



SHOT CLOCKS

poems and an essay for the WNBA

STEPHEN BURT

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Harry Tankoos Books

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Published by Harry Tankoos Books

ISBN 0-9678031-8-7

First Harry Tankoos Printing 2006

Cover and Book Design: Jessica L. Bennett

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“For Lindsay Whalen” and “Help...” appear in my full-length book *Parallel Play* (Graywolf, 2006), first appeared in the pamphlet *Brief History of North American Youth* (WinteRed, 2005), and reappear with the consent of Graywolf Press. “The Sea as a Losing Season” appeared in *Gulf Coast*. “Vanessa in Action” (as “For Vanessa Hayden”) appeared in *American Scholar*. The essay “The W” first appeared (as “Welcome to the Almost Cult-Like Fan-World of American Women’s Pro Basketball”) in *The Believer*, and reappears with their kind consent. My thanks to those presses and journals, and to their editors.

Thanks to Mike, who thought this book would be a good idea. Special thanks to Jessie, who both designed this book and introduced me to this sport; I reappear at games with her consent.

Secondary inspiration and support: Demetri and GERALYN; Ted and Sara Sampsell-Jones; Sue Short; Carisa Worden; Paul Swanson; Rebecca Rider; Nicole Smith; Board Junkies: www.bjka.net.

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For the fans. Who stay.

FOR LINDSAY WHALEN

You only have the skills that you can use.
The shots you make surround you like a breeze.
When someone wins, then someone has to lose.

You don't show off. We know you by your moves:
A feint, a viewless pass, a perfect tease
Make space for all the skills that you can use.

Defenders and their shadows, three on two,
Start at you like infuriated bees:
You glide through them. You take the look they lose.

As serious as science, picking clues
And dodges that no other player sees,
You find the skills that only you could use:

Applause, then silence. Scrape of distant shoes.
Then race through packed periphery to free
Space no one lifts a hand to. -Win or lose,

Such small decisions, run together, fuse
In concentration nothing like the ease
We seem to see in all the skills you use,
Till someone wins. Then someone else will lose.

SPEEDY HOLIDAY

for the Connecticut Sun

The air is full of it—
how every summer, how many, how they can
collide & remain in motion, a new adage
for every minute, as if the insolid
ground had become a mere surface on which the fast sun

could skate. He dug less, in that suddenly-fertile
ground, than we could expect, yet we grew as if
we had lived well together for years— on a fast-moving
island, say, whale and dolphin traffic entertaining
us at every turn, with enough applause

to overload a mike. The bolt
of divine lightning lay concealed in the rural surround;
we pried it loose over and over by making up
our sermons in sands, in every creek and brook—
why, cough or sneeze, only, and the magic environs

of that isle might restore your health,
marking the inconsistent paraphernalia
of commerce as things to deny: keys, a sale
sign, a flimsy receipt—all recede
in favor of a gift economy driven

by gambling & enthusiasm, each win
hence prompting another ode, if you only
keep up with it. Most folks, of course, could not:
their private slowdowns and difficulties mar—
goaded acknowledgements notwithstanding—what

would otherwise have become our perfect day.

WHY WE FIGHT

for the Detroit Shock

We are human beings and therefore want
to beat you & take your stuff. Consider
Jerusalem, or El-Alamein,
or Medina: no land but what our rivals
already hold comes under our notice & grasp.

We don't have to be smooth, but we don't have
to share: ill for days, we made our dismay plain
at pier's end, casting our tokens of modesty
into the voracious Greatest Lake,

then motorboating forth.

Take us seriously or with sass; wink
as shiftily, or fear us as much, as you choose.
You can tell this truth wryly or boldly: you'll go
nowhere unless you are willing
to hurt somebody over & over & over.
We are coming for you & you & you.

THE SEA AS A LOSING SEASON

for the Minnesota Lynx

Though many rocks
 Defend the private beaches from the rest,
The whole avers
A brand of selflessness:

Stray ice-cream sandwich wrappers mar sand lawns,
 Bent boards refuse
The dignified name of 'driftwood,' and if the sea
Itself makes no demand, alas, it turns

Away from us over and over. And now a gull
 Regards us as you would regard
Your treasures on earth if you thought them all
As temporary as afternoon; she waits

For foam to rise, and recede, and leave askew
 Its seal of justice, seal of lace. Tall bird,
Uneasy in your home whites, one wonders if you,
Too, will return next year, and whether we want

Whatever we say we want... Grit, salt and grease
 In the scouring air never stung
So sharp, nor shards of clamshells pleased so many,
Between the ages of five and twelve for so long.

