

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

**by Karra Porter**

**"Media Glare"**

*"I would just like to take this time to say you guys are a bunch of bluenosed snobs who obviously will not share your almighty front page of the sports section with deserving women who are just starting to emerge into pro sports or any sports for that matter."* Minnesota Fillies fan Linda M. Nelson, Minneapolis, letter to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 6, 1980.

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*"The uppity wench deserved it."* Doug Grow, *Minneapolis Star*, February 1980.

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*February 1, 1979, Milwaukee.*

*Another cold week, skirting record lows again. Inside a warm car, Kathy DeBoer chatted with other women on their way to practice as one of her teammates leafed through the Milwaukee Sentinel.*

*Suddenly, she heard an exclamation. Listen to this, her teammate said: "Does Players Blast Bosses." The headline blared across the page. DeBoer listened in horror as her teammate read the article aloud. She was one of the players who had grumbled*

to the reporter about Does management, but she had assumed it was off the record.

“Oh, man,” she groaned. “We are dead.”

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With little money to devote to promotion, league officials hoped to generate free publicity through the media (usually in print; television coverage was beyond hope). At the national level, coverage was sparse. “They weren’t cooperative at all,” recalls Kate McEnroe, the league’s public relations director during its first season. “It took really cultivating them. They were very much skeptical about if the league could make it, and I guess rightly so.” (Skeptical, indeed: “The odds against the WBL even making it to the playoffs have not yet been listed,” wrote one Illinois paper before the first season had even begun.)

Some of the WBL’s struggles could not be helped, wrote *Saturday Review*’s Jonathan Evan Maslow in the first season, but “the part that can be helped is the refusal of the male-dominated sports press to take the women’s game seriously.” That was not likely to happen, WBL founder Bill Byrne says. “Those guys had to turn around.” Painting a picture of a stereotypical male sportswriter of the day - “ugly fingernails and cigarette burns all over his shirt and a cigar out, and he was sitting there with a pencil behind his ear” - Byrne says conversations about covering the WBL were usually fairly brief:

"I would like to talk to you about women's basketball."

"Get the hell out of here."

"There was no media coverage, or extremely minimal coverage," notes former WBL player and author Mariah Burton Nelson (*The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football*). "It was still a joke to a lot of people. We didn't have respect. There was no college momentum at that point. There was no University of Connecticut or Tennessee that had gotten national attention. Those of us who were in that world knew our history, knew that Immaculata College, a little tiny school of 800 women, had won the first three national championships. But the fans were not in the habit of watching and admiring (female) athletes. So to whatever extent they did try to market us, I think a lot was unsuccessful because the culture was not ready or prepared."

The most crucial area of coverage was at the local level, and the quality ranged widely. Although major metropolitan areas obviously presented a larger pool from which to draw fans, attention by the print media was often poor there. The *New York Times*, for example, was inconsistent in its coverage of women's basketball. Only a month before Byrne announced the formation of the WBL, the *Times* had run a lengthy column titled "Women's Basketball: It's Improving With Age," and occasionally a nice piece on the WBL or a particular game ran, but otherwise, its coverage of the league and the New York Stars was sporadic at best.

The rival *New York Post* devoted even less space to the women's league. Game summaries, when the paper actually ran

them, were brief and irregular, even when the Stars were charging toward the WBL championship in 1980. The *Post's* professional basketball columnist, Peter Vecsey, ignored the WBL completely, except on one occasion when he sensed potential scandal amid a change in league management. (Even that prospect warranted only a couple of sentences in Vecsey's column. Another of his rare mentions was practically nonsensical: "Wouldn't it make sense for Stars Pearl Mason and Pearl Moore to change their last names to Harbor, so they'll always be remembered?" he wrote.)

In Washington, the *Post* also ignored the WBL - unless one counted columnist Dave Kindred, who penned such columns as one titled "Women's Basketball Is Unexciting." In that piece, Kindred expressed disbelief that a basketball legend like Wilt Chamberlain could, and did, enjoy watching women's basketball. "Chamberlain says it's exciting and deserves to be on television and ought to be playing in full houses," he wrote, but the *Post* rarely perked up at mentions of women's basketball until the WBL's Washington Metros franchise developed financial problems. By contrast, the rival (now defunct) *Washington Star* extended excellent coverage of both the franchise's ups and downs.

