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PROFESSIONAL SPORTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR AMERICAN FEMALE ATHLETES

JILL JEFFREY

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the women's and men's athletic markets are totally different. There is no NBA, per se, for women. Thus, the only place to continue their playing careers is overseas. If this discussion took place a few years ago, a half hour would not be enough time to discuss all the opportunities abroad for American women. Unfortunately, 1993 is proving to be the worst market in the last ten years for American females' playing opportunities abroad.

I am entering my third year as a player agent at Bruce Levy & Associates. Bruce Levy & Associates, to my knowledge, is the only sports agency in the world that represents female players as a primary source of income. This decline in the number of opportunities for American women is forcing our company to search out and create new and viable opportunities for our clients. We are currently investigating many new areas and hope to be able to come up with increased opportunities in the near future.

II. MARKET PROBLEMS

A. *Eastern European Influx*

There are three main factors contributing to this market devastation. The first is that since the fall of Communism, we have experienced a great influx of Eastern Europeans into the market. Former Yugoslavian, Czechoslovakian, and even Russian players have actually come out of retirement just to play basketball and flee their countries. As such, Americans are in direct competition with those players for job openings. Most of these players are willing to accept \$100-\$200 a month with very minimal contract conditions.

B. *Japanese Ban*

The second contributing factor, and probably the most significant, is the Japanese decision to ban foreign women from competing in their basketball leagues beginning in the 1993-94 season. Over thirty-two of America's best female players earning high salaries last year have been forced into retirement or have been forced to join the already saturated

European market. When we asked why the Japanese came to this decision, they told us that the Americans are preventing Japanese player improvement. We feel that it is actually more of an economic decision than anything. I think the companies are having problems justifying paying high salaries, so they just said, "everybody out."

The third factor is the poor condition of the European economy. The majority of the women's clubs in Europe are sponsored by small businesses, which really are hit the hardest in a recession. So, in tough times, women's basketball seems to be the first discretionary funding cut.

III. THE REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN WOMEN IN FOREIGN MARKETS

I would now like to give you an overview of the major leagues for women and highlight some of the differences between them. Before I begin that, however, you should be aware of a major difference between negotiating a contract with an Italian team versus negotiating a contract with a French team. Even after your negotiations are complete, you are not guaranteed a successful placement. The role of the agent in preparing a player for competing and living in a specific foreign country is really critical to our company's success. There are enormous technical and cultural differences. No matter how talented a player might be, if she does not have a good understanding of what to expect, the deal could just end in total disaster.

Another thing to keep in mind is that, internationally, women are treated much differently than here at home. Here, we have laws to ensure equal and fair treatment. However, overseas, that is not true. Many teams overseas are sexist and even abusive. During one of my trips to Japan last season, I visited one of our clients, Lynette Woodward. I attended one of her practice sessions, where I actually witnessed a coach pushing and then slapping a Japanese player right across the face. It was perfectly acceptable behavior in Japan. Therefore, you can see how important it is for our players to understand the cultural differences in the country they are going to.

IV. THE JAPANESE MARKET

Even though Japan is no longer a viable market for Americans, I would like to tell you a little bit about that market. Last season Americans occupied thirty-two positions in Japan. That works out to be approximately thirty-three percent of all the professional spots overseas that were occupied by foreign women.

I should clarify what I mean by "professional spots." The biggest difference between Japan and the other leagues is that in Japan, each team is allowed two foreign players, but only one may compete in the game at one time. The teams in Japan are primarily composed of major company employees. You might be familiar with a few of these — Japan Airlines, Toshiba, Sanyo, Mitsubishi. So, obviously, it is not too difficult for them to field a team from among the hundreds of thousands of employees. Needless to say, the skill level of the Japanese players is very low. In turn, the Americans that were hired by these companies were some of the most highly touted players in the whole world. Those players' salaries were also, last year, the highest in the world. Last year, the average salary for an American woman playing in Japan was about \$120,000 for the six month season. The highest salary reached up to \$250,000 for those six months. One interesting point is that in the whole history of Americans playing in Japan, only two Americans have been under 6'1", all of them were first team Kodak All-Americans and, between them, owned five Olympic medals.