If you don't stand up for yourself, you'll stand
 For anything, somebody overhears, and the shore
Agrees: its reach and edge own
Some measure of white noise for us

To talk above. It seems to prevent
 Finesse. Ahead, in winter
Months when only residents
Arrive, it will resume its character

Uneasily, but this evening we look instead
 To next year's summer weather in

Advance (a moon, a gust) as it seems to spread
Across the sky, slows down, and finds its place

Amid the sunset's settlements, and means
 To beautify us, too: its irenic kohl—
Old eagerness made to settle down— underlines
The sunset's parting orange-and-oatmeal glow.

SPECTATOR SPORTS

for the Houston Comets

Set down in dull Hobby Airport again, we wonder
How it came to pass that our ambitions
Ebbd so far as to reach our current horizons,
Registering as they do the meek double-entry
Year-round bookkeeping which, like dust storms, consigns
Love to the “merely personal.” What then

Should the passengers do? How fast, and when,
Would we so-called regulars have to work to design
Our own kites for such high winds, to make a rapt sentry
Out of even the closest spectator, before
Pernicious inertia confounds us? We keep our eyes on
Equanimous safety, and keep far-off hopes for dim fictions,
Saving or sparing for them our risk, our ardor.

HELP WITH YOUR PLANT QUESTIONS

You could take it from here, on these curt rocks' cut-glass court
Before the allspice tree whose anxious bark
Peels and grows back in wires; from its height
We may remain visible only as strict
Connoisseurs, defenders of no ground.
Politics lends us our interest, but it won't last,
Nor outlast these older possessors, who knew
Where to look: your learning curve, Janel, is one

These cycads bear into their microclimates, grids
Of desperate fronds and all that they survey
Who make the nets in which to catch the hopes
Whose souvenirs they bring us. Are you
Certain of your own heart? Are
You certain who cares? Who bred you, and should
You take up the purpose for which they gladly served
Or press down, like roots, for a confident repeal

Of all your fibrous parents took away
From spoiled loam in their old country? The ripe
And vigorous bottle and solitaire, giants among
Palms, arrive with their varied and expert advice
About growing up taller next time: consider this
Life as a sport, the prize hidden, the rules introduced
Too late for us to learn them all, the score
Untied at the half, the quickness that gives

Advantage loose, rolling away far under the sun,
Though only within these green boundaries do we still
Live and remain uncertain of love, point
Taken. For the brain is a
Bromeliad, and that fig tree, hacked away
So that it grows back orderly next season,
Has become your good harbinger: nothing is safe,
Nothing accomplished, none yours, till the last sound blooms.

DRAFT CAMP

We are specialists of sorts, or out of sorts. Too many people care what we are wearing.

One of us could spot a wren on a dare in a darkening glade from sixty yards away. One of us can lift any four others. One of us died. One of us stops conversations with her hawkish malachite-green eyes.

We have had repeatedly to admit that we are individual bodies, roaming through contested, crowded space, and then to believe we are part of one another, involved in very temporary combinations, minute-to-minute teams.

And why shouldn't everyone hope to be selected? Don't we all wait through life, *choose me, choose me*?

One of us can snap almost any tree limb. Another can be a tree, hard to get over, almost impossible to see around. Most of us have been called and called again.

One of us can draw blood with a glance. One can steal the sides off a scalene triangle, the green off any leaf, pickpocket the oxygen out of the air. Some of us have worked and traveled past the point of diminishing returns.

One and only one will be remembered in 25 years, her numbers hoisted up like constellations, winched and fixed into an indoor sky.

And why shouldn't everyone hope to be selected? Don't we all wait through life, *choose me, choose me*?

DIANA IN ARIZONA

Your mere profile once meant power & fear.
A temperate state held you sacred. For three out of four
seasons, the quick arc
of your shot ruled their hills; in trouble, they ran
to you, and you alone saved every day.

Those days no longer exist & we find you here
where you are no more
and no less famous than the lack
of wind, or the city plan
that offers no center, no winter, no woods, no May.

Amid its sprawl you seek a clear
path to unlikely big game; for-
lorn fanfares give back
bad calls to baffled bands
of would-be companions & ever-receding prey.

So even divinity needs help, as the moon requires
the tides to which it can never come near.
As dry as the stars, your titles flick-
er still, high over the frustrated sand,
impatient & dangerous in their very array.

CYNOSURE

for the Seattle Storm

Exuberance by a temperate sea, and the tides
always nearby, so that they mean or imply
that wisdom moves always north and west; the clouds
sideswipe the skyscrapers at twilight, each a royal orange

axe on the ghost timber we felled long ago
to build up this hilly city. Yet to end
on a vanquished forest would be
unsporting: here we love

our nature, where each hike
into evergreen or up a snowpath rebukes
the enemies of fun. But what is fun?
Is it wanting, or having, or keeping? Is it a thing

any transcontinental flight engine, all burst
balloons lost in the jet stream, and any
mere mechanical tourist can touch down to find,
as if to pursue birds' migratory

tropisms, aerial rose of fulfilled desire?
One summer we got what we wanted;
each battle in oxygen-poor air ended in
triumph, and our celebratory sound

was the noise of a city that loved us the way we love you.

