

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Georgia Munro-Cook, a research fellow in the Center for Social and Cultural Research at Griffith University here in Australia, and author of *Building the WNBA: From Dunking Divas to Political Leaders*. Regular listeners may recall Georgia from our previous conversation about women, disability, and sport, and she's also a wheelchair basketball player, member of the Australian Gliders wheelchair basketball team, and captain of Australia's national wheelchair basketball team at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics. Now, I feel like I should know more about the WNBA, given that I grew up in Indiana, where basketball is really popular, and I'm from Indianapolis, home of the Fever. I have been to Fever games. I'm pretty sure I took books to read while I was there. My parents made me go. No shade to the Fever. But as I mentioned last time we talked, if you couldn't tell from that description, I'm really not much of a sports person. So for anyone who's not familiar, could you introduce us to the WNBA?

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GMC: The WNBA is the Women's National Basketball Association. It's owned partly by the NBA, which is the men's National Basketball Association. It was launched in 1997, which makes it the longest running women's professional league in the United States, and it has kind of gone through its ups and downs. So I think maybe one of the reasons you might not know that much about it is because for a lot of its history, it was really marginalized and seen as unprofitable or seen as not as good as the NBA. And you really see an explosion in its popularity in the past four or five years, which has kind of caused it to come into a bit more prominence in the kind of general population.

AT: And so what would you say the relevance is for non-sports fans, whether we're talking economically, socially/culturally, and particularly internationally, given that we're in Australia talking about this?

GMC: I would start with the economics of it. You see with the sport as being one of the major areas in which trade unions are still very, a really big force. And especially the WNBA Players Association has been a really successful union in terms of pushing for women's equality, even things like maternity leave, family benefits for LGBTQI+ people, things like that, that are really quite revolutionary in an American context. And just very recently, they secured a pretty big pay rise, which is very exciting. And then politically, I think they've had a really big impact, even to the extent of helping get a US senator elected, and pushing for racial equality, fighting against the deaths of Black women especially, drawing attention to people like Breonna Taylor. They've also been one of the leading sports leagues in terms of celebrating Pride Nights, things like that. So they have had a really big cultural impact, even if they maybe haven't always had been given the credit that they deserve.

AT: It's interesting because I had a previous conversation with June Thomas, who's the author of the book *A Place of Our Own: Six Spaces That Shaped Queer Women's Culture*. And one of those six spaces was softball. But I feel like the WNBA has been a lot more progressive and queer friendly than I've seen from any of the men's leagues. And I don't know if that's because they're newer, because they're smaller, because they're female focused, or if it's some combination of those things.

GMC: Yeah, so I would say historically, women's sport has generally been kind of seen as queer and lesbian, and they spent a really long time trying to fight against that. So you can see prior to the WNBA, or around the time it was launched, a lot of the women's college teams were kind of using it as a recruiting tool being like, "that other college, it's full of lesbians, you should come to us," basically. So when the WNBA was launched, it was actually really important to them to not be seen as queer. So they did a lot of things to try and manage that, whether that would be dressing their players in very feminine outfits, really promoting, so Sheryl Swoopes, who was one of the major faces of the league when it launched, had a baby pretty soon after it launched, and they really

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promoted that kind of motherhood vibe. It turned out later, Sheryl Swoopes is queer, but that was kind of the image that they were pushing for a really long time.

AT: Wait, wait, wait, are you saying *lesbians* can have *babies*? (sarcastic)

