will have to be approved by WNBA's independent panel of physicians if they wish to be paid their WNBA salaries. One article on the opt out process highlights its voluntary yet subtly mandatory nature, noting how payment for the entire season would be contingent on a medical approval: "There will be a provision for players to opt out of the 2020 WNBA season if they are medically certified as high-risk if they contract the coronavirus; these players would still get their full salary," (Voepel, 2020: para. 10). While players are not penalized for choosing to stay away from the WNBA bubble in Bradenton, they also will not be paid without a valid medical reason (Voepel, 2020).

The looming return of market-based measures

While the agreement at the beginning of 2020 fostered a sense of partnership amongst the WNBA and its players, many have quickly found themselves neglected by the WNBA, especially in financial terms. Players who are sitting out the season for reasons of social advocacy have relied on external income sources, such as corporate sponsorships, to replace wages lost due to their activism. In the case of Cloud, the first female basketball player sponsored by Converse, the company announced that it would be covering her entire 2020 season salary as a sign of support for her views on racial justice (Negley, 2020). Other players, such as 2019 WNBA's MVP Elena Della Donne, have found themselves in economic limbo as a result of the WNBA's medical exemption policy. After applying for a medical waiver from the season due to her increased risk from COVID-19 as a result of Lyme disease, Della Donne reported finding out in early July 2020 that the WNBA's appointed physician panel denied her request for a medical release (Barr and Spain, 2020). Although this judgment conflicted with the recommendation of her personal physician, Della Donne was unable to appeal the decision made by the WNBA physician panel due to league policy. She found herself having to decide between her economic or physical wellbeing. In an article announcing the WNBA's decision to reject Della Donne's medical waiver, her agent notes the difficult decision her client faces as a result: "Like a lot of people, she's making a choice between what's best for her from a health standpoint and what's best for her from a financial standpoint for her and her family," (Barr and Spain, 2020: para. 13). Far from empowered, the experience of Della Donne and other athletes provides early warning signs that previous accusations of economic unviability and audience non-interest consistently lurk in the background (as the WNBA attempts to reorganize itself to survive in a neoliberalized U.S. sports industry) (Andrews, 2006).

This analysis has prioritized the narrative material provided by those who embody the results of the NBA's unequal treatment of its women's league (with the establishment of what was deemed "market rate" for such a product). This allows one to further critique the naturalized secondary status of women's sports. As Hemmings (2007) notes: "We can only know what kind of history might be useful by attending to the multiple erasures (historical and contemporary) of the present" (73). While fans may understand that WNBA games are a part-time job for their favorite players, the inferior position of the league is not understood by the casual sports audiences. Despite airing industry-wide concerns since the 1990s, the *30 for 30* podcast dramatically detailing the experiences of Bird and Taurasi remains shocking news to many basketball fans after its release in late 2019 (Becker, 1990). Instead of blaming individual fans for not showing up, it would perhaps be more beneficial to inform casual and potential fans of the complex realities that the individual athletes face domestically and internationally. If audiences are only privy to the WNBA's (and in turn the NBA's) vision of what professional women's basketball should be, it should not be surprising if they do not return to what has been treated as a burdensome asset by mainstream sports industries and media (McCann, 2010; McDonald, 2012). Indeed, hardcore and casual audiences alike would easily understand the logic behind Taurasi's 2015 decision to skip the 2015 WNBA season if they were presented with Taurasi's glory days at UConn and Spartak Moscow (Fagan, 2015). Riordan (2002) reminds us, in general terms, how feminist political economy exposes the foundation of value associated with assessments of performance in mainstream sports media. She points out "how capitalism naturalizes male bias because it values traditionally masculine ways of organization and knowing" (9). Thus, as Bird, Taurasi and many other WNBA professionals have

discovered, market-based measures, which have dominated and defined the structuring of labor conditions for women's basketball players in the U.S., are best avoided altogether.

In spite of the discovery that market-based measures can be evaded in overseas leagues, stories shared by Bird and Taurasi's should not be viewed as the norm. Rather, they illustrate the historical trend whereby WNBA players must fulfill career ambitions internationally. Even throughout Bird and Taurasi's extraordinary narrative, it should not be forgotten that a central focus of the episode was on the man that financially made everything possible—Kalmanovich. Indeed, while one can dismiss the experiences of Bird and Taurasi in Spartak Moscow as uniquely reflecting a rich man's passion for women's basketball, the grandiose treatment both players received also signifies the subjective nature of the value they provide as elite athletes. However, alternatives, whether they be worker-owned leagues or other forms of political-economic organization must be explored as a means to avoid reliance on patriarchal benefactors—whether they be profit-oriented or charitable.

The stories and political-economic issues examined within this study do not fully engage with the intersectional identities of many WNBA players, especially in regard to racial dynamics. However, the applied storytelling approach that I have employed is suited to the analysis of other narratives in the future. By going deeper into the stories that go unheard as opposed to the ones mainstream U.S. media wants us to hear, the undervalued nature of women's sports, specifically WNBA basketball, becomes clear. This revelation reflects of a lack of imagination about what types of narratives are deemed permissible or worthwhile on the part of traditional U.S. sports media outlets.

Author Bio

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Endnotes

- [1] *30 for 30* are a series of documentary films produced by ESPN. Beginning in 2009 as a celebration of the network's 30th anniversary, *30 for 30* documentaries featured in-depth explorations of notable people and events in sports history. While ESPN initially planned on producing 30 films, the series has continued in a variety of media formats given its popularity amongst viewers. In 2017, ESPN launched *30 for 30 Podcasts* with the goal of producing content that provides detailed insights on significant moments and individuals within sports.
- [2] A slam dunk, also known as a dunk, occurs when a player scores a basket with their hands above the rim. Technically, any shot completed while the player's hands are above the rim of the basket is considered a dunk; however, popular understanding of the term regards a dunk as involving the athletic ability to jump vertically high enough to successfully perform the maneuver on a 10-foot basketball rim.

- [3] It should be noted that the term ‘intersectional’ is a particularly slippery one and not applicable within this study. The players of interest (Bird and Taurasi) present very specific perspectives that do not reflect the diverse nature of WNBA players. It would be worthwhile for future research to incorporate political economic critique into the analysis of stories shared by players of different racial backgrounds.

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