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THE JOURNAL REPORT: NCAA BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

Stepping Stone

Pro basketball isn't necessarily the ultimate goal for most women college players. But it may be a good way to get where they want to go.

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Women's professional basketball is becoming a viable career choice for more college players -- at least a temporary one.

Wynter Whitley, a 6-foot-2 senior who plays on the highly ranked Duke University women's basketball team, didn't think much about the Women's National Basketball Association when she started college four years ago. But as the realities of life after graduation -- and a 9-to-5 job -- loom, playing professionally is starting to sound more appealing.



¹ See the full [NCAA Basketball Tournament](#)² report. Plus, download [men's](#)³ and [women's](#)⁴ brackets.

• [Lady Longhorns](#):⁵ We e-mailed five questions to 12 members of the University of Texas women's basketball team, including where they saw themselves in five and 20 years. [Read their responses](#)⁶.

In making her decision, she says, "the first thing would be being happy. The second thing would be, how much money you're going to make being happy."

Ms. Whitley, 22 years old, says she would like to play professionally in the U.S. or overseas for a while, making enough money to go back and take pre-med classes. Eventually, she hopes to fulfill a lifelong goal: becoming a veterinarian.

As the WNBA enters its ninth season this year, it has become a major draw for women college players like Ms. Whitley. And top college teams say the prospect of going pro can help them convince high-school players

that their school's name recognition will provide an edge at draft time.

But even as they increasingly look to play in the WNBA, college women tend to view professional basketball not as a final destination, but as one component of a life that will continue beyond the court. It doesn't pay big, so many female athletes play for the love of the sport and as a way to fund graduate or medical school. Many others nurture second careers or play in Europe in the off-season.

With the WNBA as a whole still unprofitable, "the signs are still decidedly mixed" on its future, says Scott Rosner, director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative, a sports-industry think tank at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. But the WNBA "is the best caliber of play in the world," he says. "They are getting the best women's college basketball players, and most of the best international players."

In a sign of the WNBA's growing popularity among college players, a woman may for the first time give up a season of collegiate eligibility to go pro. Monique Currie, a star on the Duke team, will graduate this spring. But because she sat out one season with a knee injury, she could play college basketball for another year -- which would give her one more chance to win a national championship with Duke, and allow her to take graduate classes. It's also possible that Ms. Currie will opt for the WNBA draft. If she does, she is expected to be among the first players chosen. Lindy Brown, spokesman for the Duke team, says a representative of the Charlotte Sting, which has the No. 1 draft pick, attended a recent game.

CAREER MOVE

The WNBA at a glance

Number of teams: 13

Locations: Charlotte, N.C.; Detroit; Houston; Indianapolis; Los Angeles; Minneapolis; New York; Phoenix; Sacramento; San Antonio; Seattle; Uncasville, Conn.; Washington

Total number of players: About 160

Average salary: \$45,000

Minimum salary: \$31,200

Maximum salary: \$89,000

Ms. Currie, 22, says she will decide at the end of the season. "If we win the tournament, that's something that would definitely help me decide to go."

Ms. Currie adds that she wouldn't want the WNBA to become like the men's league, where players frequently enter the professional ranks before finishing college. "I don't want to be the one to judge someone to leave early for millions [of dollars]," she says, "but I think education is important."

Wait and See

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*Note: Salary figures are for 2005 season.
Sources: WNBA; Women's National
Basketball Players Association*

For now at least, the WNBA is hardly the place to make millions. With average salaries around \$45,000 -- about the same as for an entry-level management trainee -- the league is more of a job than a career. In fact, many of the women will hold other jobs during the off-season. About half the league's athletes play overseas in the off-season, says Val Ackerman,

the league's former president. Some also attend graduate school to prepare for careers after professional basketball.

Athletes who are drafted get higher guaranteed minimums than other rookies. The first through fourth players selected will earn \$41,600 this year. The other first-round picks will earn \$34,320 to \$38,480, compared with \$32,240 for second-round selections. The WNBA draft includes just three rounds of 13 players each, compared with an NBA draft that has 30 players in each of two rounds.

A player with four or more years of WNBA experience will earn a minimum guaranteed \$45,427 this year. Players who are not drafted and have up to three years' experience earn a minimum of \$31,200. The maximum salary for the coming season is \$89,000, and each team will have an overall salary cap of \$673,000.

Those numbers contrast drastically with those for male players. This season's minimum salary for a rookie NBA player is \$385,277. The men's players association says the average salary is almost \$4 million -- nearly 90 times what the average WNBA player earns, though the comparison is distorted somewhat by the outsize salaries of the NBA's highest earners.

At times, the pay restrictions have forced women's teams to cut veteran players to stay under their salary caps. Ms. Ackerman says that in the long run, the WNBA hopes to pass on more money to players as its revenue increases.

The salary cap does rise every year, along with the minimum salaries for veterans and rookies. There also is a bonus structure, which includes such awards as \$10,000 to each player on the championship team, \$15,000 to the season's most valuable player and \$5,000 to the rookie of the year.

