



Globalisation and Women's Professional Basketball

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Abstract

Women's basketball is a global game with professional leagues in Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia, and the Americas. The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in the US is the premier league for the sport. During the off-season, over 100 players from WNBA clubs compete professionally abroad to supplement their incomes. Traveling teams and their visiting friends, relatives, and fans place demands on tourism businesses. This study examines the global migration in women's professional basketball, including players living and traveling abroad and their tourism impacts. In-depth interviews with the foreign players participating in the Turkish Women's Basketball League 2011 All-Star Game in Eskişehir were conducted. The foreign all-stars spent on average \$US 1200 per month in Turkey for living expenses during the season; most had been visited by family and/or friends since becoming a player in the Turkish league. The implications of professional sport team travel on league sponsorship and marketing strategies, tourism businesses, and host cities are discussed.

Keywords: globalisation; professional sport; women's basketball; tourism impacts; Turkey

Globalisation and Women's Professional Basketball

Introduction

The popularity of women's basketball has grown steadily around the world for decades. By the 1970s the sport had attracted the notice the International Olympic Committee, which added women's basketball as an official sport of the Olympic Games in 1976. Throughout the 1970s, funding for (and interest in) women's basketball increased in the United States as schools receiving federal funding complied with new laws mandating a lack of discrimination based on gender. Many countries host women's professional basketball leagues besides the United States, including Italy, Germany, Spain, Turkey, and Brazil. Many Americans play overseas and some WNBA players play basketball in foreign countries during WNBA's off-season.

Women's basketball has clearly evolved into a global game. Since first contested at the Olympic Games tournament in Montreal (with the Soviet Union team winning the gold medal over the U.S.), the U.S. women's basketball team has won gold in every Olympic Games to 2008. Several professional women's basketball leagues have emerged but all were short-lived (i.e., the American Basketball League (ABL) formed in 1996 and folded in 1998, save the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Many foreign-born players compete in the WNBA. Over 100 WNBA players from the US and elsewhere compete abroad during the off-season to supplement their incomes, primarily in the European or Australian women's basketball leagues. Typically players go abroad after the WNBA season ends in September and return for the beginning of training camp in May with no break between seasons. Traveling teams and their visiting friends, relatives, and fans place demands on tourism businesses, contributing to the host city economy. In May 2011, the Atlanta Dream traveled overseas to play a team from Great Britain, marking the first WNBA game to be staged in Europe.

The WNBA is one of the premier women's basketball leagues in the world. The league was founded in 1996 as the women's counterpart to the National Basketball Association (NBA). The WNBA plays its games in the United States from May to August and currently is comprised of twelve teams. Overall league attendance averages were approximately 7,800 fans per game in 2010 down from nearly 11,000 per game in 1998 (wnba.com)

Women playing professional basketball earn a fraction of men's salaries. The average NBA salary was \$US 5.3 million in 2010-11 (www.nba.com). In 2010, the minimum salary for a WNBA player with three-plus years of experience was \$51,000 while the maximum salary for a six-plus year player was \$101,500 (the first time in league history that players were able to receive over \$100,000). The minimum salary for WNBA rookies in 2010 was \$35,190. By 2013 (the sixth year under the current WNBA collective bargaining agreement), the cap for an entire team will be \$900,000. Kobe Bryant's salary was more than \$24 million in 2011. It should be noted that the regular season for the WNBA is 34 games whereas the NBA plays 82 games.

The economic recession of 2007-09 in the US (and its aftermath) has financially stressed the WNBA. The Houston Comets, four-time champions, disbanded following the 2009 season. Teams trimmed their rosters from 13 to 11 players, and sponsor logos appeared on game jerseys – more about this hereunder. Some teams are now owned and operated independently of the NBA clubs in the same city.

Prior to 2009, some European league players were forced to miss WNBA training camp and pre-season games because of the long season - a problem that has long plagued the WNBA. The league took action, pushing back the start of the season two weeks. Of the 256 players on WNBA rosters in 2009, 133 spent the offseason playing abroad. The change "enables the players to finish their overseas commitments, have a short break and join their respective WNBA teams for training camp and preseason" (Poms, 2009).

The WNBA is the most diverse professional sport league in North America with respect to race and gender, according to the University of Central Florida Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport. WNBA President, Laurel Richie the only woman president of a professional sports league. At the start of the 2010 season, there were four African-American head coaches, and seven women head coaches. There were six women and four African-Americans as general managers (two were African-American women) (Lapchick, Caudy, & Russell, 2010). In the 2010 WNBA season, 16% of players were white, 69% were African-American, and there was one Latina. There were no Asian players. Fourteen percent of the players were international. Spectators were mostly female, nearly 78% (Cosgrove-Mather, 2003). The diversity of the players may be a contributing factor in their willingness to travel abroad.

