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Givin' WNBA mad props

As an American citizen, it's probably safe to bet that you know what basketball is.

Because as a Eugene resident or a University student, chances are you've heard something about women's basketball. (In case you haven't, the Oregon women successfully defended their Pacific-10 Conference title last season.)

And if you're a basketball fan, men's or women's, then you had to have heard something about the WNBA.

You might have seen the league's commercials on television during timeouts of NBA games: "We've got next" was its slogan. Perhaps you've even seen parts of a WNBA game on television. Maybe you've watched a whole game, or many.

Of course, you can toss around a few names of star players — Chamique Holdsclaw, Lisa Leslie and Sheryl Swoopes — but you probably don't discuss their careers with the bravado that you would when discussing Michael Jordan or Wilt Chamberlain.

Chances are that you've heard of the WNBA — but I'd be willing to bet you haven't actually gone to a game yet.

In time, I think you will.

I ventured to the Rose Garden in Portland on June 8 to witness my first WNBA game. My first glance into the arena's red and black interior was this: large, black curtains bearing the WNBA logo seamlessly hid the Garden's 300 level of seating, and fans were scattered throughout the two levels of seating below. On the scoreboard monitor, I saw the face of some Portland player I've never heard of, but she wore an expression that I've seen on the faces of athletes hundreds of times over.

No doubt that these women basketball players have heart — but do their fans?

Upon that player sinking a free throw, the crowd's response was

a resounding "yes."

As my former sports editor and I sat in our 200 level VIP seats (which we bought from a scalper for \$15 a pop), several things went through my mind as I tried to picture success for this new,

up-and-coming league.

In Portland, 15,000 fans attending a Fire game is not unrealistic, if they start winning. But then who watches the games of teams who start losing?

Perhaps money can be made in league apparel. But how many street ballers are honestly going to show up to a game donning a Natalie Williams jersey?

COMMENTARY
Scott Pesznecker

Forget about winning the market share by wowing their audiences. Out there on the court I watched Utah's 7-foot-2 center, Margo Dydek, run up and down the court with the presence of Shawn Bradley. At that height, she can dunk, no doubt — but she didn't. Nobody else provided many firework moves either.

People go and watch the NBA because it's interwoven with America's sporting culture. The NBA makes millions of dollars in revenue because generations of today's population have grown up idolizing its players. And no female athlete will ever be as visually pleasing as Vince Carter flying toward the hoop, catching the ball in mid-air, putting it under his leg and finishing the 360-degree slam.

But as I sat there watching the game, I couldn't get over one simple fact.

I was having fun — lots of it. Fun, because even though the

Fire may have trailed by 10 most of the way through, they continued to play like they were right in the thick of the game. Honestly, it's been a long time since I've seen a team be behind by 10 in a regular season game with just a couple minutes to go, still playing as hard as they were in the opening minutes.

I'm a sucker for a good Portland-Utah matchup. And on this night, I didn't end up paying \$32 for a top row, 300-level seat, just to see a boring game with a lopsided outcome. That happened to me a few weeks before when I saw the Blazers demolish their Utah NBA counterpart in the playoffs' second round.

Small-time sports teams in Portland have done well. The Rockies (baseball) and the Winterhawks (hockey) have been successful in drawing faithful fans throughout the years. I don't see why the Fire won't do the same.

The WNBA is a league with great potential. Now that there's a pro women's hoops league, all of women's basketball will see improvement, even down at the high school level. More stars will shine. Because now they have something to shoot for, beyond college.

Yet a part of me hopes the WNBA never grows to be too big. Nobody needs another league that is marred by big business and surrounded by talks of big-market conspiracies. The Fire-Starzz game I watched wasn't merely a collection of millionaires getting together to play some ball — it was much, much more.

But that's a whole 'nother column, and a long one at that. And for now, I'm not worried about that. While I was at the game, I kept on scanning my eyes across the empty seats. Isn't that Oregon women's coach Jody Runge, sitting down there on the baseline? Yup.

The seats will fill. Soon

Crabb, Macdonald run with gusto

Senior Katie Crabb and sophomore Eri Macdonald turn in great shows at the Olympic Trials Qualifier

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

The elder statesmen and the fresh-faced newcomer.

Oregon track athletes Katie Crabb and Eri Macdonald kept themselves busy this past weekend by competing in the Olympic Trials Qualifier at Stanford University.

Crabb, the senior, was impressive in the talented 1,500 meter race. The Chico, Calif., native finished fifth out of the 17 competitors in her field.

Her time of 4 minutes, 21.64 seconds was good enough to place her as the top finisher amongst the collegians in the race. She was less than a second behind Kim Fitchen of the Nike Farm Team, who took fourth place.

Mary Cobb, also of the Nike Farm Team, won the event with a time of 4:15.83.

Oregon's Macdonald competed in the women's 800 and showed no signs of first year jitters. She ended up finishing sixth in the event with a time of 2:09.06 — less than a second behind fifth-place finisher Melissa Flynn of the Reebok Aggies.

Macdonald, who recently completed her first season as a

member of the track team, actually ran her second-fastest time of the season. Her only time that was better was her 800 of 2:08.62 at the Oregon Invitational on April 29.

Ironically, her fastest time this year was the exact same time as Flynn's on Saturday.

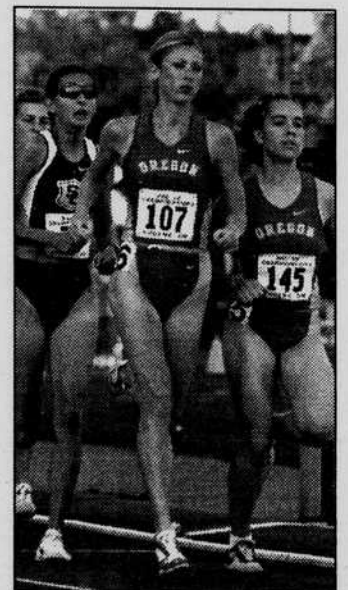
Coming in second in the event was former Duck Vicky Fleschner, who ran a time of 2:05.53. Her time left her just over a second behind 800 winner Nicole Teter of the Sacramento Track Club, who won the race with a time of 2:05.44.

Two other former Oregon women's track members also competed over the weekend. In the 5,000, Nike runner Marie Davis took eighth place with a run of 16:22.21. Annette Hand, of Asics, captured first place with her time of 16:01.77.

The race marked the end of the season for Crabb, who recently capped off her final track and field season by placing third in the 1,500 at the Pacific-10 Championships and seventh at the NCAA Championships in Durham, N.C. Her time in Durham of 4:19.30 improved her personal record by a half-second and garnered her as an All-American.

Her career is not quite over, however, as she will continue to run cross country in the fall.

In a season that women's head coach Tom Heinonen would



Emerald archive
Katie Crabb (left) finished tops among collegians in the 1,500 in California.

rather forget, Macdonald gave her coach some reason to hope for brighter days in the future. Her go-for-it-all attitude helped her become the sixth-best 800-meter runner in the Pac-10 during the regular season.

The Honolulu, Hawaii native's season is not quite over with. She is next scheduled to compete at the USA Junior Track and Field Championships in Denton, Texas. She will again run in the 800 at the event, which takes place this Friday and Saturday.