GMC: Shocking, I know. Yeah, but then some teams were kind of doing what they called gay vague advertising. So, slightly advertising in lesbian bars, places like that, hinting that they were a place like that without making it really obvious. But then at the same time, they were also holding faith and family nights, things like that, that were, again, trying to position it as “family friendly,” a place for straight people, essentially. And they were ignoring that a lot of their fans were gay. So it probably started to change in 2013 when Brittney Griner was drafted. At the time, she was a very popular college player. She went to Bailey University, which is a conservative Christian university, and was very much forced to hide the fact that she was gay. But to be frank, it was fairly obvious that she was. And she pretty much came out as soon as she got to the WNBA. And that kind of made it impossible for the WNBA to ignore that one of the players that she was going to transform the league because she could dunk, which was a rare thing for women to be able to do. She was a player they hoped would boost the popularity of the league. And they kind of started to have to be like, “oh, actually, we’re going to embrace the authenticity of these women.” So you see, in 2014, they were the first American sports league to hold a Pride Night, not without some controversy, like some players were a bit resistant to that. But I think over time, they’ve kind of come to embrace the fact that many of their players are lesbian or queer. And that could actually be a selling point for the league. Over time, they’ve sort of began to embrace that. But yeah, when you compare it to men’s sports leagues, I think it’s interesting, like we still don’t really have very many out male players, whereas there’s lots and lots of out female players.

AT: Do you think that part of that is this association with both queer women and female athletes as being inherently more masculine than “normal women,” heavy sarcasm there in case it wasn’t obvious. Whereas for men, being seen as “more feminine,” as many people assume queer men must be would be this huge detriment in sports. Like, is that why people might be more accepting of queer women athletes? Also, the fact that fandom is largely, as you said, queer in women’s sports, because maybe, I wouldn’t be surprised if queer men also felt more comfortable with women’s sports, like maybe that felt safer for them compared to men’s sports because of that toxic masculinity aspect that we so often see in men’s sports. But I can see all these different reasons that it might be considered more okay for women’s sports to be open to queerness, because not just basketball, Megan Rapinoe is one of the most popular and well known soccer players in the US. And she is very openly queer. And I just can’t see someone like LeBron James, for example, coming out – not saying that he is, not saying anything about his sexuality specifically, but you can’t imagine someone of that level in men’s sports coming out publicly.

GMC: Yeah, I think you see men’s sports are very much still characterized by a certain kind of hegemonic masculinity that’s very anti-gay. It kind of varies sport from sport. But I know ice hockey’s had a lot of problems with people not even wanting to wear pride shirts and things like that. I do think that women’s sport has been historically a place for women to find community, maybe wear clothes that wouldn’t necessarily be “appropriate” at the time, like sporty gear, which might make people feel more comfortable, things like that. And then again, with the fandom, I think they have created this space of like safety and a different form of fandom compared to the more traditional forms of male sport fandom.

AT: So just coming back to the history of the league and its growth, because you did kind of touch on that in a few different ways. But I’m curious, why did it survive when the American Basketball League didn’t? So this was a league that started basically at the same time in 1996, but it had died out within a couple of years. And so I’m not sure if that’s because the WNBA has this NBA backing, or if there were other factors going on. But

how did it start and evolve?

GMC: Yeah, so there had been other attempts previously to start women's basketball leagues that had lasted a few years and then faded. But then with the 1996 Olympics, which was called the Summer of Women, basically, the women's basketball team was very popular at that time. And it became seen as a good time to start a league, which is why both the WNBA and the ABL launched at the same time. I think probably the reason that they did survive was that the WNBA was backed by the NBA. So it had this kind of power behind it. Even things like being able to negotiate with ESPN gave it a leg up in certain ways. The ABL actually had high salaries to begin with. It was maybe a bit more women-controlled to a certain extent. Maybe that would have been better, but having the backing of the men's league is probably the main reason it survived.

AT: Well, I could actually see that being a detriment. I feel like men who are in charge feel more comfortable with other men being in charge and saying, oh, well, this gave them access to ESPN, for example. The ABL not only didn't have those connections, but being women in the '90s, and let's be honest, even to an extent today, would have been harder for them in those high-level boardroom meetings.