The Women's EuroLeague is Europe's premier basketball league, and is organized by FIBA Europe (International Basketball Federation). Founded in 1959, the

EuroLeague consists of 24 teams playing a regular season and championship tournament. Moscow Spartak has won the last four EuroLeague championships. Sue Bird, Cappie Pondexter, Candace Parker, and Courtney Paris are among the WNBA stars playing in the EuroLeague. In Australia, there are 10 teams in the Women's National Basketball League (WNBL), with all Australian states represented, except Tasmania and the Northern Territory. The league was formed in 1981. In Spain, the women's top league is comprised of 14 teams of 10-12 players of which two or three are foreigners, usually from Europe or the US.

Kaunas VĖI Aistės of the EuroLeague has won the Lithuanian women's league championship 13 times. The club's annual budget in 2011 was 1.320.000 Lt of which 400,000 Lt came from the Kaunas municipality, 700,000 Lt from a general sponsor, and 220.000 Lt from other sponsors. Another Lithuanian club, Klaipėdos Lemminkainen, had an annual budget of 900,000 Lt in 2011.

The migratory patterns of Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi illustrate the international travel trend in women's professional basketball. Bird, born and raised on Long Island, New York, played under an Israeli passport in 2010 for a team in Moscow (Spartak) where she earned almost four times her \$93,000 annual salary with the WNBA, according to Caple (2010). Diana Taurasi, who grew up in California, played under an Italian passport and earned roughly 10 times as much as the \$49,000 her WNBA Phoenix Mercury will pay her this season (Caple, 2010). NBA stars typically rest during their off season.

The business models for women's professional basketball in the U.S. and overseas are quite different. Several former NBA stars have coached WNBA teams including Michael Cooper, Bill Laimbeer, and Corey Gaines. The WNBA uses a model with high salaries for coaches, restricted pay for athletes, and heavy reliance on ticket revenues for financial solvency. In contrast, several European teams are owned by wealthy businessmen, and attract only 2,000 fans per game but pay players two to four times what they receive in the WNBA (Caple, 2010).

Obtaining accurate financial information from professional sport teams is difficult because they are private businesses and deem their records confidential. Several of the WNBA teams tied to NBA clubs share personnel and operations thus blurring costs. Cash strapped and facing declines in attendance and revenues, WNBA teams have sought corporate sponsorships to boost their bottom line. In 2009, the Los Angeles Sparks and Phoenix Mercury agreed to use their game jerseys for corporate branding

through multiyear deals with Farmers Insurance and identity-theft protection company LifeLock Inc., respectively. In 2010, Microsoft obtained the jersey sponsorship rights to the Seattle Storm, the season's eventual champions. This practice follows the lead of many sport teams and leagues around the world with jersey sponsorships.

Turkish Women's Basketball League

There are 12 teams in the Turkish Women's Basketball League with 164 total players of whom 54 are foreigners. Teams include: Galatasaray Medical Park, Fenerbahçe, Tarsus Bld., Panküp Kayseri Şeker, Beşiktaş Cola Turka, Botaş, Samsun Basketbol, Mersin Bşb, Ceyhan Belediye, İstanbul Üniversitesi, Burhaniye Belediye, and Alanya Belediye. Sylvia Fowles, Tamika Catchings, and Nykesha Sales are among the WNBA stars from the US playing in the Turkish league. Diana Taurasi, regarded as the best female basketball player in the world, has also played in the Turkish Women's Basketball League.

The Turkish Basketball League was founded in 1980 and at the first division, permits a maximum of five foreign players per team under what is known as the "3+2 rule." Under this provision, teams may have more than three foreign players on their roster but must pay the League a fee for the additional fourth and possible fifth foreign player. Teams opting to sign more than the allotted three foreign players must pay \$US 125 000 to the Turkish Basketball Federation. The Federation collects this money and distributes it equally amongst the other teams in the league that do not have more foreign players. Teams competing in other European leagues may have more than five foreign players and may have all of them on the court at the same time.

Most of the foreign players in the Turkish League are Americans (90%), with others from Brazil, Lithuania, Serbia, England, and Canada. Some foreigners become Turkish citizens after three years (previously, the rule was five years) to allow an open roster spot for other foreign players. This is a fairly common practice in international sport. At the second division, Turkish teams are permitted only one foreign player.

