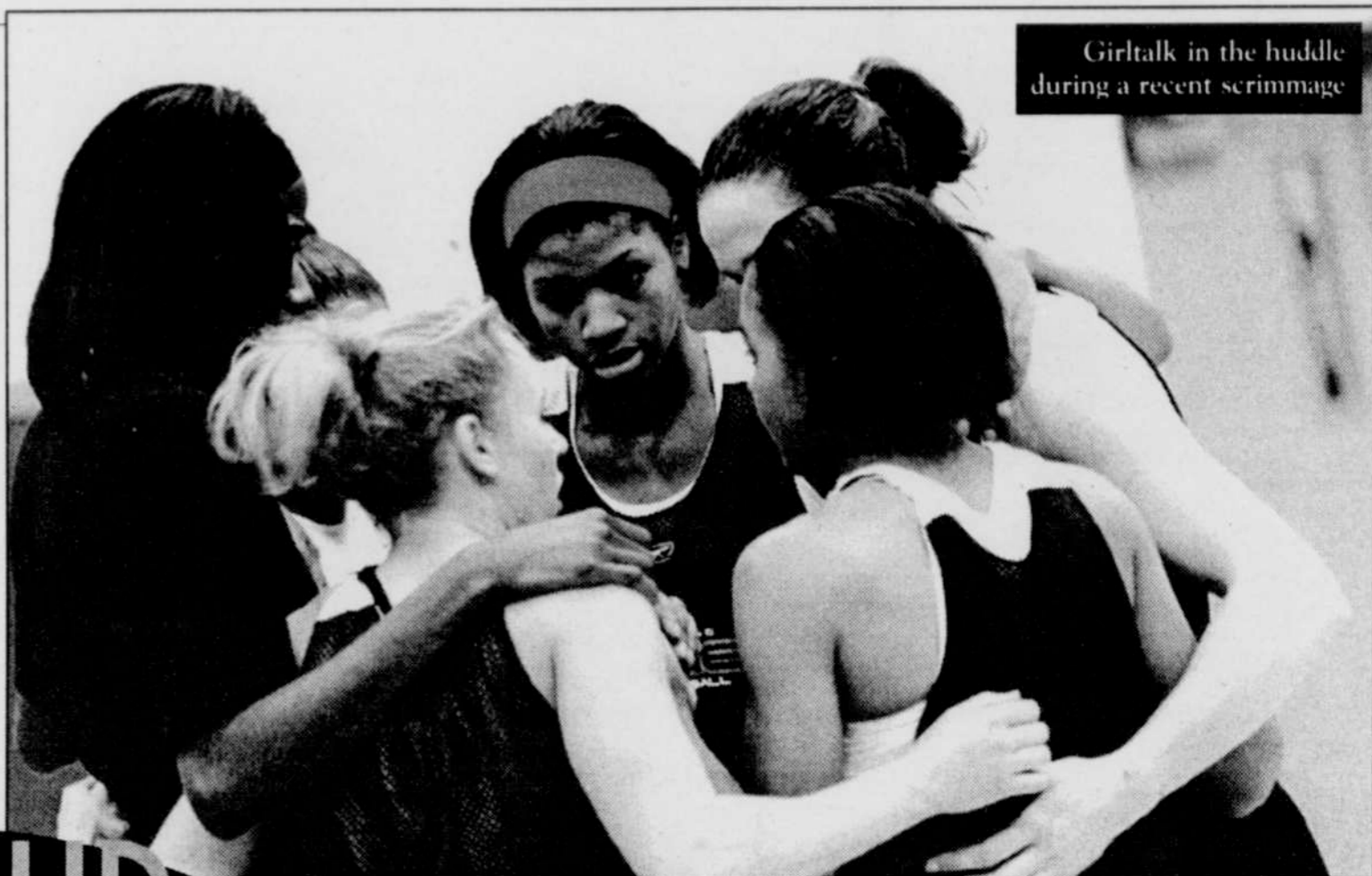
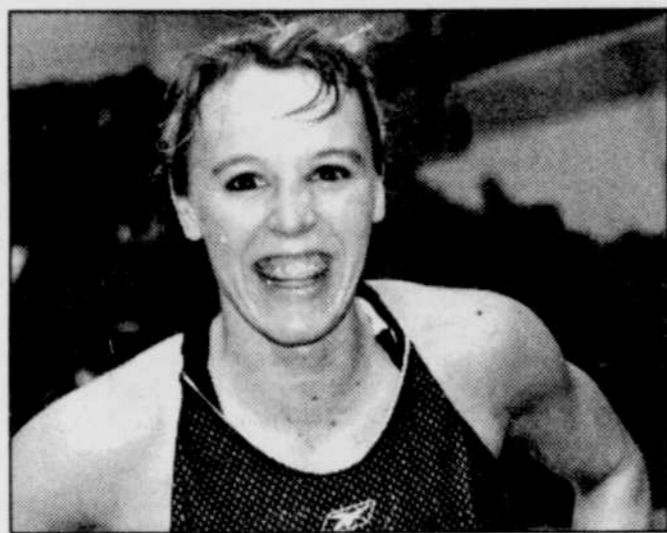


Jackie Stiles is all smiles just thinking about kicking butt on the court



Girltalk in the huddle during a recent scrimmage

# BURNIN' UP THE COURT

The Portland Fire's third season is getting under way with a handful of new players and high hopes.

The WNBA team got off to a rocky start its first year, winning only 10 of its 32 games. After a slightly improved 2001 season of 11-21, the Fire is planning to blaze its way to the playoffs this year.

