

'Your body is going to break down': Getting to the bottom of the WNBA's injury crisis



By Tamryn Spruill (/author/tamryn-spruill/) 7h ago



When the 2019 WNBA season began, injuries to stars like Breanna Stewart, Sue Bird, Angel McCoughtry and Diana Taurasi sent a wave through the league, raising questions about how championship-contending teams would keep their dominance. Teams like the Minnesota Lynx (Seimone Augustus, knee; Lindsay Whalen, retirement; Maya Moore, sabbatical) and Seattle Storm (Stewart, Achilles; and Bird, knee) have defied expectations and made it into the playoffs.

Others, like the Atlanta Dream, haven't fared as well. Without Angel McCoughtry (knee), the Dream went from the second-best record in the WNBA in 2018 (23-11) to the worst in 2019 (7-24).

But beyond wins and losses, and whether a star player is on the court to draw fans to the arena, is the issue of the overall health of WNBA players. In 2019, each of the 12 teams in the WNBA has experienced either a loss of multiple players or the loss of top talent due to injuries. With so many players competing for teams overseas during the WNBA offseason, to help supplement league salaries currently maxed at \$117,000 per season, it's no wonder people are pointing to the workload as a reason for the apparent uptick in injuries.

As the final week of the regular season plays out, 36 of the 144 athletes in the WNBA have missed two or more consecutive weeks. Fifteen of the 36 either did not play at all during the 2019 season, or played but did not return following their injuries. Thirteen players underwent surgery to repair their injuries, two suffered their injuries while playing for teams overseas and five are rookies who were selected in the 2019 WNBA Draft. At least 21 of the 36 players are starters.

WNBA Injury Report 2019		
PLAYER	TEAM	INJURY
Natalie Achonwa	Indiana Fever	Calf
Rebecca Allen	New York Liberty	Hand
Seimone Augustus (S)	Minnesota Lynx	Knee
Alana Beard	Los Angeles Sparks	Hamstring
Sue Bird (S)	Seattle Storm	Knee
Monique Billings	Atlanta Dream	Ankle
Essence Carson	Phoenix Mercury	Calf
Karima Christmas-Kelly (S)	Minnesota Lynx	Knee
Layshia Clarendon (S)	Connecticut Sun	Ankle
Damiris Dantas	Minnesota Lynx	Calf
Asia Durr (R)	New York Liberty	Groin
Jamierra Faulkner	Chicago Sky	Knee
Taylor Hill (S)	Dallas Wings	Knee
Shenise Johnson (S)	Indiana Fever	Knee
Alexis Jones	Los Angeles Sparks	Knee
Jantel Lavender (S)	Chicago Sky	Foot
Kiara Leslie (R)	Washington Mystics	Knee
Camille Little	Phoenix Mercury	Knee
Jewell Loyd	Seattle Storm	Ankle
Sancho Lyttle	Phoenix Mercury	Knee
Angel McCoughtry (S)	Atlanta Dream	Knee

Astou Ndour	Chicago Sky	Ankle
Candace Parker	Los Angeles Sparks	Hamstring, ankle
Katie Lou Samuelson (R)	Chicago Sky	Hand
Jessica Shepard (R) (S)	Minnesota Lynx	Knee
Alanna Smith (R) (S)	Phoenix Mercury	Ankle
Azura Stevens (S)	Dallas Wings	Foot
Breanna Stewart (O) (S)	Seattle Storm	Achilles
Diana Taurasi	Phoenix Mercury	Back
Kristi Toliver	Washington Mystics	Knee
Maria Vadeeva	Los Angeles Sparks	Knee
Victoria Vivians (O) (S)	Indiana Fever	Knee
Sydne Wiese	Los Angeles Sparks	Knee
A'ja Wilson	Las Vegas Aces	Foot/ankle
Amanda Zahui B	New York Liberty	Head
Shavonte Zellous	Seattle Storm	Knee
KEY		
Red highlight = Done for season, hasn't played since injury or not cleared to play		
(O) = Injury occurred overseas		
(R) = Rookie		
(S) = Surgery		

In 2018, Las Vegas Aces center Liz Cambage contemplated resting over the summer rather than playing in the WNBA, in hopes of protecting her body for a lucrative contract with a European team. “I’ve said this many times,” Cambage said at the time (https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/24381686/liz-cambage-dallas-wings-says-return-wnba-2019-the-air). “(The WNBA) doesn’t pay my bills ... We make more money overseas.”