International sponsors for some teams in the Turkish league include adidas, and1, Reebok, Nike, and Hummel. Mercedes, adidas, and GNC are among the sponsors for the Turkish Basketball Federation. Other sponsors are mostly Turkish brands.

Beşiktaş Cola Turka plays its home games at Cola Turka Arena. The club's annual operating budget is approximately € 500 000. A Turkish player makes about € 50 000 per year and foreign players earn \$US 80,000 to 100,000. The larger clubs, i.e., Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe, have annual operating budgets of \$US 3 to 4 million.

Entering its 14th year in 2011, the WNBA provides the most enduring laboratory for the study of women's professional sport in North America. Several scholars have examined the WNBA (Lough & Kim, 2004; McDonald, 2000), most notably McCabe (2007, 2008, 2011) in studies of gender and spectator attitudes towards basketball. More women attend WNBA games than men (McCabe, 2008). McCabe (2011) found that women had more positive feelings toward WNBA basketball than men, but as an outcome of their psychological involvement with the sport rather than their gender. McCabe notes "...these spectators are more comfortable supporting....women's professional basketball than are spectators with more traditional gender-role attitudes."

From a sport tourism perspective, foreign athletes may serve dual roles. On one hand, they place demands on lodging and eating and drinking places when visiting cities for competition or leisure travel. On the other, they may attract relatives and friends as visitors to the country in which they play who likewise will require tourist accommodations. The purpose of this study is to examine the travel and tourism impacts of women's professional basketball and the extent of the watching friends and relatives market (WFR). This market segment includes may include the athlete's parents, spouse, partner, other relatives and friends who travel to watch them compete in sport.

Methodology

Sample

The Turkish Women's Basketball League All Star Game was played in Eskişehir, Turkey on 17 January 2011. The game was the first contest held in the new sports centre at Anadolu University School of Physical Education and Sport, and attracted approximately 5,000 spectators. Interviews with 11 foreign basketball all-stars were conducted during the weekend of the event to learn more about the globalization of women's basketball and their travel experiences in Turkey. The face-to-face interviews took place at the official hotel of the All-Star game before and after team practices. Responses were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. In some cases, follow-up information was obtained through direct personal correspondence with the athletes.

Interview Questions

1. What country are you originally from?

2. How many years have you been playing basketball professionally
3. How many years have you been playing basketball in Turkey?
4. Have you invited family and/or friends from abroad to visit you in Turkey since becoming a player in the Turkish league?
5. Have family and friends from abroad visited you in Turkey since becoming a player in the Turkish league? Yes No
 - a. If yes, how many visitors have you hosted in the past 12 months?
 - b. How long did they visit you in Turkey
6. Do you live year-round in Turkey? Yes No
7. On average, how much money per month do you spend in Turkey for living expenses i.e. housing, food, transport, etc.? ___2000 D
8. What are your impressions of Turkey as a tourist destination?
9. Would you recommend Turkey as a tourist destination? Yes No
10. Would you like to live in Turkey after your professional basketball career is completed? Yes No Not sure
11. May we ask you a few more questions later via electronic mail? Yes No

Results

All of the foreign-born all-stars lived outside Turkey for part of the year, playing in other professional basketball leagues. On average, these foreign all-stars spend \$US 1 200 per month in Turkey for living expenses i.e. housing, food, transport, etc. They had played basketball professionally for 2-15 years, and played in the Turkish league 1-10 years. Seven of the eleven players had been visited in Turkey by family and/or friends since becoming a player in the Turkish league. The length of stay by visitors ranged from seven to 30 days.

Players were asked if they would like to live in Turkey after their professional basketball career was completed. Half replied yes and the others replied no or not sure because of their desire to be closer to family. This has long-term tourism implications as player exposure to foreign cities may lead to relocation and subsequent visits by friends and relatives. Athletes were asked their impressions of Turkey as a tourist destination. Many had favorable comments about the friendliness of the people, beautiful scenery, and food. "I think the country is beautiful especially the Antalya region - I love it." "Turkey is awesome. Food is great, people are nice, shopping is great." All would recommend Turkey as a tourist destination.

Most of Turkey's sports clubs are associated with the names of cities, municipalities or neighborhoods. Beşiktaş, Galatasaray, and Fenerbahçe, the three largest sports clubs in Turkey, have teams for almost every sport. These clubs are named for neighborhoods in İstanbul. The Samsun Basketball Club was founded in 2003 in the Turkish city of Samsun (2010 pop. 531,997) (samsunbasketbol.com).

Turkish clubs have established title and presenting sponsorships with institutions in an array of sectors: Medical, education, government, consumer goods, utilities, etc. See Table 1. The first two teams on the list, Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe, are among the most successful in the league, and have private hospital sponsors. There is an intense rivalry between the basketball clubs and the competition has intensified for the hospitals. Family health care decisions (including hospital care) are often made by women, and may be justification for hospitals sponsoring women's sport.

