

**Mad Seasons: The Story of the First Women's
Professional Basketball League, 1978-1981**

by Karra Porter

"Draft Days"

New York City, June 16, 1980.

Inside room 709 of his hotel, Dallas Diamonds coach Greg Williams was stewing. The No. 1 draft pick. Nancy Lieberman or Inge Nissen? Nissen or Lieberman? Several prominent college coaches were saying to go with Nissen, but Lieberman was also terrific, and Williams was getting some pressure to pick her from general manager Nancy Nichols. Lieberman was the best-known name in women's basketball, after all--a public relations dream. Think of the publicity, Nichols urged.

"I just can't do it," Williams told her, "and I'm not going to do it." His decision would not be based on who would generate the most ink.

The telephone rang. It was Nichols again, up in room 909. "Hey, Coach, go look out your window," she said.

Williams walked to the window, and retrieved a piece of

paper dangling outside. "Draft Nancy Lieberman," it read.

"My gosh, she will try anything!" Williams groaned.

Inaugural WBL draft, July 18, 1978.

The first women's professional basketball draft was the subject of much discussion, as WBL owners tried to figure out the best way to handle it. Initially, they thought to make it "territorial," meaning that players would be selected on a regional basis. But while stocking up on local talent might enhance fan appeal, it also posed a risk of unbalanced teams.

In the 1970s, the best known women's basketball programs were primarily in the East and South; for example, 18 of the 21 players specially invited to final trials for the 1980 Olympic team were from those two regions. Otherwise, teams knew very little about each other. When UCLA's 1977-78 title team swung through the east coast on a road trip, "you would have thought this team came from Siberia," says the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Mel Greenberg.

A territorial draft might work well for New York, but it wasn't likely to make the Minnesota Fillies a powerhouse, and as the day approached, Fillies owner Gordon Nevers moved that the WBL hold "a strict talent draft regardless of territory." The motion passed unanimously.

The 1978 draft pool consisted of college seniors and free agents who hadn't already joined a WBL team. Under league rules,

franchises could sign free agents at will before the draft, which gave a leg up to the WBL's earliest members, who were busily stocking their rosters while other franchises were still in the wishful thinking stage.

The first player to sign a contract in the WBL was Molly Bolin of the Iowa Cornets. Surrounded by teammates and owner George Nissen, Bolin signed on the dotted line in the office of Iowa Governor Robert Ray while photographers marked the occasion.

"We all kind of signed at the same time," Bolin says, but she was designated to go first. "Officially, I was the first player signed in the pro league. Unofficially, we all kind of just thought, 'Oh, my gosh, they're going to pay me to play basketball?

Where do I sign?'" In Chicago, league spokeswoman and player Karen Logan was also recruiting players for that city's WBL squad, and by the time the draft rolled around, Iowa and Chicago had filled more than half their rosters.

For most owners, preparing for the draft involved little more than reviewing a packet handed out at the league's organizational meeting the month before. Inside were reports from a scouting service operated by WBL founder Bill Byrne, the National Scouting Association, which had begun compiling information about women's basketball prospects for a league planned by a New York businessman a year earlier.

Some applicants also sent information directly to the league, but few owners had seen any of the women play. The

process, one reporter wrote, "amounted to little more than calling players after scanning their college statistics"

The evening before the draft, the Board of Governors finalized details. The draft would run ten rounds, the first five for college players only, and the next for free agents, including college students not picked earlier.

Selection order was determined through two drawings. For the collegiate draft, Houston would select first, followed by Milwaukee, New York, Minneapolis, Washington (D.C.), Chicago, New Jersey, and Iowa. The order for free agents was Chicago, Milwaukee, New York, Houston, Iowa, New Jersey, Washington, and Minneapolis. The owners then went through a practice run.

The next morning, the 1978 WBL player draft began with Houston Angels owner Hugh Sweeney. "This is kind of a historic moment," he said. "I drew a Ping Pong ball out and got to make the first selection and that is Ann Meyers." Sweeney lucked out, says Angels assistant coach Greg Williams. "No one knew anything about these players. He was picking them off of stat sheets. He got the number one pick and drafted Ann Meyers because he had read about her in Sports Illustrated." (Meyers, a four-time Kodak All-American, was a natural choice, having just led UCLA to the 1978 AIAW championship. There was just one problem: She wasn't interested. (See Wrong League.))