After Brittney Griner was ejected from a game against the Dallas Wings last month following an on-court melee, she expressed a similar sentiment. The Phoenix Mercury All-Star said that her continued involvement in the league is out of commitment to the Mercury organization, and her teammates in particular.

“I’m not doing it for the money because we don’t make enough ... they want to fine me for every little thing,” Griner said (<https://amp.azcentral.com/amp/1990765001?>).

“I love playing for the Mercury. That’s the only reason I’m playing (in the WNBA) right now,” she added (https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/27385446/phoenix-mercury-brittney-griner-says-suspension-symptom-wnba-larger-problem) after being handed a three-game suspension for her involvement in the fight. “Definitely not playing for the W. The W don’t do nothing.”

In other words, for some of the best women's basketball players in the world, competing in the WNBA for loyalty and love is running thin. Inadequate WNBA salaries require players to forgo an offseason and, with it, sufficient rest and recovery. While competing for teams in other countries can earn a player up to 10-times her WNBA salary, playing basketball year-round increases injury risk. For the best of the best, who also play for their national teams in international competitions like the FIBA World Cup and Olympic Games, "offseason" is even more of a moot point.

Griner and Breanna Stewart are two players who have pounded hard year-over-year. Now, in the 2019 season, they are dealing with the ramifications of a deep WNBA championship run immediately followed by national team play, and national team play followed by EuroLeague championship runs with their respective Russian teams.

In the EuroLeague Final in Hungary on April 14, Griner and UMMC Ekaterinburg clinched a 91-67 win over Stewart and Dynamo Kursk. During it, Stewart took an awkward step on Griner's foot and suffered a ruptured Achilles tendon, ruling her out of the 2019 WNBA season less than a month before WNBA training camps opened.

The Mercury began camp on May 5 and Griner played in her first preseason game on May 11, with limited rest between winning a EuroLeague title with her Russian team and starting a new season in the WNBA. After Griner was held to single-digit scoring in a game against the Minnesota Lynx in early June, Mercury coach Sandy Brondello told *The Athletic's* Alexis Mansanarez that Griner's early-season struggles could be attributed to fatigue (<https://theathletic.com/1068425/2019/07/09/brit-is-it-mercurys-recent-results-spur-concern-over-scoring-depth-after-griner-mitchell/>).

"I think at the start of the year, she was mentally tired from playing all year-round and you noticed that in her game," Brondello said later. "She was trying, she just wasn't having that success ..." One month later, Griner was involved in the altercation in Dallas that resulted in a suspension.

Last season, Cambage expressed concerns about the mental and physical wear and tear that comes with competing throughout the year. "I love what comes with playing (in the United States)," she said (https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/24381686/liz-cambage-dallas-wings-says-return-wnba-2019-the-air). "But at the end of the day, for my longevity, I worry about my body, my mind and my soul."

Not even WNBA rookies have escaped the injury bug this year. The Lynx's Jessica Shepard played six WNBA games before a torn ACL cut her season short. The Mystics' Kiara Leslie required season-ending surgery during training camp for an injury that may have preexisted her entry into the league.

To get to the bottom of the WNBA's injury wave, *The Athletic* spoke with a former WNBA team trainer, a counseling psychologist specializing in the treatment of performers (including athletes) and a 2019 WNBA Draft pick. Of the 12 WNBA teams reached for this story, 11 either declined comment or would not grant permission for members of their medical staff to speak on the matter. For this reason, *The Athletic* WNBA has opted to protect the anonymity of the fourth person interviewed for this story: an athletic trainer currently working for a WNBA team, who will be called "Trainer Anonymous" (or "Trainer A") for ease of reference.

'A cycle of mental and physical injury'

Trainer A says the best part of their job is the people — players, coaches, medical staff and support personnel — and the relationships that can develop in the team environment. But Trainer A says the most frustrating aspect of being a trainer in the WNBA is the consequences the players endure from playing year-round basketball.

"(Players) aren't given the necessary time required for their bodies to physiologically and mentally recover from the demands of their job," Trainer A said.

Healthcare professionals in the WNBA are left to manage what is within their power to control, "like hydration, nutrition and sleep patterns," Trainer A said. Still, there is only so much you can do with an overall lack of recovery time. Players become prone to conditions which may not keep them out of games, but may linger and make them more susceptible to future, and potentially more severe, injuries. Some of these conditions, according to Trainer A, are chronic ankle instability, osteoarthritis, minor strains and sprains.

