

Charity and Talent at WNBA All-Star Weekend Show Washington Young Women What's Possible

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Written by Helen Wheelock
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Twenty-four hours before the WNBA's Ninth All-Star game, you might have expected Mystics guard Alana Beard and her fellow all-stars to be in downtown Washington at the Verizon Center preparing for the game. Instead, she and her teammates were attending a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Robert English Boys and Girls Club out on Benning Road, and looking forward to christening the center's newly refurbished basketball court – courtesy of WNBA Cares and Nike – with an open practice in front of 100 or so children and their parents.

"It feels good," said Beard. "I just think that Nike and the league are doing great things. They are finding places that need the most help and they're putting their focus on it." "It's wonderful," added Sacramento Monarch Rebekkah Brunson who had spent most of her life in the D.C area, including attending Georgetown University. "My house is ten minutes from here, so it's great to give back to my neighborhood, to come here with the all-stars and share these kid's joy."

For Brunson's Sacramento teammate Kara Lawson, being in the gym with its close bleachers, enthusiastic young basketball players and limited air circulation seemed eerily familiar. "D.C. is where I grew up, as far as basketball," recalled Lawson. "I've touched just about every part of this city – or, I should say, every part of this city has touched me. I've played in just about every gym in this city. I'm here because of the opportunities and the competition that I got playing and growing up in this area. This is D.C.," she added with a grin. "This is what we do in the summer: we hoop in hot gyms."

Will Gunn, President and CEO of the Washington Boys and Girls Clubs, was keenly aware of the impact the WNBA players was making on his center's members. "It helps kids see what's possible. Sometimes they hear about something, or they read about it, or they see someone on television. But to have people come in that they can see, that they can interact with? It just makes it much more tangible and real for them."

Having as a local WNBA team has also change his institution, acknowledged Gunn. "This hasn't always been the Boys and Girls club. We were an organization that was a Boys Club for a number of years. And that was all about this notion that males and females had about girls and women participating in sports as being 'unfeminine.' The Mystics come and bring a different image. They challenge that myth. That makes all the difference in the world, [because] girls and boys both need the same kind of opportunity."

The benefits of those opportunities were showcased in front of the 19,400-plus who attended Sunday's All-Star game. After San Antonio's Becky Hammon won the pre-game Dribble, Dish and Swish challenge, Mystics guard Laurie Koehn got the unabashedly partisan crowd jumping during the three-point shooting competition. Up against sharpshooters like Connecticut's Katie Douglas and Phoenix guard Diana Taurasi, the three-point specialist showed no mercy. Koehn tallied a contest-record 25 points in the final round to win the competition (and match the NBA record of 25 points in a single round set by Craig Hodges in 1986) and brought the roaring crowd to its feet.

Her performance set the bar for the All-Stars, and they met the challenge, producing an entertaining and well-played game whose outcome was in doubt until the final seconds. The hot shooting of Seattle's Lauren Jackson and Houston's Tina Thompson helped the West jump out to a 12-point lead in the first quarter, but a improbable 3-pointer by Detroit forward Cheryl Ford inspired an East rally. "I surprised myself," Ford laughed later. "I know my mom was out of her seat."

Chicago's Candice Dupree tied the game at 53 going in to the half, and at the end of third quarter, up 78-67, the East seemed to be cruising to victory. The West though, made a furious comeback, getting within 101-98 in the final minute on a Hammon three. A key jumper by Indiana's Anna DeForge stopped the bleeding, and the East survived last second misses by Hammon and Thompson to escape with the 103-98 win, the closest margin of victory in the history of the All-Star Game.

As the fans watched the East's lead trimmed to one with time running out, nearly all rose from their seats and remained standing until the final horn sounded, cheering the teams on. That came as no surprise to Beard, who called Mystics fans "true believers." Now 7-12, the team started out the season 0-8 and yet, said Beard, they kept coming. "I think the All-Star game is a 'thank you' gift to them."

It was quite the gift.

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