GMC: Yeah, I think definitely. And I think there's some pros and cons to the WNBA being backed by the NBA. They were on ESPN, but the people in charge at ESPN didn't respect women's sports and were kind of like, "oh, I guess we'll do this because we have to." But there are quotes in the early 2000s of ESPN executives being like, "no one watches this. This is not good. Why are we doing this sort of thing?" So you can kind of see why when the WNBA launched, it was to this big wave of popularity. There was a big investment in the first couple of years. There were full stadiums, but pretty soon that momentum kind of stalled. And you can see why when you have people like these ESPN executives who don't respect it, don't believe in it, don't want to grow the game, and the investment kind of trickles off.

AT: Well, there is also this catch-22 pattern that you often see with women's sports. And I would imagine other things like women's media and that sort of thing. But basically, you have companies that refuse to invest in it because they don't actually believe in it. And then because they haven't invested in things like marketing. So say you've got a new movie that's coming out on Netflix, but the Netflix executives don't actually believe in it. So they're not putting any marketing money behind it. And then they're like, "oh, why did no one watch it?" It's like, well, because you didn't tell anybody about it. You didn't put the money behind this to allow it to succeed. And then when it doesn't succeed, they're like, "well, see, we were right." And it just reinforces that bias.

GMC: Yeah, exactly. And then when the women players are saying, "we want more money to be doing this," they can be like, oh, well, it's not profitable.

AT: Well, speaking of the pay gap, because pay has always been an issue in women's sports, it continues to be an issue. And you mentioned Brittney Griner, which because I'm not a sports person, the only context in which I was really aware of Brittney Griner was when she was imprisoned in Russia, I believe for having a small amount of cannabis, if I recall correctly. This was a huge international political thing, because she is a queer woman of color who has been imprisoned in Russia for a relatively minor offense. And it was very much this geopolitical situation. And I mention this because if I recall correctly, the reason that she was playing in Russia was because the WNBA doesn't pay its players enough. And so she needed to play in Russia in the offseason to make more money.

GMC: Yeah, exactly. So the WNBA is a summer league. So it basically goes from around May to September-ish. And at the time, players were making at most around \$100,000. They could make millions of dollars in Russia. For example, Diana Taurasi, who's a very famous player, her Russian team paid her \$1

million to not play in the WNBA season one year. So that's the kind of money that we're talking about, the kind of life-changing money that was happening overseas and in China now. Obviously, that's dried up a bit from Russia since the Brittney Griner situation. But yeah, basically, that was where they got their money from, is playing overseas. And that was because Russian oligarchs would own these teams, like it was their pet projects. So they would get the private jets, they would get these nice houses, they would be treated really, really well in these countries. But there was always a risk. I know Lauren Jackson talked about in her autobiography that she felt owned by these Russian oligarchs. And the team who she played for, the owner, got shot in some kind of crime-related issue. So there's a safety issue in going overseas, which was most obvious for Brittney Griner, but was a major issue for all players.

AT: So I want to quote an article that I was recently reading about some new research on organizational behavior that came out. And it kind of comes back to what I was saying about the ABL being run by women potentially hurting it. And that may have been part of why it didn't survive. So the researchers have said "women working in same gender groups face a collaboration penalty that solo women escape." So they're comparing like WNBA teams to individual athletes like Coco Gauff. "Our work found that this pattern holds across venture capital, professional sports, healthcare, and entertainment. Our research suggests it's because all women groups are seen as more threatening, as they're more likely to challenge power structures through collective action." So like you were saying with unions, for example, like players unions as part of the labor movement more broadly, I suppose. "Notably, this perception was shared by male and female study participants alike. That is, women applied this bias to all female groups just as men did. Women team athletes pay an expensive penalty. For example, no women at all appear in Forbes' top 50 highest paid athletes in 2025. Notably, the highest paid female athlete, tennis player Coco Gauff, plays an individual sport, but even her \$33 million of earnings in 2025 would rank around 150th if compared with men. And only one of the top 15 highest paid female athletes plays a team sport: basketball star Caitlin Clark, who earned just \$119,000 in WNBA salary her rookie year, compared to \$16 million in individual endorsements. Even Clark's success comes from being valued as an individual brand, not for her team play." And we're not saying that \$120,000 a year in salary is a bad salary by any means, but apart from the fact that these are highly skilled individuals doing a highly competitive job on a limited time frame because your body's only going to last so long for most people in professional sports. It's more about the disparity that we're seeing between men's and women's sports. But I found that interesting that the basketball players are also facing this additional collaboration penalty by virtue of being on an all-women team.

