

HOOOP!

There it is.

Basketball — it's not just for men anymore

BY SHAD POWERS

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NORTH DAKOTA STATE PHOTOS BY ROBERT NELSON

WHEN TALK TURNS TO COLLEGE hoops, the names Allen Iverson, Marcus Camby and Charles O'Bannon are always bantered about, while the names of high-scoring female All-Americans like Kara Wolters and Vickie Johnson only draw blank stares.

At most schools, no matter how successful the women's basketball team is, the men's squad garners most of the headlines and fan appreciation.

Even winning a national championship doesn't necessarily turn the tide. The women hoopsters of the U. of Connecticut and U. of North Carolina can attest to that — both have recently won national titles and still don't outdraw their male counterparts.

Still, some women's teams have been able to turn the tables and actually pack the gyms for every contest. The popularity of women's basketball is growing by leaps and bounds. In the 1982-83 season, 1,147,954 people attended Division I women's hoops games. In the 1994-95 season, 3,602,511 people cheered for their favorite team. The growing trend shows no sign of stopping any time soon. Of the top 50 women's teams in average attendance for the 1994-95 season, 70 percent had a higher average than the previous year. The women's teams at Texas Tech U., Southwest Missouri State U., U. of Colorado and U. of Washington all outdrew the men's teams in 1994-95.

"At this particular time, the unique element is not how the women's teams compare to the men's but how well they stand on their own," Southwest Missouri State head coach Cheryl Burnett says. "That media and fans are paying more attention to the women's game is a big step."

Burnett says administrative support is just as crucial as media coverage in earning national respect. The Bears averaged 7,186 fans per game for the 1994-95 season, which ranked them fifth in the country among women's teams.

"Schools are looking at us and saying, 'If a school like Southwest Missouri State can do it, why can't we?'" Burnett says.

Home grown

Some schools have used the philosophy of recruiting players from the local community to help

pack the stands with interested fans. The theory is that if the fans are familiar with the players, they will come out to see them.

The U. of Montana seems to have mastered this tactic. It helped the Lady Grizzlies attain the 10th highest attendance in the nation for the 1994-95 season — 5,235 per game. On this year's 15-person squad, 12 are from the state of Montana.

"A lot of our fans followed us in high school and keep supporting us at college," says sharp-shooting Lady Griz senior Carla Beattie, who missed most of last season with a tendon injury. "They like to talk to us after the game, and little kids run up to us and ask for autographs. It's great."

Another factor that helps boost the attendance at places like Montana and Southwest Missouri State is the absence of a local professional sports franchise. Folks from Montana would have to travel to Seattle or Vancouver to see pro sports, and those at Southwest Missouri State have to hike all the way to Chicago or Dallas to see some big-time hoops action.

"We're about the best thing going in Missoula," Beattie says. "I've always felt that we were very popular. The fans here just seem to love us."

Small-town pride

When you talk about basketball hotbeds, North Dakota is generally not the first state that leaps to mind. But the women at North Dakota State U. have the town of Fargo buzzing.

The Bison have won four Division II national championships in the past five years and consistently have standing-room-only crowds for their games.

"As far as college spirit is concerned, these fans are unbelievable," says Kasey Morlock, a 6-foot-1 All-American junior for the Bison. "Whether it's at the mall or church, everyone wants to talk basketball."

The relative obscurity that normally goes with playing women's college basketball is nonexistent at NDSU. In class, at the cafeteria or anywhere on campus, the Bison hoopsters have earned celebrity status.

"When you're tall, you kind of stick out anyway," says Morlock, who averaged 19.5 points and 7.8 rebounds per game last season, "but people don't really treat you like a star. They just want to get to know you better. They're just true sports fans."

Coming into a sold-out Bison Sports Arena is murder on opponents. Since the 1989-90 season, NDSU has an unbelievable record of 93-5 at home. The Bison have led the nation in attendance for a Division II school for four consecutive years, averaging 3,814 fans during the 1994-95 campaign.

"The teams that aren't used to it have a problem with the noise," says 5-9 sophomore Rachael Otto. "It can be a huge advantage."

More small-town heroines can be found in the small town of Eau Claire, Wis. The Blugolds (school colors are blue and gold) of the U. of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, have led the nation in Division III attendance for three straight years. With the noisy fans packing the stands for every game, the Blugolds have not lost a regular season home game in four years.



Super hoopers.

"We definitely have a ton of community support," Eau Claire head coach Lisa Stone says. "It's wonderful to have such a home-court advantage. The winning streak is attributed directly to the fan support."

The modest Stone says, "We oughta do well again this year, as long as I don't screw 'em up."

Power of the press

A certain cycle seems to surround the successful franchises. Start winning, pack the stands, use the large fan support to woo talented recruits, keep winning and keep packing the stands. The x-factor in this equation is the media.

Ceal Barry, head coach of the highly successful program at the U. of Colorado, says she credits the media for aiding the recent surge of popularity in women's basketball. The Buffaloes drew 5,538 fans per game during the 1994-95 season, putting them eighth on the national list.

"The media have really picked up on women's basketball," Barry says. "More games are televised, the evening newscasts include women's basketball now and the number of media credentials given out at last year's Final Four was staggering."

With the creation of the USA national women's team and speculation of a possible professional women's hoops league, the sky seems to be the limit for the sport's athletes and coaches.

This trend may make long-standing basketball terms like "man-to-man defense," "ball-you-man," "three-man-weave" and "Hey, man! Throw me the ball," things of the past.

Shad Powers used to spend his weekends inside watching sports on TV, but now that he lives in California, he spends them inside watching sports on a TV one block from the beach.



They are the champions.



A Grizzly roar.