The league might have expected better coverage in Philadelphia, whose *Inquirer* boasted one of the most influential media figures in the women's college game. Mel Greenberg had earned his reputation not only by covering women's basketball as a legitimate sport, but by developing for women what, until then, had been a uniquely male feature: A Top 20 ranking of college teams. In the mid-1970s, Greenberg was covering field hockey for

the *Inquirer*, but had also taken to covering the occasional women's basketball game, and one day he was chatting with *Inquirer* sports editor Jay Searcy. "What do you think of the idea of a poll?" Searcy asked.

"I think you're nuts," Greenberg replied. "What are you talking about? You've got four teams maybe out there that might be legit, and you need twenty. Where are you going to get scores? Where are you going to get this? Where are you going to get that?"

Well, Searcy said, maybe he could give it a try, anyway ...

"Oh, all right," Greenberg relented, and he set about his task. "Jay always planted the seeds, even though he didn't know where to reap sometimes," he says.

The project almost ended before it began, when Greenberg ran into a problem with the AIAW, the governing body over women's college basketball at the time. Did they have an interest in helping out? Greenberg asked. He would receive a position paper, the organization replied. "I got one, and it was basically (that) women shouldn't be involved in newspaper games like polls. That it would lead to all of the ugliness of men's athletics."

Forget it, Greenberg decided. "How are you going to get things done if you can't get any cooperation out there?" But Searcy continued to pitch the idea, possibly because, as a New Yorker, he had witnessed first hand the sparkling rivalry between the women's programs at Philadelphia's Immaculata and New York's

Queens College, including the first women's game ever played in Madison Square Garden. Immaculata's success also tugged at Greenberg's civic pride, along with memories of his own experience managing a men's team in the 1960s, but that wasn't enough to change his mind. Searcy, however, was spreading the word that Greenberg was starting a women's poll, and Greenberg told him to stop it. "I'm like, 'Jay, will you be quiet already? Because it's going to be impossible.'"

One evening, Greenberg was attending a pre-season dinner at Immaculata, where star player Marianne Stanley's number was being retired. "The nuns are all singing, and everything is going nicely, and I'm thinking to myself, 'You know, I better try and do something, or all of this might die,'" and he decided to give it another shot. He got on the phone to coaches, officials, and, this time, receptive AIAW officials who agreed to issue a positive statement about the project. (Word of mouth finally got around that he was "more white knight than black knight," Greenberg says.) Without the benefit of internet, or faxes, or a computer - "I used a Chinese abacus," he jokes - and scant attention having been paid to women's game, Greenberg painstakingly gathered information about programs throughout the country. It took six months to create the first poll, he says, and then he had six days to do the next one.

When the WBL's Philadelphia Fox arrived in 1979, Greenberg was busy with the college scene, and the Fox were assigned to a new reporter who had just joined the paper. Coverage was

irregular, to say the least (as it was also in the competing *Philadelphia Journal*), but Greenberg says some problems were caused by the WBL's own disorganization.

Take a Fox game he attended against the New Jersey Gems, Greenberg says. "I took one look." He shakes his head. "You know, the most important thing - beyond a team, players, too - was someone in the upper operation who knows what he's doing, because that is the other thing you need. If the papers believe you are all screwed up, then that's the end of it right there, because no one is ever going to give you the time of day. If you can't get box scores after a game in a reasonable amount of time, etc., it's like a noose."

By far the least interested of all big-market newspapers was the *Los Angeles Times*, which barely acknowledged its local WBL franchise, the California Dreams. (Ironically, a 1998 nostalgia piece on the Dreams was the most extensive coverage the Times ever gave the team. By contrast, the smaller Orange County Register followed the Dreams quite well, from pre-season workouts through the team's abbreviated season.)