The three-hour draft ended with the final selection by the New York Stars' Larry Kinitsky, who generated laughs by writing

the name of sports commentator and former Miss America Phyllis George. ("That's Miss America, not All-America," he quipped.) Two other draft selections were unusual. The Iowa Cornets used one pick on Uljana Semjonova, a 7-foot center on the Russian National Team that was in the midst of a 21-year--that's year--winning streak. (Although it was unlikely that a Soviet player could play in the United States at the time, observers noted that Cornets owner George Nissen, a key figure in international gymnastics, did have extensive dealings with the Russian government. . . .) The Chicago Hustle also made an interesting pick: Sandy Allen, listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the tallest woman in the world at 7' 7 1/4".

Even more important than choosing players, the WBL draft was intended to generate publicity, league officials said, and they got their wish. The first women's professional basketball draft was featured in newspapers across the country. "Once the draft occurred, people realized we were for real," Nevers said.

1979-80 WBL Draft, June 12, 1979, New York City.

The league's second draft was June 12, 1979, in the Terrance-Oval room at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York City, and again went for ten rounds. The draft pool consisted solely of college seniors, no free agents.

The Board of Governors initially planned to reward the eight original franchises by letting them draft twice before expansion

clubs started in at the 17th pick. A month before the draft, though, Byrne proposed a change. A professional sports league needed competitive teams in each city, he pointed out, and the draft was supposed to help achieve that. The owners voted to have expansion teams select first, in order of their entrance into the league, followed by veteran teams in reverse order of their 1978-79 win-loss records.

Byrne's NSA provided owners with a list of 400 players, but this time some teams did a little investigating of their own. Nevers scouted an AIAW regional tournament, and Coach Frank LaPorte, whose San Francisco Pioneers had the No. 1 pick, sought input from several college coaches, including Montclair State's Maureen Wendelken, whose brother was a friend of LaPorte's neighbor.

Wendelken clued the Pioneers coach into a promising small forward on her squad named Pat Colasurdo, and LaPorte called the player to see if she would be willing to play in California. As luck would have it, Colasurdo was about to be married, and she and her future husband had talked about starting out somewhere away from home. "We wanted to venture elsewhere, and so we just basically let the word out that we were willing to relocate," she says. That was just what LaPorte wanted to hear.

In New Orleans, general manager Steve Brown spent time on the telephone gearing up for the draft. "If I had a player on the west coast and the west coach loved her, I'd call the coach in

the Midwest or the east or the south, and I'd get different opinions and sort of cross check," he says. Luckily for Brown, many of the southern players he had his eye on weren't well known in other areas. Just in case, though, Brown told Queen Brumfield from Southeastern Louisiana to announce that she wasn't going to play if she couldn't stay home. "So all the others were afraid to draft her," he laughs. "That's how I got her. Oh, I'm evil."

As with the previous draft, league officials suggested a dry run the night before, but Dallas Diamonds owner Judson Phillips wasn't keen on the idea. He believed he had found a pearl in Alfreda Abernathy (a future WBL All-Star), and had no intention of cluing anyone else in. "I wouldn't tell them," he says. "I'm just not going to do it.' The rest of them said, 'We're not going to do it either,' and so the mock draft fell apart."

Most teams that year were looking for size (13 of the 15 first-round selections were post players, and Chicago used six of its twelve picks on centers), but the Pioneers took Colasurdo at No. 1. The New York Times found the choice of a New Jersey player significant, noting, "Her selection by San Francisco indicated that teams are looking for talented players rather than just name or regionally popular players."

Or that owners didn't know enough, others suggested. "Knowledge of the players by team owners and the press must improve," Basketball Weekly associate editor Clifford Smith wrote. It was obvious to Smith that Tennessee's Cindy Brogdon,

with perhaps the purest shot in the game, should have gone first.

Sportscaster commemorated the draft with a trading card featuring Colasurdo in her red Montclair State uniform. On the back was a short blurb:

The No. 1 choice in 1979 was Pat Colasurdo, a teammate of (Carol) Blazejowski's at Montclair State. She was chosen by the San Francisco Pioneers, who decided her 23-point-per-game average warranted her selection. But Colasurdo realized that being No. 1 pick in the WBL isn't worth quite as much as being No. 1 in the men's equivalent, the NBA. "I'm not a Larry Bird," she said, thinking of the \$650,000 salary the former Indiana State star received from the Boston Celtics. "I'm just looking to cover what I would make as a teacher and to make ends meet. I wasn't looking for millions right now."

1980-81 WBL Draft, June 16, 1980.

The most intriguing of the WBL's three drafts was its last. Several controversies arose at one time or another, the first of which was the selection order. Initially, league officials had announced that expansion teams would draft first in order of acceptance, as in the year before. But that placed a franchise (Tampa Bay) owned by former WBL president Bill Byrne into the No. 1 slot over Dallas, which otherwise had earned it with the prior

season's worst record.

