

Women's Basketball Comes of Age

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When Rutgers basketball star Epiphany Prince skipped her 2009 senior year to play professionally in Europe, her defection made headlines. The New York Daily News pointed out she became “the first American woman to leave school early and play professionally overseas.” Prince, who seized the opportunity abroad to earn a six figure salary, was not eligible for the Women’s National Basketball Association(WNBA) as she had not yet turned 22, graduated from college, or was four years removed from high school. After playing for Spartak Moscow and Botas-Spor in Turkey, Prince was selected in 2010 by the Chicago Sky, the 4th overall pick in the WNBA draft.

Although Prince plans to complete her education taking summer classes, not everyone sees her as a role model for college women basketball stars of the future. Pat Summit, head coach of the Tennessee Lady Vols basketball team and winner of eight national championships, said she was “very disappointed” when she learned Ms. Prince had elected to leave Rutgers a year early. “I absolutely hope that this is a one-time, not an example for the future.” Interviewed by professors Holly Vietzke and Diane Sullivan of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover for its “Educational Forum” on Comcast Sports Network, 11 A.M., Sunday, August 28th, Summit said, “I think it’s so important to get your degree, to complete your eligibility at the college level, and players don’t understand it.” That’s because, Summit continued, “it is the absolute best four years of your life...and the money can wait.” Echos UCLA women’s basketball head coach Nikki Caldwell, “I would hope it’s not a trend. Every athlete is one injury away (from becoming unable to participate) and women basketball players aren’t making the multimillion-dollar contracts coming out of college, nor are they going to make them if they leave early... Education is something that can never be taken away from and one day, when that ball stops bouncing, what do you have to fall back upon?”

Spurred by expanded television coverage, women’s basketball at all levels is growing in popularity and standout celebrity players increasingly are liable to be tempted by the money. TV ratings for the sport on ESPN are 40 per cent higher today than just three years ago. Triggered by enactment of Title IX in 1972 pushed by Congresswoman Patsy Mink, female participation in college sports generally is up 456 per cent and the figure for high school is a stunning 904 per cent. Title IX put an end to banning any person because of gender from participation in any educational activity that receives the Federal dollar. So where it used to be “huge” if 2,500 fans showed up for a womens’ college basketball game, today some womens’ games draw over 20,000 fans, more than their colleges’ male teams, according to UCLA’s Caldwell. Indeed, many men claim they prefer watching women shoot a basketball through a hoop. Coach Summit asserts men like it because “maybe things develop a bit slower, because the guys are just up and down a lot.” Also, “I think our game is played below the rim, and their (male) game is above the rim. Of course, we’ve had players that could play above the rim but I think then you get to see the game develop,

whether it's offensively or defensively. I think our fans can really see as we come down the floor, the inside-outside action. They can just see the game as a whole." She adds, "A lot of guys I know say, 'I'm getting season tickets. We'll be there. I love the women's game.' And a lot of them have daughters, too. I think that matters." Summit goes on to say, "There are so many young girls and boys that watch our team play I think what they see is 'sports are good for women.' So maybe it inspires them, even if they're not into basketball, to go out and go running or swimming, to have this visual of 10,000 or 20,000 people coming to watch a women's basketball game on television. And I definitely think it inspires young girls and young women to play."

Coach Summit says that women varsity players train very much as men do, and that they study video tapes of opponents' games. She says her Volunteer women strengthen themselves by weight training and other forms of physical conditioning and practicing often and getting in lots of shots. As different opponents have different styles, "the fun part of coaching is to try to figure out what you want to do with your own team and how you're going to defend and play against your opponent. So there's a lot of strategic thinking going on as to what is the best plan," she says. "We watch a lot of tape," Summit continues. "Video is key. In watching tape we understand their tendencies as well as our own tendencies. And maybe they're running something that we've never seen before, so then we implement that in practice to get ready to defend it in a game. So a lot of strategic planning is going on."

As important as physical and strategic preparedness is the task of getting young women who were stars in high school to understand that at the college level basketball "is not about you. It's about the team." Summit explains "Some players come in and they're a little spoiled and so they have to understand how to be a great teammate. Some of them are unselfish, maybe to a fault. But it's getting to know that, and we do the predictive index, which is the personality profile that really gives us a lot of feedback on how to best coach each individual on our team. Summit says that recruiting has become more demanding and time-consuming.