The Dreams' press coverage was "almost nonexistent," author Ted Vincent observed in his 1980 book *Mudville's Revenge*, and correctly so. Competing for space were the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers (with an exciting new rookie named Ervin "Magic" Johnson), UCLA, USC, and a dozen other popular attractions. The Times did run box scores for Dreams games, but none for other games, nor were league standings even printed except after the Dreams played. Transaction reports were incomplete and not always

accurate (such as inexplicably referring to the New Orleans franchise as "Pittsburgh.").

Occasionally, one or two-sentence game summaries appeared on the tenth or twelfth page of the Times sports section, and UCLA All-American Ann Meyers was usually good for a few words. An item in November 1979, for instance, mentioned that Meyers missed the press conference for her own contract signing with the New Jersey Gems. A few days later, the player's professional debut garnered a single sentence in the *Times*, buried on page 12 below a story twice as long about a local yacht race.

The first professional women's basketball game ever played in California received a half dozen inches of text (about a third of a typical Lakers article) on page four, but even that was excessive to one disgusted *Times* reader. "This is too much," Rick Burns fumed:

*After seeing about the 10th boring Ann Meyers article in the past couple of months, and another women's pro basketball article, I wonder how much of this publicity the market will bear. Ann Meyers is a good woman basketball player. To even subtly compare her to men is absurd. She couldn't hold her own with the average male varsity high school player. Her well-publicized tryout with the Indiana Pacers was the biggest bunch of garbage I've ever had to avoid reading. Is she really front-page stuff? Do readers care about press conferences to possibly announce her signing with the Gems, or whoever? Also front page stuff is Meg Griggs, public relations director for the women's pro league, telling me*

*the women have "movement, geometric design and play and competitors who delight the eye." As opposed to the NBA? Women are one-fourth as fast, jump one-fourth as high, shoot half as well and are about one-tenth as quick. The women's game looks like a slow-motion replay. I'm all for women playing (exercising, running, sweating) but let's keep it in perspective. Lay off the hard sell.*

Among the indifference, or outright hostility, of some large-market media, significant exceptions stood out. Before Jud Phillips invested in a Dallas WBL franchise, he did some checking on how well the team would be covered by the media in that city.

"I talked to all of the newspapers and television stations before I got involved with this thing, to see what kind of press coverage I felt we would get," he says. "The overwhelming response I got is that it will be based on how many people really care. If you draw well, we're going to send people on the road with you, and you'll get pretty good press. If nobody comes, you won't."

By that standard, Phillips' Dallas Diamonds received outstanding coverage, especially considering its early attendance woes. "We drew 300 people to the game, and some days we would get the front page of the sports section," he marvels. "We were on the news a lot, and the radio had us on. I think we got a tremendous amount of media. I didn't like everything they said on the news, but any ink was good ink."

Without question, the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Times Herald* provided excellent coverage of the Diamonds, and television was also better than average, even before media magnet Nancy Lieberman joined the team in its second season. Dallas coaches Greg Williams and Tom Davis were shocked when a television news station appeared at pre-draft tryouts in the summer of 1980. "A try-out camp!" Davis wrote. "We had a tough time getting the t.v. stations in Houston to come out and cover the playoff games. We knew that things were definitely going to be different in Dallas."

If one Diamonds supporter had his way, things would be very different. Midway through the 1980-81 season, Dallas businessman Marvin Meyers hired an advertising executive, George Toomer, to help improve coverage of the Diamonds. (A prankster, Toomer was already notorious for having "spread empty rifle cartridges around the site of the Kennedy assassination for the benefit of tourists, developing what he calls 'the 15-gunman theory,'" the *News* reported).

