

Inspiring and Empowering Women: The WNBA Leading the Way into the 21st Century

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Atlanta, April 1968. No sound but the clop-clop of two mules along Auburn Avenue at Young Street as they pulled the wagon that carried the casket of Martin Luther King Jr. There I stood, 10 years old, next to my grandfather in a sea of people flooding the four-mile procession. We were dressed in our Sunday's best while others donned denim overalls, the uniform of the Poor People's Campaign. On the sidewalk, we stood while others climbed lampposts and utility poles. Hundreds of thousands of people in the capital of the black South and millions more around the world—man, woman, child, black, brown, white, young, old, famous, and ordinary—all mourning their hero. But for us, we were mourning a family friend who, as a child, sat in the pews of Wheat Street Baptist Church, down the street from Ebenezer, and listened to my grandfather preach the words of the gospel and teach how to live them through our deeds.

Ideals of “equality,” “justice,” and “freedom” echoed through parable and song from the pulpit and choir. They were lived through voting registration drives, fundraising for affordable housing, and preparations for protests that took place after a Sunday sermon. And as these ideals were litigated in courts of law and the court of public opinion, they were also contested on fields of play across the country. As I held my grandfather's hand that April day 50 years ago, there walked Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Russell and Chamberlain were there after having flown to Atlanta from Philadelphia after playing against each other with shattered spirits in Game 1 of the NBA Eastern Division Finals.

They were black and proud, but still black and vilified. Champions who knew the privilege born of talent and fame did not protect them from the hate, slurs, and vengeance like every other black man, woman, and child in America. So, shut up and dribble they did not. Stick to sports they did not. And neither did their contemporaries, people like Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, Wilma Rudolph, and Althea Gibson. Neither has a long line of athletes—men and women—who followed and risked, and continue to risk, their safety, wealth, and freedom to define what it is they are playing for—not just for a trophy or themselves, but for respect and dignity for everyone. Collectively, they have won titles while fighting for voting rights. They broke the stigma of HIV that ravaged a generation to help bring us closer to an AIDS-free one. They speak out against racism, sexism, and homophobia from their heart and personal experiences. From

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then to now, whether they convince others of their position or harden opposition in backlash, athletes spur public debate. They understand that when the meaning of patriotism and citizenship are debated—and the ideals of equality, justice, and freedom are threatened—that is precisely when their voice matters most. When sports rest at fault lines of society, they cannot be separated from a greater responsibility to the world around them.

And the question for the sports community is whether to embrace that reality or deny it, and whether to create an environment where our games bring people together at a time of so much division. At the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), the longest-running women's professional team sports league in the world, we choose to embrace the reality and create that environment.

It's in the DNA of our game. While James Naismith invented basketball 127 years ago in a Massachusetts YMCA to instill discipline and fitness into unruly boys, it was Senda Berenson at Smith College and the women and girls she taught who helped grow the game in those early years. Before women could vote, they could play organized basketball—shattering convention in what women could wear, could accomplish, and could be. Women had been playing basketball for 100 years—with varying rules and court sizes, at the Olympics and Final Fours, through the passage and implementation of Title IX, and always against social norms on gender and individuality—before the WNBA was founded in 1997, taking that collective experience and transforming it into something bigger than just a game.

In the 21 years since, a fundamental truth of the league has remained the same: Like life lived, sports are not played in a vacuum. WNBA players are some of the world's greatest athletes—male or female—who display their rarefied talents every day. But that's what they do; it is not everything they are. And over that time, the WNBA has made it clear what it is and what it stands for by leading with core principles required of sports leagues in the 21st century.

One core principle is balancing rules of the game with realities on the ground. During one summer week in 2016, Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old black man, was gunned down by police outside a convenience store in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. One day later, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old black man, was gunned down by police in St. Paul, Minnesota, while his girlfriend and her 4-year-old daughter sat next to him in their car. The following day, five police officers in Dallas were killed by a sniper during a protest of police brutality. In a single week, bullets, blood, and murder led to protests, riots, and chaos because black men were killed for being black men. But before Colin Kaepernick took a knee and LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul, and Dwyane Wade spoke up at the ESPY Awards in protest, WNBA players took a stand.