In addition to a player's physical health, Trainer A pointed to the relationship between injury and mental health and expressed a desire for every player in the WNBA to have access to a team psychologist.

"Research has shown that anxiety and depression are risk factors for injury in athletes, and that physical injury often exacerbates pre-existing mental health conditions resulting in a cycle of physical and mental injury," Trainer A said. "I believe regular therapy sessions are just as

important to injury prevention as any type of musculoskeletal rehabilitation.”

Dr. Jas Tilghman, a counseling psychologist in Culver City, Calif., specializing in the treatment of performers, including athletes, says performance anxiety is a common reason performers seek therapy. Tilghman also points to “identity” — performers identifying with what they do — as a significant factor in causing or exacerbating depression and anxiety unrelated to anxiety over performance.

“Whenever there is something like injury that can get in the way of someone’s performing capabilities it can be very detrimental, depending on the person,” Tilghman said. “For example, if there is someone who identifies as a basketball player and that’s really all they have ever known. But then for some reason — either injury, money, scholarship, moving — something takes them away from engaging in that craft ... it could be significant because all the time, energy, money and maybe even relationships that have been severed or broken, and all of that energy and effort can feel like it was for nothing.”

Tilghman noted that inadequate rest and recovery amid professional athletes’ rigorous lifestyles can heighten susceptibility to injury. It’s also the pressure athletes put on themselves to stay on the court and remain relevant in their sport — concerns that can weigh on the psyche (impacting mental health) and can cause athletes to stay silent about injuries (impacting physical health) — that can put them at risk.

“It’s hard because everyone wants to play or everyone wants to have a leading role or everyone wants the spotlight,” Tilghman said. “Whenever you mention anything about injury it can feel like those opportunities are immediately going to be taken away, you’re going to be benched and it’s going to be given to someone else. So I think what may also increase proneness to injury is people being silent for fear that their opportunity is going to pass them up.”

And the cycle of mental and physical injury that Trainer A spoke about, if not interrupted by positive intervention, can lead to unhealthy or dangerous coping skills, according to Tilghman, including substance use, eating disorders, sleep disorders, risky sexual practices and other risky behaviors.

Tilghman says it can sometimes take a while for an athlete’s unhealthy coping skills to reveal themselves in the counseling setting. The societal perception of athletes as healthy individuals who always avoid things that could harm their minds or bodies often encourages silence.

Tilghman also says that diagnosing clinical depression and anxiety can be challenging because fatigue or poor nutrition can mimic the symptoms of those disorders.

“Sometimes someone is really sad and down, and it may not be because they have full-blown depression,” Tilghman said. “It may just be that their body is tired.”



Sue Bird hasn't suited up for Seattle at all this season due to a knee injury. (Abbie Parr / Getty Images)

'A true offseason would be a step towards preventing some of these injuries'

Prior to becoming the associate athletic trainer for the University of Texas women's basketball team, Heidi Wlezien was the head athletic trainer for the Chicago Sky for two seasons. Wlezien says she most enjoyed the “quick pace of the game, travel to great cities and working with top-tier athletes.” The only thing Wlezien didn't enjoy was the slower pace of working in a physical therapy clinic during the offseason.

She left the WNBA for “better opportunities ... in college athletics.”

Wlezien and Trainer A identified the following as significant contributors to the WNBA's injury problem:

- Limited time between the NCAA Final Four and WNBA training camp
- Overseas competition during the WNBA offseason
- International competition during the WNBA season (like EuroBasket)
- Long-term wear and tear from year-round basketball

Trainer A also identified commercial air travel, no examination requirement for draft picks and back-to-back games as significant factors contributing to injuries in the WNBA.

Many of the injuries players deal with are “chronic issues such as tendonitis, stress fractures or inflammation that could be healed simply with rest,” Wlezien said. “Fatigue can play a large role in some of these nagging injuries and can contribute to longer healing times. A true offseason would definitely be a step towards preventing some of these injuries.”

But without rest and time off, Wlezien said, “There is no right answer to get that player ready for the WNBA season” after she has competed for months overseas.

“Most female professional basketball players do not get any rest throughout the entire calendar year,” Wlezien said. “They go straight from the college postseason, into the WNBA season, straight to their overseas team. Their bodies have no time to recover from any nagging injuries they may have going on. ... They need to have a few days off when they return in order to recover from jet lag and to give their body time to recuperate from the postseason they just participated in. Minutes, load, and mental exhaustion all need to be monitored correctly to make sure the athlete is ready to begin a new season.

