

Fun While it Lasted

Kara (Haun) Rehbaum graduated from Buffalo, New York's Canisius College in 1984 with no ambitions to play professional basketball. There traditionally were no opportunities for women to play pro ball in the United States, save for a few seasons in the late 1970's when the pioneering Women's Professional Basketball League (1978-1981) struggled, ultimately without success, to carve out a sustainable niche in the American sports landscape.

So Rehbaum was puzzled when Canisius' sports information director called in the spring of 1984 to inform her that she had been drafted by something called the Women's American Basketball Association (WABA).

Rehbaum was the final player to make the Atlanta Comets roster in October 1984. For the next two months, she was a witness to the short, crazy life of the WABA - a chaotic and almost totally forgotten chapter in the early development of women's professional team sports in this country. Today's college and WNBA players would be aghast at the conditions that Rehbaum and her teammates faced on the Comets, which included home made uniforms, rubber paychecks and a by-any-means-necessary approach to team travel.

Rehbaum later became the Head Women's Basketball Coach at her alma mater, Canisius, from 1993 to 1998. Today she is the Assistant Athletics Director at Hilbert College in Hamburg, New York.

Kara Rehbaum spoke to Fun While It Lasted about her days in the Women's American Basketball Association on January 4th, 2013.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

Kara, how did you wind up in the Women's American Basketball Association in the fall of 1984?

Rehbaum:

I was drafted by New York, which was one of the franchises that never ended up fielding a team. I was home for Easter break during my senior year at college. Our sports information director at Canisius College called and said "You've been drafted".

I had no idea what he was talking about. They weren't drafting women for the army so I knew it wasn't that! I had no knowledge about a women's league forming or any aspirations about playing after college. Then he explained it a little more and that I'd been drafted by the New York team.

I got in touch with **Bill Byrne** who founded the league. Eventually Bill broke down and said, well, New York isn't fielding a team after all but Atlanta has a roster spot if you want to fly down there and give it a go. I think I flew down on a Wednesday and I was told on a Friday or a Saturday that I could stay and be a part of the team. And I think we had our first game within that first week.

FWiL:

So you got there in time for the start of the season?

Rehbaum:

Yeah. Just in time. I was the last player. Our first game was in Ohio against the Columbus Minks. All I remember from that trip is that the game was in a barn or an agricultural building* where maybe they held horse shows. We had to walk over a bridge over the horse area so we didn't track the dirt and animal debris onto the court.

My experience was so different from everyone else's. This was fun. It was not expected. It wasn't anything I was working for. To have the opportunity to continue to play was wonderful. Especially because I was a Division II player. Now I'm playing against all of these Division I players.

I looked at it as a great opportunity. Contract-wise, I signed a contract but the owner of the Comets never provided us with copies of the contracts we signed.

**The Ohio State Fairgrounds Coliseum.*

FWiL:

You were coming out of Division II, and now you're facing players like **Nancy Lieberman** and **Molly Bolin** and the **Pam and Paula McGee**. Who struck you as the most talented players in the WABA? Were you in awe of these players or did you feel you were on an equal footing?

Rehbaum:

Was I in awe? I was in awe of their names and their reputations, and then their skill level was tremendous. But I know for sure there were many other women who were equally talented that I just didn't know about because there was no exposure back then for women's sports. I grew up idolizing **Ann Meyers**, but I couldn't have told you any of Ann's teammates on those Olympic teams she played for.

The level of exposure for female athletes back then is just no comparison is what it is now. Most of the other players were incredible, but I didn't know who they were, so I couldn't be in awe of them. I just played. I certainly was not one of the top seven or eight or nine people on our team in terms of talent. I just got by because I was a hard worker who would grind it out and get the dirty work done. I didn't have the confidence that some of the other women had because of their exposure and experiences.

Lieberman and the McGee twins are really the three that stick out in my mind. After the league was over, I could mention those three names and a lot of people would know them and understand the quality that was in that league.

FWiL:

What were the crowds like for your games?

Rehbaum:

We represented the city of Atlanta, but actually we played out in Marietta, Georgia in Cobb County. It was more of a white neighborhood rather than an inner city neighborhood, so the people that might have supported us from the city couldn't really get out there to watch the games.

If there were a 100 people at a Comets game, that was a big crowd. We had more fans at Canisius College for our games than we did in Atlanta for the Comets. Also - we practiced at the Zoo! We were actually on zoo property in this funny little building.

But when we went to Columbus, Ohio for the first game, the game was being televised on cable TV. I remember the cameraman on the court weaving in and out of players stretching and I was really caught up in that. I hadn't been a part of anything like that before and that was exciting. When we went to Dallas, I recall it being pretty well attended. In Virginia, I think we played at the Norfolk Scope, which was a big arena. In Chicago we played at a community college or something. I think the Chicago folks also had to come pick us up and drive us around in vans, because we were such a mess. We were just barely alive and the other teams had to provide for us.

FWiL:

I went to college in Atlanta. I remember reading an article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* about the Comets in the Emory University library. And - maybe I'm remembering this wrong - but I think I remember that the Comets had no actual uniforms and you had to play in left over uniforms from another team?

Rehbaum:

Not quite. It's true that we did not have uniforms. We had an assistant coach named **Beverly Page** and she stepped up and went to a Champion retail store and bought ten pairs of shorts and ten pairs of white t-shirts and she had red numbers screened on them. She paid out of her own pocket, I assume. They didn't even say "Comets" on them. She handed them out and those were our uniforms.

I still have my uniform and my kids absolutely die over it. The thought of wearing a pair of shorts that probably were 7" long from the top of the waistband down to the bottom of the short. They were your typical Daisy Dukes. They weren't top notch. They weren't what you expected from a professional setting.