Toomer came up with an advertisement that the Diamonds refused to run in their game program, fearing the wrath of local media. A copy was leaked, however, becoming fodder for a *News* column. The clever ad encouraged fans to clip it out and mail it to the sports journalist of their choice. Rather than make a plea for more coverage, the ad instead asked the journalist to select from a list the reason for his absence at Diamonds games. Options included:

*I've been going to EST [insult therapy].*  
*My kids play soccer on those nights.*  
*I thought the Dallas Diamonds was a drill team.*  
*I can't holler raging obscenities at women players.*  
*I can't get a beer at Moody Auditorium.*  
*I can't be seen on TV hanging around the sidelines.*  
*I'm not used to typing women's names.*

Overall, Dallas Diamonds coverage was clearly above average. One notable exception, in Phillips' view, was after he decided to fold the franchise in 1980. Dallas media gave the owner considerable grief, even going so far as to report that the team's secretary/receptionist (his wife) had "left the country with Phillips so they could dodge a lot of questions that would soon arise."

Phillips still seethes about the accusation. "That was such a joke," he says. "I was in Dallas when that article appeared. I never left the country to avoid anything." A few weeks later, he and his wife did take a brief vacation, "but I wasn't trying to avoid anybody, I was just trying to get back to my normal life."

Of all his WBL experiences, "that hurt me the most," Phillips says. The reporter in question was just trying to make a name for himself by bashing others, he believes. "He was a hammer guy. He liked to hammer anybody."

Chicago's two major dailies, the *Sun-Times* and the *Tribune*, afforded remarkably good coverage to the Chicago Hustle. Disdain

for the women's game, however, occasionally manifested even in such supportive publications. In early 1979, for example, the *Tribune* reported that Hustle games were drawing twice as many television viewers as the city's hockey team, the Black Hawks. But rather than see the Hustle's ratings as good for women's basketball, columnist Gary Deeb painted it as humiliating for the men's hockey team. "If the (Hawks owner's) family or anyone else needs further proof that Chicago fans are down on the boring Black Hawks, they only have to peek at the latest television audience ratings for local sports," he wrote. The ratings disparity was his selection for the year's Most Profound Embarrassment.

Houston's daily papers, the *Chronicle* and the *Post*, also provided very good coverage, including (a rarity for the WBL) full box scores, with minutes played, field goals made and attempted, free throws made and attempted, rebounds, assists, fouls, and points. Both papers typically ran advance stories before games, and thoughtful accounts of the games themselves, including action shots. (Houston writers also seemed to devote the same attention to devising clever headlines as they did for the city's NBA franchise. Thus, readers might learn, the Houston Angels were ready to "shuck Cornets," who wanted to "beat the devil" out of the Angels.)

In New Orleans, the WBL's New Orleans Pride was guaranteed the attention of the *Times-Picayune* when it hired as its coach the colorful Butch van Breda Kolff, former head coach of the NBA's New Orleans Jazz and Los Angeles Lakers. "To hire Butch as

a coach was a great move because the city of New Orleans loved him to death. I mean, they just loved him," says Pride player Sybil Blalock. "When we would go out on promotional events, it was incredible how people flocked to him. He is just a great guy."

"VBK" was always good for a pithy quote, and the *Times-Picayune* sought him out often. The paper usually ran "advances," stories in anticipation of the night's upcoming game, and full game accounts after the game, and except for a few glitches (occasionally misstating the Pride's win-loss record, for example), the paper's coverage was superior. The *Times-Picayune* even designated "Pride Gains Playoffs in 1st Season" as one of its Top 10 Sports Stories of 1980.

Both the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Globe-Democrat* began with good coverage for the WBL's St. Louis Streak. "I thought they did a really nice job for the early '80's," says Streak player Darla Plice, especially with photography. "Usually I laugh about pictures taken back in that era of female athletes, it's usually like falling on the floor or scrambling. It wasn't very complimentary, but most of the pictures here were pretty good action shots."

In its first season, St. Louis media were intrigued by the Streak, who featured one of the most dynamic players in the league, Liz Silcott. However, interest faded over time, especially after the team traded Silcott and went on a 20-game losing streak. By the end of the Streak's 1980-81 season, the

formerly enthusiastic *Post-Dispatch* allotting the team minimal space, ignoring even intriguing developments such as a mysteriously cancelled game.

