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WNBA tries glitzy ads to market its players

By Debbie Arrington -- Bee Staff Writer

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Strutting past a crystal blue swimming pool in a clingy gold evening gown, Los Angeles Sparks center Lisa Leslie has the attitude down pat.

"I'm glamorous," the 2001 WNBA Most Valuable Player says to the camera. "So what?"

If image is everything, the WNBA is trying a new look. But will it lure more potential fans -- including men -- into arenas this summer? Or will it be a turnoff?

During a tumultuous offseason that saw the demise of two franchises and the relocation of two others, the WNBA is taking an aggressive marketing approach.

Attempting to make their players seem more like "the girl next door" than star athletes, the league recently launched a series of promotional commercials, featuring, among others, Monarchs point guard Ticha Penicheiro.

In the first 30-second spot that debuted during NBA All-Star weekend this month, the players may look like neighborly women -- if viewers live next door to supermodels.

Wearing a form-fitting black leather vest and pants, Penicheiro drives a bright yellow Dodge Prowler, then comments, "I'm always looking ahead, never behind."

"I love Ticha's line," Teri Schindler, the WNBA's vice president of broadcasting, said during a recent visit to Sacramento. "That's Ticha. In every sense of the word, she can play."

"Ticha was a great example for all this. Our challenge was how do you distill her game, her personality, that sparkle in her eye that makes her who she is. (In black leather), she looks like a Bond girl. She plays like a Bond girl."

Never mind Penicheiro's flashy behind-the-back passes. This segment has no on-court footage. The only clue to these players' games is the two-toned oatmeal-and-orange basketball that was used as a prop.

Wearing a blue skintight cat suit that emphasizes her length, Leslie -- the first woman to dunk in a WNBA game -- teases the camera with the ball.

Dressed in a strappy gown, Seattle Storm guard Sue Bird snuggles up with the ball on a hammock. "I'm not as sweet as you think I am," Bird says.

In March, the commercials will become staples during NBA games as the big-brother league helps promote its sister WNBA, which kicks off its seventh season May 22. Viewers often will see the ads during women's college basketball games as well.

"The players bring their own personalities to all this, especially the younger players who grew up with an enormous amount of media attention," said Schindler. "They have a different swagger. They're looking to engage."

Penicheiro liked the experience.

"People don't get to see us in our off-the-court outfits," the four-time All-Star said during the shoot. "They always see us sweating with a ponytail. They don't know how we look."

Chosen for the promotions by their teams, the players are not identified in the 30-second spots that also include Detroit's Swin Cash, a rookie last season, and Jennifer Azzi, who moved with her team from Utah to San Antonio. Shot on location in Phoenix, the ads stay with last season's marketing theme, "This Is Who I Am."

"This season, we're showing qualities all women share: 'I'm your daughter, I'm your sister, I'm the girl next door,'" explained Schindler, quoting the campaign's first 60-second spot that is showing in arenas during NBA games.

"These are qualities in women all around you. They're also qualities that make these women incredibly unique in the sports landscape."

Using beauty to sell women anything -- including basketball to the WNBA's predominantly female fan base -- is not new.

"These ads celebrate the strength, attitude, leadership, dedication and beauty -- in every sense of the word -- of our players and, through the players' example, say to our fans there are no limits on who you can be," Schindler said.

Eric Wiesel, a Sacramento sports agent who specializes in women's basketball players, worries about the approach.

"I have a 14-year-old daughter who plays basketball," he said. "She looks up to all the players. I'm not sure she'll understand this, and I don't know how I'll explain it."

"But I do know I've never seen Kobe Bryant spread out on a Prowler. He's got game, and that's enough."

Men were not the targeted demographic, insisted Schindler, but the ads' eye-catching displays received rave reviews from some ESPN male commentators.

Not everyone, however, was impressed.

On ESPN's "Around the Horn," host Max Kellerman asked, "Will a sexed-up WNBA marketing scheme help the sport?"

"This is a sign of desperation," responded Chicago Sun-Times columnist Jay Mariotti. "I cannot think of a women's basketball player as a sex object ... maybe a tennis player, maybe a golfer."

Added the Boston Globe's Charlie Pierce: "I'm sorry the WNBA feels obligated to do this kind of thing. They've got a really good product. It's inspirational to a lot of girls around the country. They shouldn't have to do this nonsense. I wish they wouldn't try because it's not going to work, and it's beneath them."

Some women agree with that.

"I thought the new commercial was borderline embarrassing," said longtime Monarchs fan Kim Callahan. "Other than holding a WNBA basketball, there's no promotion of the sport or league. Someone unfamiliar with the WNBA probably wouldn't recognize the ball or have a clue who any of the players are, let alone care how sweet Sue Bird may or may not be."

But the commercials have been noticed, a major key in marketing.

"It's a long offseason, and we're trying to get these players out there," Schindler said. "We're looking ahead."

Not behind.

About the Writer

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