GMC: Yeah, I think that's something you can see across the whole history of women's sports, in that the sports that were generally seen as more acceptable were individual sports, sports that were white-dominated, sports where women could kind of retain their femininity. So things like tennis, very upper-class sport, very white, women can wear skirts still, they're not getting in contact with other women. So something like basketball, where it's a contact sport. I know it's not technically, but you are making a fair amount of contact. When you're looking at the history of women's basketball, they did a lot of things to try and restrict the amount of contact that women were engaging in. So when Senda Berenson introduced women's basketball into colleges, she split the court into, I think, nine, and women could only stay in their little spot, which you can see is kind of the precursor to netball, which again, a feminized sport, limited contact, women wear skirts, things like that, which has become quite popular in Australia and the UK and New Zealand. There's a lot of things going on in terms of what sports are seen as acceptable, what sports are seen as upper-class, what sports are seen as white, that control how popular these sports have become, and as a result, how much money people are making. And I think there's also the lesbian and gay community aspect of sport. A women's team may be seen much more as being a threat to heterosexual norms, especially with things like softball or basketball or different team sports. And yeah, again, I think the trade unions, the fighting for racial justice, all that sort of thing becomes easier when you're a part of a collective and again, more threatening. So I think that it's really interesting that that also

applies across other aspects of society because there are all these specific historical reasons about each different historical sport, but that kind of collective power has an issue across society.

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AT: Well, and if anybody wants to know more about women's basketball from a historical standpoint, definitely go check out my episode with Lydia Reeder about the Dust Bowl girls after you finish this one. Finish this episode first. I think there's also an aspect, though, of men still being in charge, right? So coming back to that question of, "oh, well, the NBA is still affiliated with this, so it's okay that we're letting the girls play. They won't actually be like the team owners and that sort of thing." Is that an accurate reflection of the team ownership historically and today?

GMC: Yeah, to a certain extent. The Seattle Storm, for example, has an all-woman leadership group and have been quite successful. But it's very interesting in the past few years as the WNBA has become more successful and there is new expansion teams, people are paying a lot of money to become part of this league. There is, I would say, a bias towards having NBA team owners also own the WNBA teams. So it's a bit convoluted, but basically, originally, all the WNBA teams were owned by NBA teams or were partnered with NBA teams. Then over time, other kind of ownership groups like the Seattle one I was talking about joined the league. And now there's kind of been a tendency to go back to the NBA-affiliated ownership group. And I think that is, as these teams are seen as more lucrative, men kind of want to get back into the mix.

AT: Well, from what I recall, again, growing up in Indianapolis, big basketball state, our men's team is the Pacers, our women's team is the Fever. And from what I vaguely recall of what would have been like a few years into the league's existence, it was kind of like a Big Brother vibe, like not in an Orwell sense, but in the sense that like the Fever were kind of like the little sister team, where nobody was treating them as equal, but the Pacers supported the Fever in that sense. Like there was, again, not treating them as equals, but like, "oh yeah, go check out what our little sister is doing. She's cool too."

GMC: Yeah, most definitely. And you saw that in the organizational structure. When I was doing research for my book, one of the players was talking about how she had to constantly badger the marketing team because their main job was working for the NBA team. Whereas she was like, "no, please do this for us as well." Historically, they've often shared training facilities, for example, but the men get priority. In the past few years, more and more teams are building their own training facilities and that's kind of seen as the gold standard. But yeah, historically sharing a facility with the NBA team was the best option because other teams were training in like YMCAs with the public there. So you can see there's kind of a facility gap between all these different teams that limits how much women can train.