PERSONALITY TRAP

for the Indiana Fever

Bright yellow
world, uncountable
stories become you,
but all of them stop short.

When it won't rain
in Indianapolis, they
call it a drought, & choose to stay indoors.

My gangly
body and squared-up
face don't
work together, and that's the impression I make.

EARLY MUSIC

for the New York Liberty

Everybody is an elsewhere.

The emptiness of the space they once took up
forms a suitable crystal,
raw, benzene-like in the resonance of its rings.

Their garden grows so cold that there is a winter within
every summer; our ice falls away
like sheets of vagrant mica, the rink revealed
as melting while freezing, as falling-down unsafe.

We have been watching the empty
spaces even among stars: a lane, a barren
nova, a faithless eclipse—such events prepare us
for the smaller loss inside ourselves,

where even American waters part
supernaturally, but nobody walks through.
An elderly relative who shouldn't be driving
has taken charge of the country and the times,

while we play early music minus one.
The rebec key I'm on, or in, won't fit
the other instruments; they're out of tune,
or else our troubles lie in our old score.

VANESSA IN THE UNDERWORLD

When she turns the last light off, we will be alone
With all the other people in the world,
Except that they won't see her. Find them first,
And you will know your way around, telling apart
Invisible ridges, bell curves, sonar rings
From the discouraging inner atmosphere.

Yet experience here accretes as limestone
Has, in hills and under them, immense,
Though able to evanesce. Ahead, in
Columns and question marks, calcite
Collects itself, prompting alert
Spectators to form a big V,

Meaning her descent, her vanishing and her return,
As glory of whatever sort demands
More space than it can reasonably expect...
If she is both guide and hero, who can
Guard her? What has she encountered there?
A mother? a ghost? It's not our place to know.

Now stairs appear, and now the afternoon
Into which she can be expected to rise.
Outdoors, cornflowers bloom; our footpath turns
Mute blue in sunlight, turquoise in the shade
Gliding steadily off the lake.
When finally we exit the roof of the cave,

Past lowing shadows born to stand unseen,
We will look back gingerly at the strongest
Blocks we have ever observed, whose secrets demand
Our promise to return through this perhaps
Half-empty arena, whose glittering posts support
Itself in majestic frustration: so far, so high.

VANESSA IN ACTION

South Florida weather will thrash
All but the sturdiest roofs
Or bring them to the ground.
Its hardest neighborhoods

Leave everyone behind.
Brought up, and out, and North,
From streets far worse than storms,
Already you are your own

Immovable object, though not—
Or not yet anyway—
An irresistible force.
You make your young mistakes:

The strength we know, and speed
We won't expect, come back
To you irregularly,
As sun itself comes back

On a day of small storms, as made
Plays send you to the line.
On good days, you can hold
Up almost anything—

Opponents, plans, the frame
Of the visible world, like the Greek
Titan whom Hercules
Tricked so he would support

The globe on which we stand.
He stands there still. You move;
You take your certain turn.
The globe on which we stand

Should be yours for half the game
To block and put away,
To pivot and set in place,
To sign, on this summer, your name.

TALE

for the Sacramento Monarchs

Giant herself, the intrepid
heroine will slay the ogre if
I think so: I know it, as certainly as
we teach a pen, a chair—oh, even
a roof or a freeway—to follow instructional lines

of gravity, their transparent, never-to-be-crossed
strata making parts of the land comprehensible
amid smoggy confusion. It works even if you don't
care: a law—sonorous
in its intangible push and pull—just says

that charisma, while heady, may awe (walk or run with it as
you like) the inattentive, but won't
make the beanstalk grow thicker or faster, nor break
the life-threatening hedge of thorns that flare like
sparks around hostage beauty. Our heroine needs

one homophonic (Oulipo will
offer examples) complement of bright
and well-maintained, if not indeed shining, armor,
rinsed, like Achilles', in a special sea,
new tonics for courageous grownups coursing

over its monarchical breastplate and greaves:
thus emboldened, she will go on to stand
and fight for her too-sunny, agricultural realm,
where fire signals from each hillcrest, in hay needy teens
have secretly gathered, give warning enough to defend

each village against all marauders, imagined and real.

