

Fun While it Lasted

Barbara Kennedy graduated from Clemson University in 1982 as one of the most celebrated women's basketball stars in the history of the Atlantic Coast Conference.

The 5' 11" forward was not heavily recruited as a prep basketball player and attended Clemson on a volleyball scholarship. But she quickly turned heads on the basketball court, earning three first-team All-ACC selections between 1979 and 1982. She was twice an NCAA All-American and earned back-to-back ACC Tournament MVP selections in 1981 and 1982. More than twenty years after her final collegiate game Kennedy still held the all-time ACC career marks for both scoring and rebounding.

But when Kennedy finished school in 1982, professional opportunities for female basketball players were limited. The first attempt at a truly professional league in the United States – the Women's Professional Basketball League – had folded the previous year after three tumultuous seasons. So Kennedy headed overseas to Italian club UFO Schio where she played two seasons, enjoying a decent salary, enthusiastic fan support and the adventure of living and working overseas.

In 1984, Kennedy returned to play in the United States for the Women's American Basketball Association, a new attempt to launch a nationwide pro league for women. Kennedy collegiate heroics made her a first round draft choice of the Baltimore franchise, which relocated to Norfolk, Virginia shortly before opening day.

During their two months in the WABA, Kennedy and her Virginia Wave teammates played against top competition, but also endured missed paychecks, endless bus trips and, ultimately, a disappointing end to a pioneering experiment.

Today Barbara Kennedy-Dixon works for her alma mater, as the Associate Athletic Director/Senior Women's Administrator for Clemson University. In 2002, she was named to the ACC's 50th Anniversary Team.

Barbara Kennedy-Dixon spoke to Fun While It Lasted about her days in the Women's American Basketball Association on June 8th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

After Clemson, you played overseas in Italy for a couple of years before coming home to play in the WABA. Can you describe the environment for American players overseas in the early 1980's? What could a top U.S. player earn playing in Europe at that time?

Kennedy-Dixon:

I had a wonderful experience and I would love to be back in Italy right now. I was surrounded by some great Italians that treated me like a Queen. The town was small and I knew all the people in that town. Women's basketball was well supported and there was standing room only every game. The manager of the team was very appreciative for all the ladies and we were treated respectfully. I lived in an apartment with two teammates who taught me the language and the culture. I traveled throughout Italy to see the beautiful areas. After my first season, I had a injury and I struggled with my ankle and it was never corrected so after the second year, I thought that It was time for me to hang it up. I did not mean to go back to memory lane but I enjoyed every moment of that experience.

Financially, I received 25,000 dollars each year <in Italy>.

FWiL:

How did you first learn about the Women's American Basketball Association?

Kennedy-Dixon:

I was drafted by the Virginia Wave and I was so excited to be a part of the American team. I saw this as an opportunity to be a pioneer for women's basketball as this was the first time that the women's professional league was being trying to get re-established.

FWiL:

Were you eager to get into a league back home, or did the organizers have to do a sales job on you?

Kennedy-Dixon:

Yes, I was very elated and proud to be a part of the American league. We saw the opportunities to get women's basketball back in the game and this was a great <selling point> for me. Regardless of the challenges we faced in the American league, I enjoyed the experiences.

FWiL:

Can you talk a little about the Wave as an organization? What were the living and working conditions like for you and your teammates? Were you paid on time?

Kennedy-Dixon:

I remember the day that I moved to Norfolk, Virginia and this was a very exciting day for me. The players checked into a local hotel and we stayed there throughout the season. I cannot remember the name of our coach, unfortunately, but he was a good coach and very pleasant to work with. He tried to be fair with us and he fought to get the things that we needed.

Unfortunately, we lived in the hotel until the league folded. We dined at a local restaurant daily and we traveled by bus for all our trips. We were treated fairly but we did not receive our payments for the services rendered. This was difficult because many of us lost our jobs before we relocated to Virginia but nevertheless, we made the best out of this situation. I chalked this up to say that this was an opportunity to grow women's basketball and we were pioneers. I am proud of this experience and this is why the <WNBA> is a reality. I would never trade the experiences I have had in my athletic career.

FWiL:

What kind of crowds did the Wave attract at the Norfolk Scope? What were you and your teammates expected to do off the court to promote the team in the community?

Kennedy-Dixon

As I recall, the fan base was very small but we had some dependable people watching our home games. Again, my memory is short, but we did do a couple of promotional events but not much.

FWiL:

In an interview you gave at the time with your hometown paper, you described some epic bus trips - Norfolk, Virginia to Houston, Texas, for example. Can you share any stories from the road?

Kennedy-Dixon

I was one of the captains on the team that year and we had a long trip to Dallas to play. The players and I were discouraged prior to that game because we had not been paid for the season. We talked to our coach and he assured us that we would be paid prior to game. So we played professionally and fought hard to beat Dallas. When we returned back to Virginia, we thought that the check was valid but it was not good. Then immediately, we checked out of the hotel and departed to our destinations. Again, we lifted our heads and left Virginia but <it was> bitter because we were losing our passion for the game, leaving our teammates and starting over. That was a sad day for us.

We laughed, cried and were grateful for the experiences and memories. We certainly wanted to finish the season but the league had some challenges. But what I can say is that my teammates were close and stayed strong throughout the time and we will always remember our times together and remember <that> we were pioneers. I am proud of my teammates, our coach, the league and thankful for the opportunity, the resources and the many memories.

I loved all my experiences.