The day after President Barack Obama addressed the nation from Dallas, Seimone Augustus, Rebekkah Brunson, Maya Moore, and Lindsay Whalen stood together in a basketball arena in Minneapolis. Seimone Augustus, a WNBA champion and Olympic gold medalist, was born into a law enforcement family in Baton Rouge and raised four blocks from where Sterling was killed. Before Rebekkah Brunson was a WNBA champion, she was an 8-year-old girl playing with friends in Maryland when police approached them with guns drawn for reasons that remain unknown to this day. A top pick in the WNBA Draft and a WNBA Champion and MVP, Maya Moore became an outspoken voice



on criminal justice reform after studying the case of a then-16-year-old African-American boy in her hometown who was wrongfully convicted of a crime. Lindsay Whalen, a Minnesota born-and-raised WNBA champion and Olympic gold medalist, never forgot where she came from.

Over their Minnesota Lynx jerseys, the team captains wore warm-up shirts with “Change Starts With Us – Justice and Accountability” on the front and “Philando Castile,” “Alton Sterling,” the shield of the Dallas Police Department, and “Black Lives Matter” on the back. The New York Liberty followed suit with their own shirts. Their simple acts sparked a movement, and a debate within the WNBA league office. League guidelines barred the alterations of uniforms, and violations would result in fines. The league levied the required fines, but later rescinded them after further dialogue with players. The rules of the game were balanced against realities on the ground—and I took to heart what my grandfather preached: You have two ears and one mouth, so listen twice as much as you talk. And we listened to countless personal accounts like that of Tierra Ruffin-Pratt. The day she signed with the Washington Mystics, she shared how her life-long dream turned into a nightmare after learning that her cousin—her biggest fan—was shot and killed by police in Virginia.

As more WNBA teams wore various shirts in protest, organized media blackouts, and knelt or stayed in the locker room during the national anthem, a solidarity formed among these courageous women who were more than just world-class athletes. They were black and white, gay and straight, American and foreign-born, mothers, sisters, daughters, and spouses who felt a responsibility to speak out on injustices that were both so deeply personal and such powerful reminders of the platforms they have. And while there was backlash, a clear majority of WNBA fans responded by showing up at games and sharing support on social media. They may have respectfully disagreed with a position, but they respectfully recognized the right of the players to make their voices heard.

And it was a lesson for the league that embodies a second principle: Constructively engage broader society. A few weeks after the initial protests, USA Basketball players—WNBA stars like Tamika Catchings and Brittney Griner and NBA stars like Carmelo Anthony—convened a conversation in Los Angeles between the players, law enforcement, young people, and community leaders. It was honest, unfiltered, raw, and an example of how sports social activism can be a model for how to address difficult social issues. It was so successful that the WNBA and NBA have since convened more than 325 similar social justice events in communities across the country. Such programming is now a key pillar of social responsibility programs run jointly by the WNBA and NBA—and with support from both players’ unions—that do everything from promote health and fitness for millions of people around the world to sign up 25,000 mentors in a single year to empower young boys and girls to believe they can achieve anything. And teams have engaged in their own efforts—last season the Seattle Storm hosted a Planned Parenthood night to raise awareness of the need to improve access to cancer screenings, mental health counseling, and other preventive health care for women. Storm owners and players understood that as a league built on health and fitness, how could it not stand up for the health and well-being of millions of women and girls?



During the 2018 season, we are enhancing this longstanding engagement to deepen the connection with fans and foster greater collaboration in the community. WNBA fans now have the option to donate a portion of their ticket proceeds to a designated nonprofit committed to empowering women and girls. Take a seat, take a stand. This ground-breaking arrangement recognizes that sports are communal experiences, the modern town hall, with untapped opportunities to constructively engage with one another and build lasting bonds that make a difference in our communities.

