

The Mistreats Its Players—If You're Surprised, You Aren't Paying Attention

By Holly Santman

Oh my gosh, did you hear the news? The WNBA has been caught mistreating its players!

...So, in other words, the sky is blue.

The WNBA turned 25 years old this year and that is certainly something to celebrate. But the league's struggles over the years have been well-documented and some of its loudest critics are its own players.

What kinds of things could they possibly be protesting? They're professional athletes! They shouldn't complain! There was a time when women didn't even get the chance to step on a professional court. They should be grateful for the opportunity!

Well, there is plenty to protest in the WNBA.

One of the biggest grievances players have is travel. The WNBA flies all its teams commercial, usually in economy. This last season, when the Connecticut Sun was playing the Chicago Sky in the semifinals and the series shifted back to Chicago, the Sun and their coaches were split among three different flights leaving three different airports.

Let's not forget the historic 25-hour travel nightmare the Las Vegas Aces faced back in 2018, leading to them to forfeit a game against the Washington Mystics in the interest of player well-being.

Imagine being 6-foot 8 like Brittney Griner in a small coach seat or getting into town less than four hours before you play a professional basketball game in front of thousands of fans. The fatigue wears on the players, leading to more injuries and potentially more health problems.

In the newest collective bargaining agreement, signed in 2020 by both the league and players, they agreed to move players up to premium economy or comfort seats, but they will still have to fly commercially. Charter planes, used during the WNBA Finals this year, have not been discussed long-term.

Another key grievance WNBA players often bring up is their paychecks. This has been a topic of conversation for years, and many have criticized WNBA stars for wanting millions of dollars, like Stephen Curry or LeBron James.

In reality, players are advocating for an equal percentage split of the league's revenue compared to the NBA. In the NBA, players receive 50% of what the league takes in, whereas WNBA players receive about 20% of what the league makes in a year.

In the 2020 CBA, set to last eight years, the maximum salary for the stars of the WNBA is set at \$215,000, with opportunities to make a maximum of \$500,000. But that doesn't take into account the great players who aren't "stars" and who may not make that much money. The league minimum is just under \$59,000.

As a result, many WNBA players often play year-round, going overseas shortly after finishing their season to play for Russian or Chinese teams to make more money. If they are lucky, they get to stay in the U.S. and make money from sponsorships or television deals.

But it is rare that their only job is to play in the WNBA.

In contrast, the lowest-paid NBA player makes a little more than \$925,000. Players you've never heard of make more than some of the most well-known WNBA players in the world.

Other problems include a cramped regular-season schedule with a short postseason, a lack of investment in both the mental and physical health of the athletes and little to no marketing for the teams or players.

Team marketing is almost nonexistent—the names of teams are not even on some of the jerseys. Where the team should be, ads are printed instead.

Marketing applies to the players as well. If the WNBA does not treat and market its players like the stars they are, how can they expect others to treat them with the respect they're due? Star players like Diana Taurasi, Sue Bird, Candace Parker, A'ja Wilson and others should be on billboards and in commercials all around the towns they play in, and yet, you rarely see them.

These women are picture-perfect messages of diversity, equity, inclusion and achievement that businesses all over the U.S. are looking for. The league is 80% women of color with a strong LGBTQ+ presence. You don't need to look much harder for interesting and inspiring stories.

These kinds of institutional issues start at the high school and college levels. Fewer young women and girls are playing sports like basketball, and even less stick with it over a long period of time, for a variety of reasons. According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, since 2000, girls' basketball participation has dropped 10% and that trend has showed no signs of reversing.

Look no further than the NCAA tournament debacle last year. University of Oregon's Sedona Prince posted a video on TikTok showing the differences between the men's and women's weight rooms in their respective bubbles. Those differences also appeared in the food options each group was given and the types of COVID-19 tests offered.

If you do just a tad more digging, you can see that the bio of the official NCAA Twitter account says: "The official NCAA March Madness destination for all things Division I NCAA Men's Basketball."

Men's basketball.

The NCAA initially said the discrepancies were due to limited space and the difference in how the men's and women's tournaments operated. Later, they issued an apology saying they would fix things as soon as possible. But they only fixed the immediate problems you could see on video. They have not fixed the systemic problems that cause them to treat their female athletes as less than.

The more these kinds of obvious disparities continue with no one saying anything, the more the problems for top-notch female athletes in both college and the WNBA will continue.

These women are some of the best athletes in the world and yet, some might not even know their names.

Now, you may be feeling sufficiently hopeless. But there are a couple easy things you can do to support the women of the WNBA.

First, go to the games. When you're there, post about it or put it on your Instagram story--visibility helps both the league and its players succeed. If you cannot make it to a game, or there isn't a team in your area, watch it on television. Consistent viewership helps the league grow, which helps the athletes get more visibility and make more of the money they're owed.

We hold these women to the highest standards of play and they deliver, night after night. The least we can do is support them in all their excellence.