"With the parity of the game and the number of students coming out at the high school level, it's a lot more competitive in the recruiting wars. And this means that we have to be out and identify the best seventh or eighth grader and follow their progress. It's not just wait until they're in high school. Sometimes, I feel like I'm just looking at these little babies. But you follow them and you may have a diamond in the rough or just really hit the jackpot." In an era of outstanding coaching, Summit says, recruiting has become increasingly competitive, and everybody's trying to get these one or two players to buy in, and we want them to come to Tennessee and (other coaches) want them to come to their schools. And the players have decisions to make because the majority of schools have great facilities. The (talent) pool is bigger, but it's still highly competitive. You've got to be fortunate enough to get the good ones."

Womens' basketball coach Tara VanDerveer of Stanford University—who coached the USA womens' team that won the 1996 Olympic gold medal—says her satisfaction comes when her teams achieve excellence. "It was about giving—doing it right; about training and working and the sacrifices that the women made to play together and train together." Speaking of her Olympic team, she said, "If you were around them for as long as I was around them, just to see the maturity that they had, and the unselfishness, and all the things that they did for each other and how they grew together as a team, it was inspiring.

And you could carry that kind of lesson into your life, of how, really, anything is possible if people are willing to do what it takes. And those women, that team, were willing to do whatever it took." VanDerveer believes that "the rest of the world had this idea about U.S. basketball, as far as it pertained to women...that we had never really trained for the Olympics but just kind of showed up and practiced for two weeks and gave it a try." On the contrary, VanDerveer said, "I had to leave Stanford for a year and the women I was training with for nine months were basically professional women, and it was serious. We were on a mission to win the gold medal."

VanDerveer says that full parity with men still eludes women, and she includes women basketball coaches: "I think it is fair to say (of them) that if you ruffle too many feathers, you're easily replaced. In men's basketball, in the NCAA tournament, for every round you're in you basically win money. In women's basketball, when you're in the tournament it doesn't equate to any money...if the women's coach causes trouble or if they're outspoken, (the Administration) will say, 'Let's just get rid of them and get someone else.' It's not about money. There are a lot of situations where a woman coach can easily be fired, where they can bring in someone that coached men's basketball somewhere, or a friend of the athletic director's. It's a situation that is not supply and demand...if you are a troublemaker or you are questioning your salary or your resources it's easier to get rid of you."

American culture has changed to be more accepting of women playing sports. "I think people see it as being healthy, being fit, being active, and I think that is a great reflection that our society is changing. And sports, I think, helps us (women) get out and do things and be more productive citizens in the big world. This year we'll probably (have) more women than men in the workforce, and our lives are changed." VanDerveer says fathers are "huge" in the struggle for equality for their daughters because they're saying, 'My daughter's not going to ride on that rickety bus,' 'My daughter's not going to practice at 6 in the morning when the boys have the 2 to 7 P.M. slot in the gym. And it's parents, both mothers and fathers, saying, 'Let's be fair to our daughters.'" VanDerveer goes on to say, "It's great to see young girls and young women play sports. It's a part of their life. And I think that young girls do not understand that sports was not a part of...our older life. When we've had our basketball camp and I'll have 50 eight-year-olds in the audience I'll talk to them about the fact that I never went to basketball camp, I never played basketball in junior high or high school. There weren't scholarships for women to go to college. And so after giving this spiel (from) my soapbox, one little girl raises her hand and says, 'Why not?' And I said, 'Well, can anyone else answer this question?' And another eight-year-old girl raises her hand and says, 'Sexism.'"

UCLA's coach Caldwell says that women coaches can help women players in ways that male coaches cannot. "We always say we're coach last. I think when you're a young girl, whether you play sports or not, you go through those puberty and adolescence issues and things like that, so we're easily able to relate, and when they have breakups and their boyfriends aren't being a great boyfriend, we're easily there to say to them that we've been there, we've been in your shoes. And they understand that, so I think they are more prone to confide in us." Caldwell adds, "When you think of it we wear a lot of different hats. We play the role of their mothers at time or best friend. We just be whatever we have to be to them. So I think the Number One thing is that we can relate (and say) 'I've been in your shoes. I've walked the same path as you've walked. And to me, that is a great way for us to open up our communication."

Caldwell stresses that a good coach is as involved in a player's academics as in her court

play. “They’re of equal importance and if I feel like the academics is suffering then I will remove basketball because you (the player) are going to get your degree.” She recalls, “I’m from a household where my mom stressed going to class and I adopted coach Summit’s policy of ‘You miss a class, you miss a game,’ and it’s been very effective in just letting the young ladies know why you’re here. You are here to get that degree and along the way we’re going to play a little basketball, hopefully win a championship, and we’re going to remember all the experiences that we had while we were in college.”

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