THE W:

HOW PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S PRO BASKETBALL TOOK OVER MY (AND COULD TAKE OVER YOUR) LIFE

first published May 2005

1. BURGUNDY PALMS

I teach at a smallish college in St. Paul, Minnesota. People who walk into my smallish office see: the cover of the July 2004 *Lynx Tracks* (the promotional magazine of the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx), with its photo of an airborne Katie Smith, the all-time leading scorer in women's basketball; the June 25, 2004 issue of *Lavender*, the gay and lesbian newsweekly of the Twin Cities, with its slightly blurry photo of Lynx reserve center Michele Van Gorp; an uninflated blue, green-and-white basketball with the Lynx's logo; and a newspaper clipping about the life of Lynx rookie Vanessa Hayden, whose life story is even more inspiring than her clean shot blocks (her grandmother and an attentive coach helped her escape from an Orlando housing project, where her crack-plagued mother died when Vanessa was twelve).

The Lynx, like the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves, play in Minneapolis's Target Center, fifteen minutes by car from the college. Yet none of my students, and almost none of my colleagues, know who Smith, or Van Gorp, or Hayden are. Here's what they miss:

With 6:42 left in the second half, the Lynx had all but collapsed before the visiting Phoenix Mercury, who, under the command of Rookie of the Year Diana Taurasi, led by a seemingly insurmountable margin—55-35. Lynx coach Suzie McConnell Serio pulled all five Lynx starters, replacing them with Hayden, two other rookies, one defensive specialist, and the then rarely-used veteran Stacey Lovelace-Tolbert (whose infant daughter had become a fixture at practice). Hayden positioned herself for a layup, got fouled, missed the free throw. Lovelace-Tolbert shunted the rebound upcourt to another rookie, who hit a three-pointer. Thirty seconds of strong defense led to a block and another rebound, and another Lynx three-pointer.

Five minutes and a few long-range baskets later, the Lynx trailed by three points, with under a minute to go. In these situations the team that's behind can foul the team that's ahead, which stops the clock; the trailing team then has to hope their opponents miss free throws. The Lynx did just that—but the player they sent to the free-throw line was the Mercury's best shooter,

connecting on 86 percent of her freebies. This time, though, she hit just the first of two. Lovelace-Tolbert grabbed the miss, the Lynx called a timeout, and with fourteen seconds remaining fed the ball back to her. She hit another three.

Lynx 58, Phoenix 59. The Lynx fouled again, sending Taurasi, the Rookie of the Year, to the line. A rattled Taurasi missed both free throws; Lovelace-Tolbert was fouled as she snatched a rebound. She then made both freebies to give the Lynx a 60-59 lead. When the buzzer sounded, the Lynx had completed the largest regular-season comeback in team history. Fans in the stands—those of us who hadn't given up at the six-minute mark, or the five-minute mark, or the four—stood up, shouted until we were hoarse, and applauded until the skin on our palms turned burgundy. It was the kind of sports moment witnesses recall on non-sports occasions as proof that teamwork and confidence occasionally accomplish the near-impossible. (I thought about it regularly while ringing doorbells for John Kerry.)

That evening, July 9, 2004, few people in Minneapolis's Target Center cared about the empty seats. On other nights, those vacancies stand out. Configured for Lynx or Timberwolves basketball, the Target Center seats 19,006; the best crowds in Lynx history have nearly filled it, but on a bad night it can look hollow. The Phoenix game drew only 6,030 people.

Away from the arena, however, the intimacy and commitment implied by the limited attendance form part of the attraction. In the four years since I've become a WNBA fan, I've discovered a national community, maintained in part electronically, whose articulate membership and close-knit feel distinguish it sharply from the more popular men's sports. We fans of the *W* also face a paradox: if the league grows and thrives as we hope, then it will have to give up a bit of what sets it apart—the self-selected company we cherish, the sense that our fandom isn't like other leagues.

2. THE UNAVOIDABLE SONIC YOUTH ANALOGY

When I read it ten years ago, Nick Hornby's soccer memoir *Fever Pitch* seemed a superb account of life as a sports fan, something I had never been. Now that I am one, I reread the book to see how it fits. Bad dreams when your team plays badly? Check. (The '04 Lynx made the playoffs, but led the league in turnovers.) "The value of investing time and emotion in things I cannot control, and of belonging to a community whose aspirations I share completely and uncritically"? Check. A potential league championship for a team around .500 as "something you either believe in or you don't"? Check. (For the first-ever Lynx playoff game in 2003, the team distributed dish towels that read "BELIEVE." We waved the towels, and watched our team edge out the heavily favored Los Angeles Sparks, who then killed us in L.A. twice to take the series.)

In other ways, though, Hornby describes the opposite of a typical W follower. Even accounting for transatlantic differences, Hornby depicts the culture, the atmosphere, even the history of sports fandom, that devotees of the W can avoid—"the overwhelming maleness of it all," for example, or "the benefits of liking football at school."

