

Lesbians can have such a complicated response to women's basketball. Is it about guessing—or hoping—which players are possibly dykes? Is it about sitting in the stands scanning the crowd with your binoculars, pretending that you are watching the game when in fact you're checking out cuties across the way? Or is it about seeing strong, powerful women play excellent basketball, unfettered by sexual stereotypes?

Clearly, whatever the reason, women's roundball is a big draw for lesbians eager to indulge their senses in the sweaty experience.

And that's exactly what many will do come Nov. 8, the date of the home-game opener for the Portland Power, the women's professional basketball team that is part of the American Basketball League. During the 1997-98 season, the Power was the ABL's Western Conference champion.

Not only does Nov. 8 mark opening night for the Power, it is also Basic Rights Oregon Night.

The Portland-based BRO is a statewide group dedicated to fighting for queer civil rights. It will have a booth set up at Memorial Coliseum during the game.

The Power is one of the most recent Oregon employers to sign onto BRO's Fair Workplace Project, which asks employers to adopt or amend their personnel policies to state that discrimination based on sexual orientation will be prohibited in the workplace.

The Power has also given the group more than 25,000 "ABL bucks," which BRO has distributed in mass mailings. If you buy your Power ticket with an ABL buck, you will save \$1 on your ticket purchase price and the ABL will make a \$1 contribution to BRO.

Though BRO is encouraging people to use these bucks at the opening game, they can be used for any home game during the season.

According to Jean Harris, BRO's executive director, the partnership with the Power began last year when the Power donated four box seats to BRO.

"Let whoever wants to use them, use them. We're trying to reach out to all sorts of people," is what Harris remembers Power personnel saying.

At the time, Harris felt the need to provide further information about her organization. "I said, 'You know we're the ones that fight all the anti-gay measures? You know we're identified with fighting the right wing?' They said, 'Yes, and we're very supportive of that.'"

This year, the Power approached BRO staff and asked them if they would like their group to be the nonprofit headlined at the home opener; Harris gladly agreed.

A big Power fan herself, Harris says of the partnership: "We're both struggling... Everyone in Oregon should support both of these things."

PUMPED ON THE POWER

Portland's women's professional basketball team gears up for its third season by Lis Baccigaluppi

During a Power practice, Coach Lin Dunn is putting the players through a series of drills, some of which they are forced to repeat until they get it right.

"Slow down! What's your hurry?" Dunn yells. "Slow down, what's your hurry! Slow down..."

Finally, exasperated, she yells, "You're like a bunch of chickens with your heads cut off...getting in line for Thanksgiving."

Throughout the drill, veteran player Katy Steding defends Danielle McCulley, a 6-foot-3-inch forward and the first-round draft pick in the ABL this year.

They're really going at one another—waving arms, grabbing and shoving.

In between drills, while Dunn is yelling, McCulley stands behind Steding, who has gotten clunked with one of Dunn's "Goddangit, why did you do that?" questions. McCulley gently straightens Steding's jersey.

Eventually the players get it right.

"You saw us making a bunch of mistakes out there," Rhonda Smith tells me after practice.

Smith, a 6-foot-2-inch forward, played for Seattle her first two years in the ABL. She was traded to Long Beach last year before the draft, and ended up in Portland after Long Beach disbanded.

Dunn rides the players about their mistakes, but, says Smith, "When you do make mistakes, it's OK. She gives you alternatives."

Smith didn't see a lot of playing time in Seattle, though her stats are impressive. About her play last season, Smith says, "After awhile my confidence was so gone, I wasn't really playing well anyway."

Now, she says, she's playing with more confidence. She adds: "Coach Dunn gives us a lot of freedom. I love the way she handles the team. It makes me excited to be out there."

Smith is also excited about the team as a whole.



The Power at practice

"I think we've got a lot of chemistry on the team," she says. "I think you're going to see a big difference."

This team is not the same team from last year. In addition to Smith and McCulley, there are three other new players, all guards: Averill Roberts, Debra Williams and Sonja Henning. The Power is also fortunate to have as a practice player Shelley Sheetz, who was a point guard last year for Colorado.

Returning players are last season's league MVP Natalie Williams, DeLisha Milton, Steding, Sylvia Crawley and Elaine Powell. Gone from the Power are Lisa Harrison, Falisha Wright, Molly Goodenbour, Sheila Frost, Laticia Morris and Jennifer Jacoby.

There will also be some changes in the ABL designed to accommodate—and encourage—better television coverage of the games. Halftime will be 12 minutes, down from 15 last year, and there are new rules that should result in fewer free throws.

The ABL has a new contract with Fox Sports in which there are incentives for Fox to carry the games live, rather than on tape delay. This should be an improvement over last year,

when the network sometimes cut segments from the middle of games.

There will be 16 games on Fox, and Black Entertainment Television will no longer carry ABL games. CBS, meanwhile, has promised to televise two games during the ABL finals, and the Power is working with local television stations to broadcast home games.

"We're hoping to have as many as six or eight home games on local TV this year," says Power spokesman Nelson Holmberg.

Some lesbians perceive the ABL's focus on players with husbands—and television's attempts to avoid obvious lesbians when scanning the crowd at games—to be homophobic.

Harris says she thinks it's different when it comes to the Power. She points to its continuing, unsolicited support of BRO.

"In the sports world," Harris says, "homophobia is really hard.... If you're raised in the women's sports world, you don't talk about your sexual orientation. It's just the way the sports world is. But you know there are more lesbians involved in sports than Martina. Lesbians are alive and well, inside the Power and out."

YOUNG AGGRESSIVE

Sick & Tired of being Pre-judged?

Earn what you're worth...

Looking for outgoing, teachable individuals with an unyielding

DRIVE TO SUCCEED.

(503) 533-4048

Proudly Serving Our Community

Cobb & Woodworth

Attorneys at Law

503-226-0088

920 Crown Plaza

1500 Sw First Avenue

Portland, OR 97201

Fax 503-226-9005

See my Exclusive Listings on our webpage

<http://www.pru-nw.com>

JEWEL A. ROBINSON

Multimillion \$ Producer

Prudential

1730 N.E. 10th Avenue

Portland, OR 97212

OFFICE (503) 281-4040

VOICE MAIL (503) 301-4283

E-MAIL Jewel2U@teleport.com