The Streak's late-season resurgence did not regain the kind of attention the team had received earlier. "I do think the media interest seemed to sort of slide gradually down over the two years we were there," owner Vince Gennaro says. When the Streak were legislated out of the 1981 playoffs by a Board of Governors decision reducing the qualifiers from three to two in each division, the papers did not even mention it.

Press coverage of the San Francisco Pioneers by the San Francisco *Chronicle* was good, relatively speaking, and sports columnists and writers seemed genuinely interested. However, most coverage was limited to game-day articles. The paper typically did not mention when players were traded or added, for example.

Over time, interest seemed to wane, and shifted to less appealing aspects of the WBL. "We had regress," owner Marshall Geller says. "Because of San Francisco being that kind of city, they really took to the sport initially, and they wrote wonderful articles that helped us. But as the ownership around the league started to run into financial problems, it started hitting the press. All of a sudden, some girls didn't get paid, they were owed money, they were living out of their cars because the team couldn't pay them. Any decent newspaper is going to pick up that article and really make it a big issue." The *Chronicle's* coverage deteriorated dramatically in the Pioneers' second season as the

team struggled and fan favorites retired or were traded.

The Dayton Rockettes were well covered. Most games were preceded by advance stories, and followed by detailed accounts of the games. The *Dayton Daily News* also ran a lengthy feature story on the Rockettes early in the season, complete with photographs of players on their bus, on the sidelines, and on the court. In Omaha, the *World Herald's* coverage of that city's "Distaff Pro Cagers" (or "Female Club") was, in spite of such questionable headlines, favorable to the Nebraska Wranglers. (Incidentally, the *World Herald* wasn't the only paper to use generic labels for its WBL team. It was not uncommon for headlines to refer to the local "girls' pro team" and the like).

Coverage of the New Jersey Gems was consistent and largely positive, (although Coach Don Kennedy once ejected from the locker room a sportswriter from the *Bergen Record* who he said had written "three nasty stories" about the team). Like other papers, attention to detail was not always a priority when it came to the WBL. One article in the Newark *Star-Ledger*, for example, opened with an announcement that there would be no Patterson-Patterson duel that night between the Dayton Rockettes and the New Jersey Gems because Dayton's Shelia Patterson was injured. The name of the Gems player, however, was not actually "Dale Patterson," as the article stated, but "Gail Tatterson". (Most newspapers provided fodder for this kind of nitpicking. Thus, the *Washington Post* might refer to the "Idaho Cornets," while Gannett Westchester Newspapers might think they were the "Iowa Coronets.")

Iowa newspapers were very generous to their popular WBL team, the Iowa Cornets. The Des Moines *Register*, Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, and half a dozen local papers reported faithfully on the Cornets. When "Machine Gun" Molly Bolin broke the WBL single-game scoring record with 55, the *Register* ran a banner headline - "MAGNIFICENT MOLLY!" - with large photographs marking the event.

Game summaries, player bios, team updates were all printed on a regular basis, and on those occasions when a local stringer needed "help" with a story, Cornets general manager Katie McEnroe was, literally, right upstairs, ready to come down and lend a hand. ("If you don't do this, I'm just going to put it on the wire for you," she told them.)

Milwaukee was a story all its own. The competing *Sentinel* and *Journal* were delighted to run stories about the Milwaukee Does - their coaching problems, their scandals, their attendance problems, and, occasionally, their games. Criticism of the Does was relentless, beginning with a seemingly innocuous ticket stub drawing for a color television or the use of a Lincoln Continental at a Does game - an "an illegal lottery," the *Journal* proclaimed.

"I don't know if we had the juiciest stuff going on, but we certainly had the juiciest stuff in the paper," says Does player Kathy DeBoer. No question about it. The *Sentinel's* Jill Lieber ruthlessly pursued dubious activities by team management, and had plenty of fodder. Milwaukee newspaper readers might not have known who the high scorer was in a particular game, but they knew all about the GM's prior business dealings, alleged sexual

harassment, and other off-court activities.