Those of us who follow women's hoops are not often asked why we like basketball; instead, we're asked why we care about the women's game as much as or more than the men's. Many of us are, simply, attached to the idea of women's sports. Many are former or current players themselves. Others are mothers and fathers of girls who play; antisexist men who love basketball and don't want to see themselves, or their sport, as an all-male world; and women (gay and straight) who enjoy seeing women's strength, speed, and physical skill. (Clubs differ wildly in how they treat their gay fans: the New York Liberty has given lesbians the cold shoulder, but the Lynx printed T-shirts—I own one—for Minneapolis Pride Day.)

Phoenix lawyer and Mercury supporter Barry Uhrman sorts WNBA fans "into four demographic groups: lesbian couples, heterosexual families with daughters who play sports, single African-American men, and senior citizens." (Lynx president Chris Wright says the "in-arena fan base" is "75-80 percent female.") The Lynx report their highest attendance each year on Camp Day, an afternoon weekday match designed for day camps to bring kids. The Washington, D.C. Mystics lead the league in attendance despite their sometimes confused and substandard play; with 12,615 tickets sold per game in 2004 (down from 14,042 in 2003), the 'Stics (or "Mystakes") benefit from a downtown arena near excellent public transit, a large metro area with many African Americans, an energetic lesbian and gay population, and stinging lousy summer weather.

But why do some men (like me) follow the women's game so closely? And why do some fans—gay, straight, and bi, women and men, middle-aged and teenaged, parents and childless folks—feel so attached to the league? "I plan my summer schedule around games," says Uhrman. "I have also decided that I cannot date any man who isn't a WNBA season-ticket holder or who at least attends games and follows the league." Mike O'Brien discovered the women's game during the 1996 Olympics, and cancelled his season tickets to the NBA's L.A. Clippers a few years after that. Uhrman, O'Brien, and I, and hundreds (or maybe a couple thousand) like us, chat in electronic forums such as ESPN's message board, Lynx Lane, Stormfans.org, the Mercury's gotnext.com, and the Board Junkies (www.bjka.net).

NBA and NFL fans chat online, too, but they don't expect to hear back from their teams; "lynxfrontoffice" and "SFO" (Detroit Shock Front Office) show up on our message boards. Connecticut Sun devotee David Siegel notes that players at team events remember and recognize his ten-year-old daugh-

ter, Dani. O'Brien remarks, "No NBA player ever emailed me to see if I'd be at the game!"

The friendly, approachable teams are one attraction; the style of play can be another. Pam Schmid, who covers the Lynx for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, writes that "the women's game... relies more on fundamentals and teamwork" than the dunk-heavy, one-on-one athleticism of much NBA ball. Mercury player Taurasi has said that since women rarely dunk, "you have to take as much enjoyment in making the extra pass." In some ways big men's-sports teams are like arena-rock bands (they even play in arenas): they may rock hard (they're good at what they do) but their enormous fan base, with its macho trappings and its obsession with remote, rich stars, is not one I want to go out of my way to join. WNBA teams, like local indie bands, do some things about as well as their big-time counterparts (songwriting, passing) and the things they don't do (guitar solos, dunking) I don't miss; these smaller-scale stars (if stars is the right word) become the nucleus for a community I'll happily call mine.

3. AGGRESSION-FREE HALF-COURT BLOOMERS

If you visit the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville, Tennessee (as my spouse and I have), you'll find a ten-ton fiberglass basketball out front and a hallway-cum-timeline inside. That timeline starts in 1891, when James Naismith invented basketball as a men's game; in 1892, Smith College instructor Senda Berenson wrote special rules for her students, who competed in bloomers and blouses. Early rule books tried to restrict aggression—some variants banned defense or dribbling; one version, played in many high schools until the 1960s, involved six-on-six play—nobody could cross half-court.

Amateur and semipro women's hoops flourished in the 1930s and '40s. Launched in 1935 to promote a Missouri beauty shop, the All-American Red Heads—a barnstorming team with Harlem Globetrotters-like antics—toured the country for decades. Support for women's hoops receded after World War II, hurt by culturewide backlash against Rosie the Riveter; even during the forties, semipro franchises wanted ladylike players, and those who looked too "butch" could get booted from teams.

The women's game made its comeback through college ball, especially after Title IX in 1972 mandated better treatment for women's athletics at federally funded educational institutions. But save for the shortlived Women's Basketball League (founded 1978; folded 1982), collegiate stars who wanted to play professionally as adults had no domestic options, and headed for often frustrating, or lonely, careers and leagues in France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, or Japan.

The history of the WNBA begins with the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Anticipating the media festival that the home-court Olympics would inspire,

Team USA chose eleven players and a coach (Stanford University's Tara VanDerveer) a year in advance; the NBA arranged to promote the team. Touring the country for exhibition games, the teammates "lived like campaigning politicians... proving that professional [women's] basketball could make good television," according to Sara Corbett's *Venus to the Hoop* (1998), a superb book about the '96 team. The Olympians did win gold, beating Brazil 111-87 before record-smashing crowds.