Before draft day, the Board of Governors voted to move expansion teams to the seventh position, giving Dallas back the No. 1 pick. At No. 2 originally was Milwaukee, but the Chicago Hustle traded two veteran players and cash for the slot. Picking third would be the Nebraska Wranglers franchise owned by Larry Kozlicki, based on the win-loss record of his former team, the defunct California Dreams. This, too, raised eyebrows, as some believed the Wranglers should be counted as an expansion team, not as an extension of the Dreams.

Nearly everyone predicted that the top two picks in 1980 would be Nancy Lieberman and Inge Nissen, teammates from an Old Dominion team that won 72 of 74 games on its way to two consecutive championships, widely recognized as one of the greatest women's basketball teams in history. (A matchup between 1979-80 Old Dominion and undefeated 1994-95 University of Connecticut would be something to see, Greenberg says.)

A stellar post player, Stephen F. Austin's Rosie Walker, was expected to go high as a defensive specialist. "Rosie is no weak sister on offense either," Chicago Hustle general manager Ed Smythe wrote in a fan newsletter. But Walker was not tall enough (at 6'1"), some observers thought. (Told of that remark in a pre-draft scouting report, Walker laughs. "It's a typo.")

Perhaps the top pick might be used on a dark horse, *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Glenn Dickey speculated. "Nancy

Lieberman gets all the publicity, but coaches in the Women's Basketball League like the chances of (Brigham Young University's) 6'5 Tina Gunn, with her 40-point average, just as much," he wrote. (Gunn, who was not interested in giving up her job as an engineer, laughingly nixed that possibility by telling callers that she would only sign for \$150,000.)

The clear front runners, though, were the dynamic duo from Old Dominion, and most teams wanted a shot at them. Talk emerging from some corners, including the player herself, was that Lieberman would help the league more in New York. But if the Stars wanted the No. 1 pick, the Diamonds said, it would cost them Pearl Moore, Sharon Farrah, Stacey Rhoades, and their own first-round pick. New York passed. (Dallas wanted "half a team," Stars assistant coach Joe Verdi grouched.) The Hustle also wanted Lieberman for their television coverage, the best in the league. Would Dallas trade the pick for three Hustle players? No.

Shortly before the draft, Diamonds president Dave Almstead announced to his coaching staff that he wanted both Lieberman and Nissen, no small feat considering they were expected to be the first two picks. To Coach Williams' consternation, Almstead liked to do all of the Diamonds' wheeling and dealing, and when San Francisco owner Marshall Geller approached to inquire about a trade, Almstead spirited him away for the chat. "Dave was on some kind of power trip as president of the Diamonds," Dallas

assistant coach Tom Davis concluded, seeking revenge on other owners from Almstead's days as league vice president. "I couldn't blame him," Davis wrote that summer. "He had been their voodoo doll and he wanted the chance to reciprocate."

As draft day approached, Williams was stewing. Lieberman or Nissen? Lieberman could handle either a guard or forward position, but he hadn't met her, and Almstead had refused to disclose what he and Lieberman had talked about during her recruiting visit. She also posed some risks. What if she refused to come to Dallas because she wanted to stay in New York? What if, as expected, she asked for huge dollars?

Williams had been impressed with Nissen when she flew in for a pre-draft visit. "Inge proved to be a personable, very mature lady" who joked about getting her naturalization papers by flying to Cuba then rowing over by boat, Davis said, and offered to sign for \$5,000 and a year's supply of cheesecake.

The coach decided to solicit input. "Back then you didn't go out and scout games live, so I just did a lot of telephone research," he says. Calling a number of top college coaches, Williams presented the scenario: "Okay, I've got the number one pick. It's between either Nancy Lieberman or her teammate Inge Nissen. Who would you take if you were in my position?" The answer was almost unanimous: Nissen. "Nine out of ten of the college coaches said, 'Lieberman is a great, great player, no question, but you are talking 6'5" versus a 5'10" guard, I'd take

6'5".' That is where it was leading all the way. I told my owner that."

In keeping with tradition, a Board of Governors meeting was held the day before the draft, and tempers flared as Geller was accused of illegally signing South Carolina State's Margaret English, the 6'4" sister of NBA Hall of Famer Alex English who had been assessed as a potential first-round pick. English should have been placed in the draft, several owners argued. "Uncertainties over her eligibility led to sharp debate at the owners' meeting held the weekend preceding the draft in New York City," the Pioneers acknowledged. The signing was upheld, but Geller was penalized a 1981-82 draft pick. The vote was close; Byrne had to break a 6-6 tie.