Ridicule of Does management began early after the team fired its head coach following a single loss, prompting a scathing writeup in the *Journal*:

*"There was a time when the circus was called The Greatest Show on Earth. That, obviously, was before the Milwaukee Does of the Women's Basketball League came into existence.*

*If you like Bozo the Clown, the Bearded Lady, dancing bears and lions and tigers, you'll love the Does' organization. Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

*Get your peanuts and cotton candy, grab a front row seat and try very hard to believe what has transpired under the Does' Big Top this week."*

Later, another blistering article in the *Sentinel* included quotes from several Does players. One was DeBoer, who was immediately traded to Minnesota. Another player named in the article, Marguerite Keeley, would be joining her. "Now that I'm in management, I understand why they were so angry," says DeBoer.

"It's like, 'You are hurting all of us here with this naivete, and you are hurting the league. Do you want women's pro basketball to succeed? If you do, then why would you go to the paper with this kind of stuff? Why would you let the paper get it from you?'"

DeBoer had not intended to hurt the team. "It was a start of my education which has been long and painful and generally one step forward, two steps back," she says. "I just had never fully appreciated that what a sports writer is doing doesn't have

anything to do with what I am doing in terms of motive. So we got a real lesson in, that off the record doesn't mean I am not going to write about this. Beware of the sports reporter that wants to be your friend."

Milwaukee press were not through tormenting Does management. In mid-March 1979, the *Journal* turned up the heat with an article - kindly titled "Does' Officials Have History of Failures" - that outlined in detail the financial history of three team staffers. General manager Gene DeLisle had been involved in at least 17 court cases, it reported, including an earlier project to sell athletic jackets named after Milwaukee Brewers broadcaster Bob Uecker that ended up involving law enforcement. A few days after the article was printed, DeLisle resigned.

Equally bitter conflicts with the media took place in Minneapolis, where the lack of coverage of the Minnesota Fillies itself became the subject of media coverage. The digs began early in the first season, when Minnesota Twins relief pitcher Tom Johnson announced that he was an enthusiastic Fillies fan, "and thinks the local WBL entry is deserving of better media coverage." A week later, the Minneapolis *Tribune* was accused by its rival, the Minneapolis *Star*, of ignoring the team. *Tribune* readers had to wait a week "to find something of note about the Fillies," columnist Bob Utecht complained.

Local media definitely were not friendly to the cause, Fillies owner Gordon Nevers says. One sports editor, for example, "spent almost the entire opening night going around interviewing the people in the stadium and asking them if they

paid for their ticket, nothing relative to how the game was. He was basically saying that we seeded the house.” Yes, a number of the tickets were given away - “We tried to make people come in and see our game” - but Nevers would have liked more emphasis on the game itself.

In his three seasons as owner of the Fillies, Nevers’ disputes with local press grew. “I think maybe I was a little bit of an irritant, because I reacted to it probably not the proper way at the time,” he says now. “I have always been a little bit feisty, and I just took offense at it. It’s hindsight now, but I wish I had been a little less volatile about reacting, and maybe a little bit more - I don’t know what the word is, because I’m not that way.”

Fillies fans added their own complaints. “I can never find anything in ‘Scoreboard,’ or almost any other place in the Tribune, concerning the Women’s Professional Basketball League and the Minnesota Fillies,” William H. Hull wrote the *Tribune*. “You are making a mistake in not supporting this new league. Although it may be of limited audience appeal, it’s not alone. Examine a ‘Scoreboard’ and see the many other listings that are also of slight interest to your total readership audience.” Another *Tribune* reader wondered, “There is only one professional basketball team in town - the Fillies. Why do you give them so little support?”

Because fans were not supporting them either, the paper replied. After explaining that its coverage for the Fillies

equaled that for a local professional slo-pitch softball team, the *Tribune's* sports editor declared, "the *Tribune* will give the Fillies more coverage when more fans go to Fillies games."

That, in turn, posed a longstanding question about media coverage of new sports ventures: Which comes first, media attention or public acceptance? Reader interest drives media attention, but without media attention, how do readers become interested?

"We went round and round about whether they would cover a sport or an event that didn't have any people," recalls Fillies player and publicity director Lynnette Sjoquist. "I would continue to debate with them, 'No one knows about it. If you would put it in the paper once in a while, then we would get some attendance.'"

