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Freedom, WPS heed lessons of history

Women's Professional Soccer works to avoid fate of WUSA

by Jennifer Beekman | Staff Writer

Washington Freedom defender Nikki Marshall remembers when money problems caused the Women's United Soccer Association to fold in September 2003, just after its third season of operations.

"I was a sophomore in high school," Marshall said. "I remember, I watched the 1999 World Cup, and dreaming about being where those women, who were the face of soccer in the country, were, playing professional soccer. Then the league shut down and it was like, 'Oh, well, where do I go from here?'"

The answer came just in time for Marshall. Women's Professional Soccer launched in 2009, her senior year at the University of Colorado, and she was selected by Washington in the 2010 WPS Draft.

The Freedom won the WUSA championship in its final season, but did not disband when the league collapsed. The franchise today appears stronger than ever.

George Perry, the team's senior vice president of sales and marketing, said attendance is up 10 to 15 percent from 2009. Ticket revenue is up 20 percent and sponsorships are up 250 percent.

Washington is fortunate that its owners, John and Maureen Hendricks, are more than committed to Women's Professional Soccer's prosperity.

The former is the founder and chairman of Discovery Communications and helped found the WUSA in 1999. He and Maureen are the Freedom's original owners.

But the league as a whole faces some of the same challenges WUSA did. To ensure young players like Marshall continue to have a place to fulfill their professional dreams, WPS must steer clear of those pitfalls.

Expansion teams in Philadelphia and Atlanta have only served to maintain the league's numbers this season, as two original WPS franchises ceased operations after a single season.

Last year's regular season champion, Los Angeles Sol, did not return to defend its title. The team's owner, Anschutz Entertainment Group, returned its stake to the league and WPS was forced to fold the team.

St. Louis Athletica ceased operations in May after its main investors stopped funding the team, leaving a hole in the schedule.

So, how will WPS avoid the same fate as its predecessor?

"I think after the initial World Cup victory in 1999, where 80,000-plus people were packed into the Rose Bowl, a lot of people thought we could fill 80,000 seats daily and pay those players a lot of money," Perry said. "And maybe that was a little overzealous. Soccer is certainly growing in this country. And women's sports are growing. But maybe not that quickly. That was a big international event and I think they tried to fill the RFK Stadiums and pay the Mia Hamm's of the world a lot of money and ultimately I think it was kind of overzealous."

WPS is taking a more conservative approach. Games are played in smaller stadiums, like the Freedom's home at the Maryland SoccerPlex in Boyds. When the league launched, SoccerPlex's stadium field added about 2,000 seats to reach a capacity of about 6,000.

WPS also installed a firm salary cap. The average player makes \$32,000 over a six-month contract, a significant drop from WUSA. With 18 paid players per roster, each team has about a \$600,000 salary cap.

"You can call it a pay cut or you can call it getting paid," Perry said. "Without a league they weren't getting paid anything. Now they have the opportunity to play and make money playing the game they love. And they hope it will grow, obviously."

There are opportunities for players to make extra cash making public appearances, and many players earn money playing internationally during the six-month WPS offseason.

"I think that was a sacrifice we were willing to make," Marshall said. "Eventually my hope is we will get to the point where we're like Major League Soccer or bigger franchise sports. But right now we have to realize we have to start small and then go. This is definitely the primary job for all of us. But some of us do have second jobs, but they're mostly coaching. We all stick around soccer."

Perhaps the biggest factor is the players' understanding the situation and willingness to help promote the league.

Freedom players spend much of their free time in the community, promoting healthy and active lifestyle choices for women of all ages.

As part of Washington's partnership with Inova Health System, Freedom players make regular visits to Inova Fairfax Hospital for Children in Virginia. They engage in community initiatives such as the Inova Partnering Actively Toward Health (iPath), which encourages teens from diverse backgrounds to exercise regularly and adopt better eating habits, according to the WPS website.

As part of their involvement with area youth clubs, a program called "Freedom Raids" sees Freedom players "invade" local team practices and spend time with some of the area's young talent.

The U.S. Coast Guard is an official WPS sponsor, and on April 21 Abby Wambach, the U.S. Women's National Team's leading scorer, and France native Sonia Bompastor spent the day with the Coast Guard Station Washington crew.

In mid-June, Marshall and fellow defender Becky Sauerbrunn visited Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall in Virginia to donate money to the USO of Washington.

Players often make public appearances at local restaurants and, in addition to staying out on the field for as much as 30 minutes after each game, host post-game after parties where they make themselves accessible to fans.

"I think it's cool for kids to see that pro status and be able to come talk to us," Marshall said. "If you see Abby [Wambach], she's the face of women's soccer right now and she stays around for 20 minutes after games to talk to people. She's just wonderful. I think part of it is knowing the league needs this, but I think most of the women on the team are willing to be out there and connect with people, no matter how small or big we are."