AT: I'm just picturing like all of the issues that you have when you go to a communal gym, but it's like Brittney Griner or Caitlin Clark or Sheryl Swoopes. So it's like, "oh my God, Sheryl Swoopes didn't wipe down the weight bench again, ugh." Again, not saying that Sheryl Swoopes has ever done that. But just picturing the incongruity of someone who like, I just saw that person in a TV ad and then I saw them at the YMCA.

GMC: Yeah, exactly. And especially I think as the WNBA became more popular, these women were quite famous, but they're also put in these positions. Until recently (they) were also flying commercial. So they were kind of getting harassed in airports and things like that. So yeah, it's kind of an incongruity of being this professional league, but also not having the professional facilities.

AT: With this question of the pay gap and women in groups being threatening and labor unions in sports, my understanding is that there has been a new collective bargaining agreement that I don't really know the

details about because again, I don't pay attention to sport. So could you tell us about it?

GMC: The new collective bargaining agreement, CBA, was just signed very recently in early 2026, which occurred without having to have a strike or a lockout, which was a pretty big achievement. It resulted in a pretty massive pay rise for a lot of the athletes. So previously the kind of max salaries were around \$200,000, between 100 and 200,000. Now it's like close to, I think A'ja Wilson just signed a three-year, \$5 million contract. So that's a pretty massive jump, but what they were fighting for is having a revenue sharing agreement. So basically the NBA players get around 50% of what's called basketball-related income. WNBA players didn't have that in their collective bargaining agreement, but estimates were around, they were getting about 20% of income. They've calculated a bit differently, but essentially now the salary cap is tied to the percentage of gross income that the WNBA makes, which has resulted in a much higher salary cap and much higher salaries, which is a massive win for the WNBA. And they've also continued to fight for things like housing, maternity leave, things like that, that are really important. One of the wins that they got was that you can't be traded while you're pregnant because Dearica Hamby was traded. Her contention is it was in retaliation for getting pregnant. So this is thinking beyond salaries. It's a broader kind of labor issue and especially a women's labor issue.

AT: That feels like more progressive bargaining, not only in terms of taking what are often responsibilities that are put more on women, like caretaking responsibilities. I'm assuming none of the NBA players are getting pregnant. So not just in that regard, but this more holistic approach is not just about money. It's taking all these other things into consideration. That feels very gendered to me because that is stuff that women have to care about more.

GMC: Yeah, definitely. And if you look at the history of women-dominated fields, like flight attendant unions were pretty historic in pushing for an understanding that women might be the dominant breadwinner in a family. So there are these kind of gendered dimensions of trade unionism that the WNBA really embodies. And also making sure like maternity leave benefits for women who maybe weren't the person in the couple that gave birth, like things like that, recognizing that not everyone's a heterosexual woman.

AT: (joking) What?!? Next you're gonna be telling me that lesbians can have babies! So with this question of political activism, particularly since Trump 2.0 took power, there has been such a push against DEI. So diversity, equity, and inclusion. And so given that the WNBA kind of wasn't about DEI, and then they were like, "yeah, we should probably be on board with DEI. That could potentially make us some money in addition to making us less dickish." What has their response been to that kind of conservative pressure in recent years? Because you mentioned that like they helped to get a Democratic senator elected, which I wasn't expecting.

GMC: If you look at women's history of political activism, and especially race-related political activism, often the women aren't getting the credit. And I think that's very much true for the WNBA. So most people have heard of Colin Kaepernick, kneeling in protest of police brutality. But around the exact same time, you had players with the Minnesota Lynx, so this is around 2016, they held a protest in response to a black man being killed in Minnesota. This resulted in some backlash from their police department, things like that. But it also meant that the WNBA at the time fined them for breaching the uniform policy because they were wearing shirts that weren't related to the uniform. And this caused a massive backlash amongst the players. They were very obviously not happy with that. And that political pressure forced the WNBA to rescind the fines. Then when 2020 came around and you had COVID and George Floyd's murder, they again took a really big stand. They were in what was called the wobble, which is the women's bubble, like a little bubble where no one could leave basically so that they could still hold their season. But they dedicated that season to getting justice for Breonna Taylor and paying attention to Black women who'd been killed by police. They led various strikes and action. And probably most prominently is one of the the Atlanta Dream's team owner at the time, Kelly Loeffler, was a