Sjoquist did not buy the argument that attendance was the whole story behind editors' decisions. "They probably didn't think it was a professional sports package, meaning it didn't deserve any attention," she speculates. "Because it was a woman's sport, that probably had something to do with it. I mean, I've seen them cover Minnesota Twins games with less people than what we had at some of our games. So I know the idea of attendance doesn't really hold water, but it is a nice thing to say, and I guess I have to believe it. Part of it was it was a different time and place. That's the reason we kept in the fight - we wanted to change that type of coverage."

In December 1979, a *Star* columnist wrote, "I've had it with the Fillies complaining about the media. First of all, it's not

the media's job to sell tickets for any sports club. The media should reflect interest, not develop it." Yet at the same time Minnesota media were refusing to cover the Fillies unless fans showed more interest, some members of the media actively campaigned to drive down interest. "The only sure-fire way to draw people for the WPBL would be to send out a group of thugs to shanghai innocent citizens - the same method captains sailing to the Far East used to put together a crew," wrote Patrick Reusse of the St. Paul *Pioneer Press and Dispatch* declared in one of several columns bashing women's basketball.

Two weeks later, a Fillies home game drew a surprising 4,917, forcing the arena to call in additional staff and delay the tipoff while spectators filed in. Seemingly contrary to the *Tribune's* assertion that better attendance would produce better coverage, the game received no mention at all the next day beyond the final score. Three letters and nearly a dozen phone calls from angry fans followed. "What's the matter with you and your newspaper?" one asked. "I suggest that you get on the ball and with the times and crawl out of your archaic shell."

*Tribune* sports editor Gary Libman bristled at the accusations. No story appeared after the biggest crowd of the season, he claimed, because the typesetting machine had "crashed" and erased it. "A reader who says we do not put women's sports - including the Fillies - on the front sports page does not read the *Tribune*," Libman said. True, the paper did not afford the same coverage as in men's sports, which generated significantly

higher attendance, but “what we do try to do is cover women in their more important games or do feature stories during the season when we find a personal angle or situation which is extremely interesting.” (That explanation did not satisfy a handful of fans who picketed outside the *Star* and *Tribune*, demanding better coverage of the Fillies.)

A larger battle was yet to come. In 1981, *Star* reporter Doug Grow made a call to Fillies player Marie Kocurek, who happened to have walked out of practice that morning to protest not being paid. How were things going, Grow wondered. Kocurek let loose. “You can quote it. All that I have said as true,” she told him. “I can prove it. Quote it all.” And he did. Grow’s article began: “It has become commonplace in the last two years that on scheduled paydays, members of the Minnesota Fillies’ basketball team have been confronted by owner Gordon Nevers instead of a paycheck . . . ,” and went on from there.

The article hit the streets Wednesday morning, and by that afternoon Kocurek had been waived. The article was the last straw, Nevers admitted, but the player’s attitude had been poor all season. “She’s been bitter for three years and things never seem to get better when someone is bitter.” The move was inevitable, he says now. “It was just that we had come to an impasse, and there’s no sense in making people miserable.”

Immediately upon being placed on waivers, the Nebraska Wranglers claimed the All-Star Kocurek “for an undisclosed amount of cash.” When word of Kocurek’s fate reached Grow, he launched

an attack on Nevers. "The uppity wench deserved it," Grow began his next column. "She grumbled about not being paid on time and he had her on the next bus to Omaha." Grow emphasized that he had called Kocurek, not the other way around. "Hey, woman, where's the humility?" he wrote. "You've been traded because you've got a big mouth."

The Fillies signed Kocurek to play basketball, Grow said, "but she didn't understand that she was still a skirt. She didn't understand that she was to look pretty, keep the hair combed and smile coyly. Kocurek thought that the sneakers and the contract and the basketball suit meant that she really was a pro athlete."

The Associated Press picked up both Grow's original column and the aftermath. Nevers finally had the headlines he had been looking for.