Much of the spark lighting the trail is coming from an infusion of new players combined with the experience of veterans Jackie Stiles and LaQuanda Barksdale, says head coach and general manager Linda Hargrove.

In this season's draft, the Fire acquired Los Angeles Sparks guard Ukari Figgs and Florida International University guard Gergana Slavtcheva in exchange for Nikki Teasley and Sophia Witherspoon. Also new to the team are Colorado guard Mandy Nightingale, Arizona State center Melody Johnson and Florida guard Monique Cardenas.

Hargrove anticipates Figgs, together with Rookie of the Year Stiles, will help form a strong backcourt for the team. In her three seasons with the Sparks, Figgs played a pivotal role in helping lead the team to the 2001 WNBA Championships.

Stiles is expected to continue to be the big scorer, with Figgs and Sylvia Crawley getting their

touches in the post. Barksdale, in her second year with the Fire, and Stacey Thomas will duel for the starting "3" spot.

"Ukari gives us experience...and it's experience at a championship level," Hargrove notes. "Then we've got Jackie and 'Q,' who should be much, much better this season after having a year of experience under their belts."

The WNBA assigned two free agents to the Fire this season, forward Amber Hall and center Leslie Johnson. The Fire waived Johnson, keeping its current roster at 17. Point guard Tully Bevilacqua is on the suspended list while finishing out the playoffs for her European team.

During recent practices, players have been working hard to improve overall quickness and athleticism, Hargrove says.

"We have put in some new defensive schemes that will have us trapping some and will step up our defensive effort in general," she explains. "I think our quick-



Vanessa Nygaard sums up the coming season

PORTLAND FIRE BASKETBALL HAS SOME HOT NEW TALENT BLAZING INTO AN EXCITING NEW SEASON

BY SHANNA GERMAIN  
PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

for Stiles, who suffered injuries late last season and spent some of the off-season recovering from wrist and abdominal surgery.

Beyond a healthy team, Hargrove says, "We're looking to be more consistent for 40 minutes on the court and from the start of the season to the finish...we're in the tough Western Conference, so we have our work cut out for us to be successful enough to make it to the playoff in the West." □

The PORTLAND FIRE kicks off the 2002 season 7 p.m. May 29 in a home game against the New York Liberty. Single tickets are \$10-\$50 and season tickets are \$108-\$1,350 from 503-797-9622 or [www.firebasketball.com](http://www.firebasketball.com).

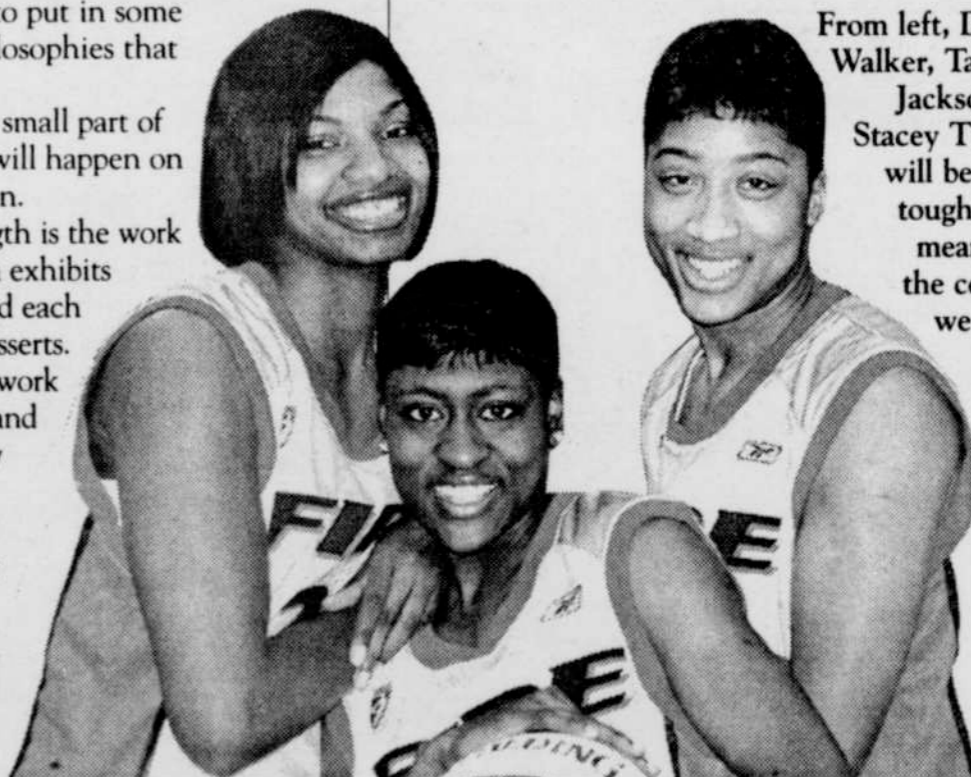
SHANNA GERMAIN is a Portland free-lance writer.

ness will allow us to put in some new defensive philosophies that will benefit us."

But that's just a small part of what she's hoping will happen on the court this season.

"Our true strength is the work ethic that our team exhibits in each practice and each game," the coach asserts. "We are willing to work harder than most, and that will eventually pay off for us."

The big challenges to reaching the playoffs this year? Staying injury-free, for one. Especially



From left, DeMya Walker, Tamicha Jackson and Stacey Thomas will be much tougher and meaner on the court—we swear

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