senator for Georgia. And she spoke out against the WNBA and these actions, basically wrote a letter to the commissioner being like, "they shouldn't be doing this sort of thing." And as a result, the WNBA players decided that they were going to get her rival elected. They settled on Reverend Warnock. They wore shirts before games that said Vote Warnock. They did a lot of fundraising and activism for him. And as a result, like after they wore these shirts, his fundraising numbers skyrocketed, his poll numbers went up, things like that, to the extent that he credits the WNBA players for his election to some extent.

So they had this really massive political role around 2020. But I would say over the past maybe four or five years, as the WNBA has gotten more popular, as this CBA battle has been coming up, they've kind of, I would say, have quieted down a bit in an extent that's been quite surprising to me. Because I would have said in 2020, and I did say in my book, that the WNBA was using this kind of progressive platform as a way of selling the league by being like, "this is the kind of league we are. And these are the kind of fans we want." And I think that was quite successful at the time. But when Caitlin Clark entered the league, and the league got a kind of a boost of popularity from that, you did see kind of a quieting down of this political activism. So for example, some players have agreed to play in an off-season league called Project B, which is being funded by Saudi Arabia. So things like that would have surprised me five years ago, to be completely honest. I think you've seen less pushback against Trump than I would have expected. There are still players that are pushing for things like Brianna Turner wrote an open letter in support of trans athletes. So it's not like they're completely silent, or anything like that. Just maybe the height of the protest movement peaked in 2020.

AT: Now, in terms of the importance of women's professional sports leagues existing and thriving, I saw something the other day that was written by a sports writer who was talking about how she actually found it really condescending when people talking about women's sports focused on inspiring young girls rather than like the importance for women, like the importance of these athletes in and of themselves, right? They're not just role models for young girls, like they are professionals playing this sport in their own right. And I found that to be an interesting perspective because I feel like that is very often held up as like, "oh, this is important so that young girls will know that they can do anything." But it also feels like just having a professional pipeline for female athletes, including as coaches, I assume there's been like a knock-on effect with women's college sports. Although I'd be curious, like in terms of sort of a chicken and egg thing where women's college sports obviously support the WNBA, but also has the WNBA's existence and growth helped spur women's college athletics. Because sports are very much a pipeline, right? It's not just, "oh, I showed up when I was 20 and started playing the sport and I'm suddenly at the Olympics," right? It's very much, those little girls you're inspiring are the future athletes. Like this is very much a pipeline situation.

GMC: Yeah, definitely. And I think for a long time, women's college basketball was actually more popular than the WNBA. I think probably because people have the built-in affinity to a certain university or college that then they can support that team. Often you'd find women's college teams would be flying private, they'd have these really nice facilities. And then these women would go to the WNBA and be like, what's going on here? Basically. Yeah, I think that's changing though. I think though, in having like a place to play in America is really important because otherwise you had stories of women who would be really amazing college players and then their options were going overseas or nothing essentially. And I think it's really important for all sorts of reasons beyond the little girls, which has been a marketing technique that many women's sports athletes have used. But in terms of creating fandom spaces for women, communities, the more embodiment aspect of showing that women can use their bodies in really strong and powerful ways beyond traditional conceptions of femininity as being really constrained and limited. I think that's so important for everyone to be able to see.

AT: So that exalting of women as physically strong and powerful and active, right? That very viscerally, physically active.

GMC: Yeah, I think so often women are seen as how pretty they are or how much they can be an ornament or how skinny they can be. And this is women being celebrated for what they can do, not what they look like.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.