By the end of 1996, two women's U.S. pro leagues had coalesced—the American Basketball League (ABL), and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Devised by American businessmen with no sports experience, the ABL sought, and won, allegiance from most of the '96 Olympians. The NBA-sponsored W seemed at the time like the less serious option: WNBA teams would play only in NBA cities, only in summer (when the arenas were available), with all teams initially owned by the NBA and managed by their cities' NBA franchise (that is, by people whose paychecks came from the men's game). But the NBA's deep pockets won out; the undercapitalized ABL folded in 1998, and most of its stars entered the 1999 WNBA draft.

Buoyed by hype, the WNBA expanded fast, adding eight teams to its initial octet between 1998 and 2000. Even so, official attendance remained flat or dropped slightly each year. In 2002 formal control of each franchise passed from the NBA as a whole to the individual NBA-team owners. Two W teams moved; two (and one more in 2003) folded. The Lynx spent much of their existence giving fans like me reason to fear a similar fate.

4. JUMBOTRON BOO-FEST

Almost every fan I interviewed agreed on three propositions. First, the players and teams keep getting better. "The level of play has increased exponentially," says Missouri-based fan Beth Coppin, who "started at the beginning" in junior high school by following the '96 Olympians, and who won the WNBA's 2004 Virtual General Manager competition (an online game whose contestants predict players' performance). Sue Short, a professor of archaeology who runs unofficial websites for the Lynx and the University of Minnesota women's hoops team, says that "We are still seeing an amazing increase in the skill level of players, largely because the opportunities created by Title IX are now bearing fruit."

Second, nearly everyone hates the Sparks. Uhrman says most fans consider them "dirty players who throw elbows"; Kevin Brown, a Board Junkie who seems to know every WNBA statistic, adds, "People see the Sparks as arrogant thugs." Coppin's VGM performance won her a trip to the finals, in which Seattle played Connecticut; she reports that when Sparks center Lisa Leslie appeared on the Jumbotron in an Olympic highlight, spectators

booed. Short wonders about “an element of racism” in these reactions—the Sparks’ marquee players and coaches have been African American or African, and their ’04 roster had no white Americans. Yet every team in the league has a plurality or majority of black players, and other teams’ African-American stars, such as Tamika Catchings and Dawn Staley, are rightly regarded as near-perfect athlete role models. If nothing else, Sparks hatred demonstrates the persistence of a national fan culture in ways the league did not likely predict, and might not want (though controversy can sell). The hundreds of people who travel to away games aren’t just fans of one team, we’re fans of the league, hence opponents of sharpened elbows and forearm grabs anywhere.

Third, the league’s finances and marketing haven’t performed as well as they could. Coppin says “the first number I still check in the box score is attendance, and I know MN can do better.” Season-ticket holder Val Spann, who once advised me to stop worrying about attendance, admits “I do worry about the finances of the league”; she gives her co-workers each year’s WNBA schedule “so they can plan” their vacations around games too. Patti and Ron Bender of Clay Center, Kansas, who became WNBA fans when Kansas State’s Nicole Ohlde joined the Lynx, arranged “a Nicole Ohlde appreciation day in Clay Center” (population 4,500). Ted Sampsell-Jones, who with his wife Sara (a former Dartmouth player) operates the Women’s Hoops Blog (womenshoops.blogspot.com), says that to assist the Lynx, “I mostly try just to bring people to the games. Which is an uphill battle.... after surviving winter here, [Minnesotans may not] want to go sit inside the Target Center on a summer night.”

Should we worry? It’s hard to know. Attendance for all teams averaged 8,589 in the 2004 season, just 237 seats down from ’03, and a little above the 8K mark that some experts claim (off the record) a team requires to break even. Ten of thirteen teams finished above 7,500. Of the other three, one, the Connecticut Sun, plays at Mohegan Sun casino, whose Mohegan tribe also owns the team; the Sun can earn money for the Mohegans indirectly, by enticing basketball fans who then spend cash on poker or slots. Former WNBA head Val Ackerman has said that nationally televised WNBA games draw about the same ratings as regular-season pro hockey did before the strike.

Those numbers aren’t bad, considering how little (compared with its brothers) the WNBA spends. “It costs about \$3 million to run a WNBA franchise for a season,” says Clay Kallam, publisher of the online women’s hoops journal Full Court Press. This year’s WNBA rookies start at \$34K to \$41K a year; team salaries face a cap of \$647,000, and individual salaries max out at \$87,000, which the biggest names supplement with endorsements. Many if not most WNBA athletes also play overseas in winter; those who don’t may coach college teams. Smith has been preparing for dental school.