“Time off should be mandatory for players coming from overseas seasons. Just as the NCAA mandates seven days off after the postseason in college basketball, some sort of time off should be mandated in the WNBA for players returning from other seasons.”

According to one 2019 draft pick, seven days is not nearly enough time for women's basketball players who compete in a long NCAA season during their senior year in college, especially if that season takes them to the Final Four.

‘It’s not (the players’ fault) ... It’s the system that they’re in’

Cierra Dillard was selected 20th overall by the Lynx in the 2019 WNBA Draft. She is no stranger to working toward her dreams, but Dillard will tell anyone that attempting to make a WNBA roster is one of the toughest goals to achieve

(<https://theathletic.com/1004549/2019/05/31/not-going-to-pity-myself-the-realities-of-players-cut-from-wnba-rosters-and-what-the-league-can-do-to-fix-it/>) in professional sport.

When we spoke on May 24, opening day of the 2019 WNBA regular season, Dillard was at home in the Buffalo, N.Y. area. She had been waived by Minnesota during training camp. Picked up by the Los Angeles Sparks during the preseason, she soon found herself waived again.

“To get drafted is one thing,” Dillard said. “To be one of 36 people, you have to be very dedicated, you have to sacrifice a lot, you have to put in some hard work to get drafted.” And that work comes with a very quick turnaround time between the last college game and WNBA training camp.

“Like, Baylor, Notre Dame, UConn, (those players) only had like a week or two weeks to even get ready (for WNBA training camp),” Dillard added. “So, it’s very hard (to have only) about three weeks from the Final Four to May 5 (when WNBA training camp begins).”

The same does not apply to NBA rookies who also finish their college season in April but do not report to training camp until October. While some NBA draft picks compete in the NBA’s Summer League, it is a two-week tournament in July followed by two more months of rest, recovery and individual training.

What Dillard believes has been overlooked in these discussions is what elite women’s basketball players in this country do to ready themselves to turn pro while also making a championship run in the NCAA, and what that grind does to the body.

“A lot of people don’t understand that all the players in the WNBA were stars on their college team,” Dillard said. “So, you’re playing a lot of minutes in college. You’re playing a lot of games. A lot of the players that got drafted never sat out a game (in college), probably played between 30 and 40 minutes a night, every game ... (with) contact from October to March and April.

“So when you’ve been going that long and you hit April, your body knows it’s (usually) time to rest (before the next season). But if you’re trying to go pro, you don’t get that (period of recovery). You have to go harder.”

During her senior season at University of Buffalo, Dillard’s days ran from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., starting with early morning runs, moving onto classes, working out for hours in the afternoon, finishing classes or studying in the evenings and finishing with on-court work until bedtime.

Some rookies, including Megan Gustafson and Kennedy Burke, were waived at the roster-cut deadline but called back into the league when injuries took other players out. When Dillard didn’t get the call, she signed with Mann Filter Casablanca in Spain to begin her professional career overseas. While she wants more than anything to be in the WNBA right now — both teams she suited up for during training camp are in the playoffs — a summer of rest may prove beneficial to Dillard long-term. Instead of competing in the WNBA over the summer, she got — even if for just one summer — the rest and recovery many of her basketball idols never did.

“(Year-round basketball) is another reason why you lose talent,” Dillard said. “I mean, all the people I look up to, Sue Bird, DT, are out because they’ve just been going hard. They’ve just been going back-to-back-to-back-to-back (for) years.

“Your body is going to break down if you don’t get the right recovery time. And it’s not (the players’ fault), because they have to make money for their family. It’s the system that they’re in ... (Although) we’re blessed to be able to (play basketball for a living), you’ve got to understand what (doing it) year-round does to the bod(ies) of great talent.”

For athletes in the WNBA, the fight for higher salaries is a fight for health and an investment in career longevity. When the WNBA’s elite no longer feel financially bound to compete overseas in the offseason, they will be able to rest their bodies and minds, recover from any injuries and work with health professionals to prepare for the coming season.

Some of the world's best basketball players have spoken about the working conditions in the WNBA that have compromised their health and financial security. And all those interviewed agree the number of torn ligaments, ruptured tendons and fractured bones this season, especially to star players and starters, illustrates the instability of the current system.

“Until players are compensated in such a way that they don't need to play overseas in their ‘offseason,’” Trainer A said, “they will never be able to physiologically and psychologically recover enough between seasons to reach full health and peak performance.”

(Top photo of Jessica Shepard: Sam Wasson / Getty Images)

Boom! Glad you really enjoyed it.



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