Outside the meeting room, Davis tried to eavesdrop, but eventually he and the other Diamonds staffers made their way to the lounge. There, Davis became suspicious when he spied Iowa Cornets coach Steve Kirk sitting with the wife of Nebraska Wranglers owner Larry Kozlicki. Later, he realized, Kirk (who had come with Cornets owner George Nissen) was handling the draft for the Wranglers. "He spends Nissen's money to prepare for an opposing team," Davis mused. Actually, though, Kirk had resigned from Iowa and joined the new Nebraska franchise.

(Rumors that something was up between the Nebraska and Iowa franchises later proved true. In September 1980, just two weeks before WBL teams were to declare if they would play the upcoming

season, Kozlicki reported a trade in which Nebraska would give up four picks in the 1982 and 1983 drafts, plus rights to two players not then in the league, in exchange for Iowa veterans Connie Kunzmann, Charlotte Lewis and Tonyus Chavers and draftee Holly Warlick. The trade irritated some owners, who felt that it violated the spirit of the September 30 declaration deadline, since it would essentially render Iowa incapable of competing. This "will become a sore point" if allowed to stand, Minnesota's Nevers warned, but Kozlicki ended up with the players.)

When the June 15, 1980, Board of Governors meeting ended, another announcement was made to staff: Nessie Harris and Trish Bell, who had signed with Minnesota, and Sheryl Pate, who had signed with San Francisco, were no longer eligible for the draft.

Diamonds coach Williams "jumped up hotter than he is after a blown Diamond lay-up" and stormed out, Davis reported.

Dallas still had the big prize, though, and Williams wanted to be sure he had the final word. "Dave (Almstead) came in there, and he had some bitter feelings towards some of these owners who had basically run he and Bill Byrne out of the league," he recalls. "And now he finds himself as GM of the team that has the number one draft pick, so he has a little positioning power here. We go to the draft, and I start seeing him meeting with several other teams owners, without me there. These rumors start to come back to me that 'Hey, he is talking about trading the pick,' and blah, blah, blah."

The night before the draft, Williams approached Diamonds owner Michael Staver. "We need to have a meeting," he said, and argued his case at dinner. "I want it specified by you that I have the number one pick, it's my decision, and mine only."

Staver agreed. "OK, Greg has the final say," he declared. "He is making the call. Who are we drafting tomorrow morning?"

"We're drafting Inge Nissen," Williams replied.

After dinner, the two men went their separate ways, but Staver called the general manager several times during the night, frustrated that they would not have the top two picks. "Dave fucked up, didn't he?" he asked Nichols. "Now we can't get them both. Dave fucked up." ("Of course, Dave hadn't, but it was tough convincing Mike of that," Davis wrote.) Almstead did make a last-second try for the second pick, offering Chicago Alfreda Abernathy, but without success.

At 9 a.m. on June 16, 1980, the draft began, and the Diamonds had three minutes to make their selection. Williams scribbled on a piece of paper, folded it, and waited for Staver to appear for the announcement. And waited. Almstead hurried to a nearby coffee shop, but Staver wasn't there. He ran back to the hotel; again nothing. "You have one minute, Dallas," Byrne declared. Williams was getting nervous. "My owner is a total night person, he is the ultimate party guy. He's not even there," he recalls. "The clock is ticking. We keep looking back at the door. Where is he? Where is he? Because we wanted him to have

the honor of making the first pick.”

The owner wandered into the room, stopping to greet people. “Finally, he comes walking through the back door and he comes walking up there, and you can tell that he has had a good time in the Big Apple,” Williams says. “He’s just kind of staggering around.” The coach quickly handed Staver the note. “Of course, he’s half out of it, he’s expecting to see ‘Inge Nissen.’ He’s blurry-eyed, and he kind of looks at it and says, ‘Wait a minute, what’s this?’” Williams shoved him toward the microphone. “Hurry up--get up there and make the pick before we lose it!”

With the number one pick, the Dallas Diamonds selected Nancy Lieberman of Old Dominion University. Williams had changed his mind overnight. “I woke up the next morning and hey, it was just like manna from heaven,” he says. “I just changed my mind, I can’t really tell you why.”

Nissen, meanwhile, was headed for Chicago. The Nebraska Wranglers selected Rosie Walker with the third pick. “Trust me, Steve, you’re not going to be disappointed,” Williams told Wranglers coach Kirk. “Rosie Walker is a heck of a player.” The prediction proved true-Walker was MVP of the league and led the Wranglers to the last WBL title.