By contrast, the *Detroit News* puts the average (I presume it's a mean, not a median) NBA team payroll at \$59 million, the average individual salary at \$4.92 million. The highest-paid NBA player, Shaquille O'Neal, pulls down \$27.7 million—more than three times what all the players on all the WNBA's teams make combined. The News also finds that the NBA as a whole takes in about \$3.1 billion (gross) per year. Sports economist Dan Rosenbaum concluded last year that individual “low-spending [NBA] teams earned about \$300 million in profits, while high-spending teams about broke even.”

Given those numbers, whether or not to operate a women's team is, for most NBA franchises, less a matter of cash than of taste. Some owners have given up; some teams may not make it. But the league is likely here to stay. “Those teams that have ‘failed’ financially,” Short says, “have really been abandoned by their NBA organizations because of a lack of commitment to women's basketball.” Kallam calls the 2004 championship games, when “Seattle drew 17,000 twice in a row,” “a testament to the fact that a winning WNBA franchise can make money.” Some investors seem to agree: a second non-NBA-affiliated team will begin play in Chicago in 2006.

5. THE FUTURE, OR, 1,000 OUT OF TUNE PICCOLOS

There's one WNBA player my students do recognize: Lindsay Whalen led the University of Minnesota Gophers to their first three winning seasons in a decade; regularly scored thirty points a game in her college career; specialized in drives, no-look passes, and unlikely assists; and took the Gophers to the Final Four her senior year, six weeks after breaking her shooting hand. Whalen grew up in small-town Minnesota, chose the local school over bigger names elsewhere, said the right things in her deadpan interviews, and garnered more attention by far than a female athlete in Minnesota had ever received. In Whalen's first year as a college player her Golden Gophers averaged 1,087 spectators a game; in her last, they drew 9,703. Her history guaranteed big Lynx crowds if she stayed here.

She didn't. McConnell Serio's 2003 winning season gave the 2004 Lynx the seventh draft pick; the Connecticut Sun took Whalen with the fourth. Val Spann recalls that “the Lynx got trashed by most of the local media for not offering the world for Lindsay Whalen.” At least three coworkers have told me they would be Lynx fans if, and only if, the Lynx had acquired Whalen, even though the Sun's trade demands would have left Lindsay with nobody to pass to.

Whalen's story may make Minnesota exceptional, but it also reflects growing national interest in the college game. 2004's NCAA final—the fourth in nine years to set the University of Connecticut against Tennessee—drew the highest ratings ever for a televised women's game (the mens' final, by contrast, drew record lows). As of February 12, 2005, the UConn women had

sold out eighty-nine consecutive games on campus (capacity 10,167), thirty-six in a row at the Hartford Civic Center (16,294). Ohio State recently drew 17,525, more than 1 percent of the greater Columbus population.

Ideally the growing college game should feed not just players but fans into the W, much as admirers of Michigan State's Magic Johnson and Indiana State's Larry Bird discovered the NBA in 1979. That process may have begun. Sampsell-Jones says he has "only been following [the W] closely since some of my favorite UConn players graduated." (My wife and I discovered women's hoops through UConn as well.) Yet the fan pipeline from college to pro has some clogs. Sports writer Schmid explains that many college fans, especially those "old enough to be retired, just like to cheer on their local girls"; "hard-core WNBA fans tend to be younger and very knowledgeable" about the game.

Though older viewers who support their alma mater may never cheer professionals who grew up far away, their basketball-playing daughters and granddaughters may find the W more to their liking. The National Federation for High School Sports found that in 2003-04, 457,986 girls played high school basketball at 17,061 schools—both numbers climb by about 1 percent per year. "The more sold-out high school gyms there are for girls' games," FCP publisher Kallam says, "the more fans are being created for... the WNBA."

After her Final Four appearance, Whalen played in Minnesota just once, on July 14, 2004. Radio hosts interviewed her, calumniated the Lynx for the nontrade, or simply promoted the game. Advance sales breached 13,000: all for Lindsay? Not quite: the Sun happened to play the Lynx on Camp Day, and spectators found thousands of small children, dressed in matching solid colors so counselors could keep track of their charges.

Whalen brought all the moves she had shown as a Gopher: reverse layups in which she seemed to levitate, zigzag drives, and triumphant, geometrically unlikely rebounds against players six inches taller. Whenever she scored, the grade-school kids let loose with a noise like ten thousand out-of-tune piccolos.

Fortunately for the Lynx, basketball isn't just guards running all over the floor; it's also about big players who fight for position near the basket, and Nicole Ohlde consistently won that fight. The 6'5" Kansan, who slouches whenever the ball's not in play, took the first shot, made the first basket, blocked three shots, scored six field goals and nine free throws, and generally outreached and outmaneuvered Connecticut's more experienced inside players. The game brought six ties and six lead changes, and stayed close to the end. When the crowd headed out for a beer or a nap, Whalen had scored 18, Ohlde 21, and the Lynx had won, 66-63. Ohlde came to the Lynx with the draft pick that would have brought Whalen, had she remained available: if we couldn't have Lindsay, the scoreboard seemed to say, we got what we needed instead.