V. MAJOR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S LEAGUES

A. *The Italian League*

This season, the three major leagues for women are Italy, Spain, and France. The Italian League consists of sixteen teams, and each team is allowed two foreigners, making a total of thirty-two possible spots. Keep in mind, when I refer to openings for foreign players, I do not necessarily mean Americans. I am referring to players foreign to that country. The Italian League is considered to be (as for the men as well) the most competitive league from top to bottom. The Americans playing in Italy are seasoned, international, veteran players, national team members, and former All-Americans. As of today, Americans occupy twenty-three of those thirty-two possible spots. The usual season is about seven and-a-half months. The players generally arrive sometime in late-August, and the playoffs extend through May.

Salaries in Italy have dropped overall. The highest paid player in Italy is actually from Bosnia. The top American salary this season is about \$135,000. Last year, the same player earned \$175,000. So, even veteran players re-signing with the same club have been forced to accept 20-40% less pay than last season. We would consider eleven of the sixteen teams financially sound, but, even with that, most of them have very low budgets. The average American salary this season in Italy is approx-

imately \$50,000, with a few players earning \$90,000 or slightly more. It has been nearly six years since salaries have been this low.

As far as playing in Italy, from a player's perspective, the Italians have three main concerns. The first one is winning. The second one is winning. And, the third one is winning. Overall, there is a tremendous amount of pressure on the Americans playing there. If a player wins a game, she is the hero. If she loses a game, it is her fault, even if she scored fifty-three points. She still lost.

As far as negotiating with the Italians, their sponsors and management do not generally speak English, therefore, you need to be able to communicate in Italian.

B. The Spanish League

The Spanish League usually consists of sixteen teams, but this season there are only fourteen. One team lost its sponsorship just before the season began. The other team began the season, and actually hired Olympian Theresa Edwards. A week later the team folded. That leaves us with fourteen teams, and twenty-eight possible spots. Currently, Americans hold sixteen of those spots. In general, the league is less professionally operated than the Italian League. In fact, there are some teams we will not even do business with due to their credit history. The players tend to be treated with less respect than in the other foreign leagues. The salary structure has seen a dramatic drop from a few years ago. The median salary is about \$20-25,000 per season. However, a player like Trina McClain, who plays on the best team in Spain, earns a salary that would be high even by Japanese League standards.

C. France

In France, there are four divisions: 1A, 1B, 2, and 3. In the 1A there are twelve teams with two foreigners per team. In 1B, there are twelve teams, with only one foreigner per team. A total of thirty-six possible opportunities are available. Currently, there are thirteen Americans playing in both leagues. This low number, more than any other country, reflects the Eastern European influx. I think every player, besides the Americans playing, has a last name ending in "ova" — Novokova, Pavlikova, Sukova, Nemkova, etc.

Salaries in France, on average, are about the same as in Spain, with a few players earning salaries comparable to Italian League standards. There is a great emphasis in France on speaking French and understanding the French culture. Our company actually has a partner in France

who handles all the negotiations, the clubs, the troubleshooting, and all the problem-solving.

D. OTHER MARKETS

Italy, Spain, and France are considered the major leagues for American women this year. We also currently have players all over the world. We have players in Brazil, in Portugal, Turkey, Israel, etc. In fact, this year we actually made history for American women abroad, the only bright side for our company. We actually placed two former Olympians in Russia. Yes, they are safe and well.

In addition to negotiating a player's salary, our company asks any club, anywhere in the world, to provide some minimum contract provisions. I am going to briefly highlight them.

First, the player's salary. We ask the club to guarantee the salary in U.S. dollars and to pay our players monthly, one month in advance. The club pays all taxes on this money. At the end of the season the player receives a receipt of the amount of taxes paid on her behalf to that government. Also, at a player's request, the club must transfer her money back to an account here in the States. We do insist on a bonus system, which varies from team to team, and most of the bonuses are based on team goals. However, in some cases, we do have some individual goals implemented.

Next is the term of the contract. The beginning date is usually two to four weeks before the first league game, and the contract ends after the club's final league game or playoff game.