The Standouts

Most women players don't rely on the WNBA for their entire income. Ms. Ackerman, who played basketball in college and in France, says European teams consider the American players the stars and give them salaries in the five-figure to six-figure range, while local players might earn only a few hundred dollars a game.

And a few star players have reaped major financial rewards from women's basketball. Lisa Leslie, 32, of the Los Angeles Sparks, last year's WNBA most valuable player, earns about \$1 million from endorsement deals, according to her agent, Bruce Binkow.



Duke's **Monique Currie** may forgo a year of college eligibility for the WNBA.

Ms. Leslie, who has been playing with the league since its inception, says the existence of the WNBA has helped her secure endorsements and that she wants to draw attention to a league that is still new to many fans. "We've evolved with television and sponsors," she says. "We need media support for our growth to continue to get the American public involved and aware of women's basketball."

Professional basketball also has been lucrative for Diana Taurasi, who last year led the University of Connecticut to its third straight national championship, played on the gold-medal U.S. Olympic team and was the No. 1 WNBA draft pick, chosen by the Phoenix Mercury.

Nike Inc. is coming out with a signature shoe for Ms. Taurasi this summer, says one of her agents, Marla Mullen of M3 Management, and Eight O'Clock Coffee recently filmed a national commercial with her. Ms. Mullen adds that Ms. Taurasi is in serious talks with **Coca-Cola Co.** and EA Sports, a division of videogame maker **Electronic Arts Inc.** Coca-Cola and EA declined to comment; Nike couldn't be reached for comment.

The basketball star earns "in the high six figures" from endorsements and public appearances, Ms. Mullen says.

But even with endorsements, most women professional players aren't pulling in the huge sums their male counterparts earn. Forbes magazine estimated that Shaquille O'Neal of the Miami Heat earned \$31.9 million from June 2003 through May 2004, while Kevin Garnett of the Minnesota Timberwolves pulled in about \$29.7 million. The estimates include

salaries, bonuses, prize money, endorsements and appearance fees.

The women's league, subsidized by the NBA franchises, started with eight teams in 1997. But after doubling in size by 2000, financial difficulties forced the WNBA to contract to its current 13 teams. Average attendance last year was 8,664, down 2.2% from 2003. Still, the league just announced an expansion team in Chicago for 2006. Though the WNBA has struggled to make money, a "handful" of teams have become profitable, Ms. Ackerman says.

The prominence of the college game helps draw attention to the professional league, says Ms. Ackerman, who stepped down from her position Feb. 1. "The top players can come into our league with a profile that helps them and helps us. We felt it was advantageous for our league to have a more mature and skilled player to take on the demands."

Unlike the NBA, which has drafted a number of players out of high school, the WNBA requires U.S. athletes to have a college degree or to be four years out of high school. (International players have different standards.)

Tasha Butts, a 23-year-old forward with the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx, says she wouldn't have been ready to play professionally if she had left college after her sophomore year. Ms. Butts, drafted in the second round last year, says she always wanted to play basketball for a living. When she was growing up, she told her family, "I'm going to play in the NBA."

After her junior year, Ms. Butts says, she put herself through a grueling off-season regimen in the hope of impressing WNBA scouts during her senior season. Now entering her second season, Ms. Butts says she enjoyed her rookie year and is looking forward to returning.

"This has given women the opportunity to have something to push for," she says. "They're working out to win national championships in college, but they're also working out and busting it every day so they can be one of the top picks in the WNBA draft."

Life After Basketball

But during the off-season, Ms. Butts is back at her alma mater, the University of Tennessee, as a graduate assistant for her former team. She'd like to earn a spot as an assistant coach at a top college program, and then become a head coach.

She isn't the only Lynx player with post-WNBA plans. Michael Cristaldi, a spokesman for team, says player Katie Smith is interested in becoming a dentist. During the off-season, she takes preparatory classes at Ohio State University.

The WNBA season runs from late May to September, avoiding competition with the NBA and women's college games. That schedule makes it easier for players to compete overseas or return to school the rest of the year. But because training camp begins in early May, graduating seniors sometimes have to withdraw from classes to start playing professionally, and then return later to complete their degrees.

Some players go back to college not to study, but to coach. Dawn Staley of the Charlotte Sting -- an all-star who has won three Olympic gold medals and played professionally in France, Italy, Brazil and Spain before the WNBA was formed -- is head coach of the Temple University women's team. Under her leadership, Temple this year earned a national ranking for the first time.

Just as the prominence of women's college basketball has helped the WNBA, the U.S. professional league has helped the college teams. "It's been a great thing for recruiting," says Randy Press, a spokesman for the women's team at powerhouse UConn, where the locker room has large photographs of alumnae in the WNBA. "Coaches can say, 'If you come here, you have a chance to go play professionally.'"

Mr. Press says UConn's coaches don't want their players talking about postcollege plans until the season ends. But two seniors, Ashley Battle and Jessica Moore, "possess the athleticism that WNBA teams are looking for," he says. "We anticipate they'll be drafted. If they're not, we expect they'll be given a tryout with a team."

Still, even Ms. Battle -- a top player in a top program -- has been storing up work experience. She interned at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Ore., last summer, working in sports marketing and other areas.

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