Table 1. Turkish Women's Basketball League Teams and Sponsors, 2011.

Team/Sponsor	Description
Galatasaray Medical Park:	İstanbul neighborhood + hospital brand used in the name of the club
Fenerbahçe Acıbadem:	İstanbul neighborhood + hospital brand used in the name of the club
Tarsus Belediye:	Province and name of the municipality
Panküp Kayseri Şeker:	City name and sugar company brand (Kayseri is the city)
Beşiktaş Cola Turka:	Neighborhood in İstanbul and cola brand
Botaş:	Natural gas distribution brand
Samsun Basketbol:	City name
Mersin Bşb:	City name and municipality name
Ceyhan Belediye:	Province name and municipality name
İstanbul Üniversitesi:	City name and University names
Burhaniye Belediye:	Province name and municipality name
Alanya Belediye:	Province name and municipality name

Makbule Amachree is from Nigeria and has played in the Turkish women's league since 2000, longer than any foreign athlete. She currently plays for the team, Samsun Basketbol, with Americans Kristi Toliver, Alexis Rack, and Jessica Addair. Before joining Samsun, she played professionally in Istanbul. Makbule was the first foreign player in the Turkish league to obtain a Turkish passport. She did so to help her team and further her professional career. Five other foreign players in the league have obtained Turkish

passports. Makbule is captain of the Nigerian national basketball team and trains young Nigerians for college and professional playing careers at her basketball camps during the off-season. Several family members and friends have visited her in Turkey over the years. Her cousin from Nigeria now plays football professionally in Turkey.

American Epiphany Price skipped her final year at Rutgers University to turn professional, playing for Spartak Moscow before joining Botas Spor in Turkey (Bishop, 2010). Spartak was owned by Shabtai von Kalmanovic, a prominent businessman and former KGB agent who bankrolled the top women's team in Europe before he was murdered in November 2010. His widow, Anna Arhipova - von Kalmanovic, now directs the club. Botas Spor is located in Adana, Turkey, and near a U.S. military base. In 2010 Price was developing her game in Europe with the hopes of latching on with a WNBA team in the future. This example illustrates the lure of international travel for women's professional basketball players and the dynamic nature of team affiliation and ownership.

Discussion and Conclusion

The name of the game in professional sport is assumed to be money. As women's and men's sport clubs compete in a tight global economy, opportunities for additional revenues may emerge from new sources. Companies offering services to tourists including airlines, resorts, casinos, and on-line booking services may increasingly seek stadium, team and jersey sponsorship opportunities for women's sports. As a recent example, Foxwoods Hotel and Casino in New Jersey signed a jersey sponsorship agreement with the New York Liberty of the WNBA in 2010. The deal essentially removes the Liberty brand from sight as only the Foxwoods name and logo appear on the front of the players' game jersey. Several arenas in the US are named for airlines including the United Center (Chicago), American Airlines Arena (Miami), and USAirways Center (Phoenix). Sport sponsorships by travel related companies may lead to tourism bookings by the athletes and fans with the companies through specialized promotional deals.

Turkish Airlines became official sponsor of Europe's top club basketball competition, Euroleague Basketball, in 2010. The league is now referred to as the Turkish Airlines Euroleague in all media. This deal marked the fourth major sponsorship contract for the company in 2010. Turkish Airlines had earlier secured sponsorship deals with football superpowers Manchester United and Barcelona, and Greek basketball club

Maroussi BC. Similarly, Emirates, national airline of Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), secured sponsorship of several prominent sport clubs including Arsenal FC, AC Milan, Team New Zealand (America's Cup), and Cricket Australia. In the US, the Portland Timbers signed Alaska Airlines as jersey sponsor for their 2011 Major League Soccer debut.

Future research should examine the extent to which the Watching Friends and Relatives (WFR) market in women's (and men's) sport contributes to tourism. Research by Scott and Turco (2011) reveal that upwards of 12% of visitors to the U.S. Open Women's Golf Championship were relatives or friends of the contestants. An investigation of team sponsors involved in tourism and offering travel incentives to the relatives and friends of players may reveal more frequent visits and/or extended lengths of stay. The relocation, socialization and/or dual citizenship of foreign athletes and their families in the country they play may also be an area of future research. For example, is obtaining dual citizenship and/or relocation more common among female athletes and if so why? To what extent if at any does foreign travel and competing abroad influence a player's decision to relocate permanently in the host country?

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