Lodging is provided by the club and must be modern, fully furnished, and comfortable. All the maintenance, heat, and power, is taken care of by the club. Our players, if they wish, may live alone. Some of them choose to live with another foreign player on the team, or, hopefully, another American. It is their choice.

The club must also provide the players with some sort of local transportation. Players in Italy usually have a car. In other places, they receive a local transportation pass or something comparable. Regarding airfare, the minimum is three door-to-door, roundtrip tickets, a trip there at the start of the season and then home at the end, plus a Christmas trip. We do insist on a Christmas trip.

As for insurance, the player is provided with a comprehensive medical insurance plan. Language lessons must also be provided by the club, taught by a native speaker of that language.

One important clause we place in our contracts is a "free agency" clause. This means that the club will agree to release the player's rights, unconditionally, without compensation, at the end of the contract term. Most of our contracts are of a one year term. Until this year, there was no reason to have multi-year deals because the market kept increasing. We would be cheating our clients if we hooked them into a multi-year situation. In the past year, we negotiated three multi-year deals. Those were two-year deals, made in anticipation of this market devastation. Generally, however, one year deals are the norm.

In addition there is usually a no-cut clause in our contracts. The player's full year salary is guaranteed by the club, unless: 1) the player arrives injured; 2) the player is suspended by the league or commits a felony; or 3) if the player becomes pregnant and unable to play.

We also have some optional contract provisions that may be incorporated for some of our top players. Sometimes we are able to incorporate interpreters, additional airline tickets for family and friends, babysitters, an American VCR system, or a satellite TV system.

VII. COMMON PROBLEMS

Placing American women successfully in the foreign market certainly comes with its share of surprises. But, knowing and anticipating some common problems our players might face adds to our company's success.

The first problem deals with a player's condition. Americans are in direct competition with Eastern European players, and Eastern European players are in top physical condition all year. So, when the Americans go overseas, they are expected to be in top physical shape. There are many failed placements where a player showed up in poor condition and was cut immediately and sent home.

Second, the style of play is very different. It is much more physical and fast-paced. The referees overseas do not like the Americans, so we do not often get favorable calls. It takes our player half of a season to adjust technically to the different style of the game. Overtraining and burnout seem to be big problems for our clients. It is a very long season overseas, and there are no restrictions regarding the length or frequency of practices. The players are treated like robots, as if they need no rest or time to recover. It is just "Put them on the court and let's go, go, go!" There is a tremendous lack of sports medicine staff and facilities. Honestly, some of our players are lucky to get ice after games.

Third, the expectations placed on the player are high. The American is supposed to dominate every single game. The coach is putting pressure on them, and the community as well. The worst pressure, however,

is by the media. The newspapers think nothing of openly trashing a player that is not playing well. I always advise the players not to read the newspapers.

Fourth, the players experience a great deal of homesickness. These women spend up to eight months a year overseas, and they do miss their friends, families, and boyfriends. It is not unusual for one of our players to spend up to \$15,000 a year just on phone bills.

Fifth, the language barrier causes many communication problems. There are communication problems between the players on the team, the management, and the coaching staff, even with the help of a translator. Personally, I do not believe a translator is going to do very much good during a timeout.

And sixth, I think the biggest adjustment though is the transition from amateur to professional. These women are not used to having their job put on the line every single day, and that is what the club expects, their best everyday. Last year we had a player, Carla McGee, who was playing in the Canary Islands. We received a fax from her club in Spanish. They were telling me that she drinks too much Coca-Cola. So, I called Carla up and asked her what was going on with this Coca-Cola story. She said that she had a stomach virus for three days and could not even make it to the court. Meanwhile, the team officials were telling her that she was drinking too much Sprite and Coca-Cola. Apparently, some overseas clubs may not be too sympathetic to injuries and illnesses.

I believe that if the agent and the player are aware of these problems, and if they work together to solve or prevent them, their first year placement success will increase significantly, as well as certainly helping to retain their veteran client base.

VIII. HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

In summary, American female athletics is struggling in the international market. We are certainly hopeful that things will change for the better in the near future. Our company is fully committed to women's basketball. We have been involved for thirteen years, and we are not going anywhere. We are going to continue to expand, and hopefully create new opportunities overseas, as well as right here at home.