The current state, and the arguably brighter future, of the WNBA are probably not a cultural barometer for anything not crashingly obvious elsewhere—the increase in the number of girls and women who play sports, for example, or the real but frustratingly slow progress of feminism in many layers of American life. Detractors still say the W’s fans support the league for political reasons, which is nonsense—I give money to a political party for political reasons. I give money and time to the Minnesota Lynx because I like watching them play basketball. We who cherish the W enjoy nifty play-making; approachable teams; the fact that the players are women, not men and not girls; and an obsessive, welcoming, nerdy, chatty, national subculture, free of the yahoos, and the boys’-club feel, that men’s team sports can bring. Will the Lynx stick around if its audience grows only slowly? Will the subculture we cherish collapse as the empty seats fill up with ten-year-old girls? Come see my favorite team play, and you might find out.

AFTERWORD (MAY 2006):

We still haven’t found out for certain, but we can make an educated guess: the Lynx, and the W, seem to be here to stay: owner Glen Taylor’s commitment to the former seems nearly beyond question, especially after the giant trade that sent slumping star Katie Smith to Detroit in return for the second of two first-round draft picks and a talented but unproven guard. The ‘05 Lynx tanked, but the trade showed Taylor, and chief operating officer Roger Griffith, thinking long-term: in that long term, it will pay off, since the Lynx ended up with the very first draft pick this year. LSU’s Seimone Augustus has already turned heads, and sunk trick shots, in the Lynx’s first two ‘06 games (losses to Connecticut and Detroit). Second-year WNBA prez Donna Orender—a golf exec in her past job (Ackerman was a lawyer) and a *de facto* expert in promotions—has impressed almost everyone, and backs her effusive optimism up with good marketing moves: a stronger, more useful Web presence, for example, and a tenth-anniversary ad campaign (slogan: “Have you seen *her?*”) that actually shows women playing hoops. The NBA (as Orender likes to point out) took decades to get where it is, and a league in its tenth year has plenty to boast about. The Lynx may not win it all this year (so much depends on whether Seimone can get the ball). And the W will remain a niche pastime, or passion, for a while. So will poetry, for that matter. Neither is for everybody: neither is going away.

NOTES

The poems react to WNBA teams, games, and players as they were in 2004 and 2005; a few look forward to the 2006 season, just underway as this volume goes to press.

“Cynosure,” “Early Music,” “The Sea as...,” “Speedy Holiday,” “Tale” and “Why We Fight” use a technique (derived, with apologies, from Raymond Roussel) in which poems contain homonyms of proper nouns: in this case, the proper nouns are the names of WNBA players or coaches from the relevant teams. In “Why We Fight,” for example, “Medina: no land” contains “Deanna Nolan”; “truth wryly” contains “Ruth Riley”; “sass: wink as shiftily” contains “Swin Cash.” (Containment involves phonetics, not spelling.)

All told, the poems contain these names: *Connecticut Sun and former Sun*: Katie Douglas, Lindsay Whalen, Mike Thibault, Brooke Wyckoff, Nykesha Sales, Margo Dydek. *Detroit Shock*: Deanna Nolan, Cheryl Ford, Plenette Pierson, Swin Cash, Ruth Riley. *New York Liberty and former Liberty*: Crystal Robinson, Cathrine Kraayeveld, Elena Baranova, Ann Wauters, Becky Hammon. *Lynx and former Lynx*: Amanda Lassiter, Stacey Lovelace-Tolbert, Chandi Jones, Vanessa Hayden, Seimone Augustus, Nicole Ohlde. *Sacramento Monarchs and ex-Monarchs*: Yo Griffith, Ticha Penichiero, Kara Lawson, DeMya Walker, Chelsea Newton, Kristen Haynie. *Seattle Storm*: Lauren Jackson, Anne Donovan, Janel Burse, Sue Bird, Betty Lennox. “Help with Your Plant Questions” involves Janel McCarville, now of the Charlotte Sting. “Spectator Sports” praises the on- and off-court accomplishments of Sheryl Swoopes. “Draft Camp”: in 2006 the WNBA’s draft camp (also called pre-draft camp) took place during the Final Four, in Boston; potential draft picks played on improvised teams so that WNBA scouts and coaches could see their skills. In prior years, the draft camp has been its own event, after the Final Four and before the draft. “Diana in Arizona” is both Diana Taurasi, now of the Phoenix Mercury, and the goddess Diana, reborn in an unpropitious place. And “Vanessa in the Underworld” is both a poem about Lynx center Vanessa Hayden, and a journey into, and then back out of, the world of the dead; as in the *Aeneid*, and in Philip Pullman’s novels, we enter that world through a cave.

