

The Most Diverse Fan Base in Sports

An Interview with Laurel J. Richie,
President, Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA)

EDITORS' NOTE Laurel Richie was named to her current post in April of 2011. Before the WNBA, Richie served as Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Girl Scouts of the USA. Prior to working at the Girl Scouts, she worked at Leo Burnett Worldwide from 1981 to 1983. In 1984, she moved to Ogilvy & Mather, where she spent more than two decades building brands for blue chip clients. She continues to work with Ogilvy as a founding member of its Diversity Advisory Board. Richie is a recipient of the YMCA Black Achiever's Award and Ebony magazine's Outstanding Women in Marketing and Communications. Richie attended Dartmouth College.



Laurel J. Richie

ORGANIZATION BRIEF On April 24, 1996, women's basketball announced "We Got Next" as the NBA Board of Governors approved the concept of a Women's National Basketball Association (www.wnba.com; WNBA). The WNBA – which features 12 teams and is the most successful women's professional team sports league in the world – is a unique global sports property combining competition, sportsmanship, and entertainment value with its status as an icon for social change, achievement, and diversity. The league, which counts Boost Mobile as its leaguewide marquee partner, will tip off its 17th season in the spring of 2013.

Through WNBA Cares, the WNBA is deeply committed to creating programs that improve the quality of life for all people, with a special emphasis on programs that promote a healthy lifestyle and positive body image, increase women's health awareness, support youth and family development, and focus on education.

Has the fan base for the WNBA broadened over time as you had hoped?

Our fan base is one of the most diverse in sports. We draw a wide range of adults and families. The demographic composition varies by market – Connecticut's fan base skews older, whereas in other markets it skews younger; in San Antonio, it skews Hispanic.

The good news is that there are a lot of different portions of the general population that are attracted to the WNBA game and the in-arena experience.

So my job in partnership with the league and our teams is to make sure we're doing a

good job as we possibly can in extending an invitation to all of those diverse groups to come and sample what we think is a terrific product.

Will the in-arena experience for the WNBA be similar to or different from the NBA in-arena experience?

When I talk to our fans and those who are familiar with the WNBA and NBA, I often hear them say that in the WNBA there is a focus on the fundamentals, and there are many who truly value and appreciate that.

Clearly, the games are different but, at the core, what both leagues have in common are passionate fans who love the game of basketball and who have teams and players to which they're loyal.

How much of a focus is attracting potential partners and what is the value in that?

Our business model is based on building attendance and creating partnerships with a range of corporate entities. It's a team effort that happens with a lot of dedicated and hard-working people at the league and at our teams.

We are particularly proud to have signed the first ever league-wide marquee in Boost Mobile. Boost defines their audience as strivers, people who have big dreams and are driven to achieve, and that was a common point between the WNBA and Boost Mobile.

State Farm is our newest partner. They will also be a presenting partner of our Community Assist awards. Both of us share a deep commitment to the communities in which we compete and in which they run their businesses in wanting to make sure we have a strong, positive presence.

Jamba Juice is another partner of ours who focuses on healthy living and lifestyles, and making good choices.

Our platform of Inspiring Women – and that can be with a focus on physical, emotional, and social well-being – has been a fertile connection point for our partners. We have 132 terrific role models of what it means to lead a healthy and active lifestyle.

Are you content with league visibility?

Our broadcast partner, ESPN, who has been with us since the beginning, recently extended our partnership through 2022. That is an important partnership for us, not only because of broadcasting our games, but also because ESPN is the epicenter of sports globally, and it's a reflection of their commitment to

women's sports and the WNBA. They recently launched espnW, their women's sports property that features women's sports and targets the female sports fan.

We're also looking across all of their platforms to bring our fans closer to the game, whether that is by putting a camera on our referees or stepping up what is already pretty full access to our players, our coaches, and our locker rooms and shoot-arounds.

We've begun preliminary discussions about a pre-season tournament next year at ESPN Wide World of Sports and pulling in our partnership with AAU.

How critical is WNBA Cares to what you do?

WNBA Cares is part of our DNA – it's part of who we are. In addition to our league wide initiatives, many of our players have their own philanthropic organizations because they feel fortunate to play at a professional level and they are cognizant of the women that paved the way for them. So the notion of giving back is on a very personal level.

How we make those choices is always tough. We first look to what we have to offer the communities, and inspiring women and health and wellness are natural starting points – it can be breast health awareness, anti-bullying, and working with corporations that are interested in strengthening leadership potential and opportunities for women within their organizations.

Also, almost every team has a program in place for nonprofit partnerships, so we can create programming, like an individual game where we'll partner with a nonprofit in the local community and fully engage them in the game. It is a nice way to shine a light on local partnerships.

Did you know early on that this opportunity would be a good fit for you?

First, I was really impressed with the quality of the game and the character and integrity of the players.

I recognized how terrific this product is and the opportunity to share it with more people.

There was also a real opportunity to be an example for young girls and boys in promoting a league for women. It's important as we work to get closer to a gender neutral society to encourage everyone to be physically active and find an activity they love – it's breaking the glass-ceiling of sports.

The final piece was the notion of making a difference in the communities in which we compete. I liked that it was central to the DNA of the WNBA. ●