And that leads to a third, and enduring, guiding principle: Inspire, empower, and elevate one another. There is a reckoning and awakening in America today. From #MeToo to #TimesUp to the sad reality that there are more CEOs of Fortune 500 companies named John than there are women leading those companies—more and more women are speaking out for themselves and their peers. Particularly in the WNBA.

Nneka Ogwumike, the Stanford-educated WNBA MVP and WNBA champion with the Los Angeles Sparks, is president of the WNBPA, continuing a tradition started by Tamika Catchings and Swin Cash of the league's top players also leading the players' union. When the USA women's hockey team staged a boycott in demand of equal treatment by the U.S. Olympic Committee, Nneka and the union stood by their fellow world-class athletes and recognized that positive change in one place can create positive change elsewhere, for any female Olympic or professional athlete.

Breanna Stewart—a four-time NCAA champion with Connecticut, three-time consensus college player of the year, Olympic gold medalist, top pick in the 2016 WNBA Draft, WNBA Rookie of the Year, and among the top players in the league—opened up about being a sexual assault survivor by writing a courageous #MeToo essay that speaks for itself:

“Part of why I waited so long to tell so many people—even those very close to me—is because I don’t want to be defined by this any more than I want to be only defined by how well I play basketball. Both things are a part of me—they make me who I am. We are all a little more complicated than we might seem.”

As soon as Breanna posted her essay, she received a flood of support from across the league and the entire sports world. In speaking her truth, she helped create an environment for others to speak theirs and demonstrate the power of one voice to inspire, empower, and elevate someone else's.

And that's the ultimate power of sport beyond the court. Our sports are egalitarian with locker rooms that are truly diverse, and the only judgment passed is whether you have game. They help us understand that if we say we care about values like equality, diversity, and inclusion then we must reduce implicit biases not just in the workplace, but at home; not just in our laws, but in our hearts and minds—because that's what's expected on the court. And while all of us—athletes and fans alike—face moral choices professionally and personally that can cause discomfort and require risk, today there can no longer be a moral separation between what we do and who we are.



That's why this season when WNBA fans hear the beat of the ball on the court, they hear the beat of a drum at a march. When they watch a player raise her hand to shoot the ball, they see a woman hold a sign in protest. When they bring their daughter to a game, they lift her on their shoulders so she can see the woman she can grow up to be: Courageous, authentic, dynamic, strong, and confident.

And at the close of this season, I will reflect on that sad, silent April day in Atlanta 50 years ago, and wonder what I would tell that little girl standing next to her grandfather as they watched the mules, wagon, and casket go by. Could I tell her that things will be okay? That the parables and songs about equality and justice will ring true? That words and deeds will deliver the promise of freedom for the millions of people who mourned that day?

Perhaps, or perhaps not. But for all the struggles we have overcome as a nation and a people and for all the struggles that remain, I would remind her what else she saw that day: Her mother holding her other hand in a sea of other strong, proud black women. Ms. Parks, Ms. Walker, Ms. Jackson, and countless others whose own marches toward justice cast long shadows over giants like Russell, Chamberlain, and Abdul-Jabbar who mourned that day. Strong, proud women who watched one of their own walk just ahead of the casket of her husband, a black veil draped over head, her hand holding the hand of her own young daughter.

I would tell her what Mrs. King once said, *"My story is a freedom song of struggle. It is about finding one's purpose, how to overcome fear and to stand up for causes bigger than one's self."*

And I would tell that little girl that she will hear her own song, find her own purpose, face down her own fears, and stand up for something bigger than herself because she will be part of another incredible group of courageous women who live that same creed. Proud, determined women who speak up to help us look at, talk to, and hear each other not as enemies or opponents, athletes or fans, but as citizens engaged in the necessary work of building Dr. King's vision for a beloved community.