FWiL:

For some of the other players, I imagine that was a major reality check. Even if the payroll problems hadn't cropped up yet. I imagine you and your teammates must have been looking around saying 'What is going on here'?

Rehbaum

They were. And it was the majority of my teammates. Again, they were all Division I athletes - in college they had multiple pairs of sneakers during the year, they had sweat suits, they had special practice gear. They had the things that maybe I had at Canisius, but I didn't have three pairs of sneakers and two sets of warm ups. I had one. They were just from a different level. I was that poor kid that didn't have anything growing up and you give me one pair of sneakers and I'm happy. We did wear AVIA sneakers in the WABA. When we each got one pair of sneakers, the questions were: 'Where's our second pair? Where are our kick around sneakers? Where's our shooting shirts?'

I think I was just so naïve to not realize that this league wasn't going to survive.

Our original coach was Tree Reece. He was fired. Or he probably quit, actually. I don't know. Our general manager was Karen Brown. Her back was up against the wall. Here's the commitment that she made to this team: since none of us Comets were getting paid, she was working overnights in some kind of steel industry. All I can think of is the movie *Flashdance* that was popular at the time. Remember that, with the dancer who was working as a welder? It was something like that - a woman working in what was typically a man's field because she needed to make an income and support herself somehow.

Shortly after Karen took over as coach, the Comets went on strike because we never received a paycheck. The strike game was at home against the Dallas Diamonds. I was one of the ones that played. And what I recall about that game was that Dallas had the McGee twins from the University of Southern California, one of whom had just won a gold medal in the 1984 Olympics. And one of the McGee's was sitting in the stands at the Cobb County Civic Center eating popcorn twenty minutes before the game. And, you know, I didn't grow up that way! You ate three or four hours before the game and you had other things to worry about at game time besides eating popcorn of all things.

FWiL:

I've talked to a number of players who played in the previous women's league from the 1970's that was more successful - the Women's Professional Basketball League. And a number of them said something similar to what you've just said. The women who played for especially poorly run clubs said, well, there really was no measuring stick of what it meant to be a professional athlete back then, because they were practically the first ones.

And so it's almost more in hindsight that they are kind of shocked at the conditions they had to put up with, whereas at the time they were more thrilled just to be playing. Some of their teammates might have been up in arms, but for a lot of them, they didn't realize what was missing because it was an all-new experience.

Rehbaum

That is totally my feeling about being in this league.

Our team was bailed out financially. The only paycheck we ever received actually came from the Dallas Diamonds team. We only flew one time. And I believe it was to Dallas. In the airport, we ran into the Philadelphia 76ers and I remember that me and a few of my teammates were able to get Dr. J's autograph and I think Maurice Cheeks was with him. Dr. J was the nicest guy you would ever want to meet, whereas Maurice Cheeks, well, it was clear that we were bothering him.

Anyway, we flew to Dallas and the Diamonds owners and their families picked us up in their town cars and drove us to Southern Methodist University where their arena was. They helped us out and gave us a paycheck. Nancy Lieberman was on the Dallas team. She had her poodle with her, sitting on the bench during warm ups. The poodle had a diamond necklace on. Our conversation carried along the lines of "You know...that poodle could cover our team's payroll for the month".

My other memory from that trip was we flew on to Norfolk, Virginia for the next game. After the Virginia game, we bussed home overnight. I had never done that in college and neither had my teammates. Anyway, we bussed back to Georgia and the charter bus dropped us off at bus station in Atlanta and we all had to take the MARTA (Atlanta public transit) back to our apartments.

FWiL:

Did the Comets owner **Forace Watts** spend much time around the team, or did he try to hide from you all as much as possible, given that he wasn't paying anyone?

Rehbaum:

He was the gentleman that picked me up at the airport when I flew in from New York. My most naïve question to him was if we were near the ocean. I really didn't know where Atlanta was in the state of Georgia. So I remember him laughing at me for that.

We did have an office location that he was at and involved in. He issued our contracts and explained the contracts, but then at a certain point he disappeared, definitely. I don't know the truth of the rumors about him. Players were speculating that he had served time in jail previously, but who knows? Those were just conversations and I don't think anyone knew what was going on with him.

FWiL:

How did you and your teammates find out that it was all over - that there were going to be no more games and the Comets were out of business.

Rehbaum:

I flew home to New York for a holiday, I think it was Christmas...

FWiL:

Must have been Thanksgiving. The team shut down at the end of November.

Rehbaum:

OK. That's funny - why would I go home for Thanksgiving? I don't know. Maybe there was a break in the schedule. Anyway, I was home in Rochester. I received a phone call from someone in the Comets office. I don't remember who it was. They just said that the league had disbanded. We - myself and **Chris Johnson**, one of my teammates - we lived in an apartment complex in Atlanta. Someone in Atlanta, maybe our athletic trainer, she packed up all my belongings and shipped them back north. Once I was home, I never went back.

I think I initially had every intention of returning. But then the apartment complex I lived in - or so I was told - had a fire and my apartment had some damage. So not everything that I went down with returned. I guess you could say it was a fitting way to end my association with the Atlanta Comets and the Women's American Basketball Association. Everything went up in flames.

I look back at all of these experiences as life experiences that I would never have had otherwise. As much as people complained and thought these were terrible living conditions, I was one year out of college. The conditions were very similar to what it was like to be a college student. On the flip side I was supposed to be happy that I was a "professional", in quotations, athlete. I didn't really feel like a professional, but I was given the opportunity to play with some of the best women's basketball players of the era.