

The WNBA's long road to embracing and marketing the 'layers on top of layers' of player identities



By Tamryn Spruill (author/tamryn-spruill/) Jun 21, 2019



When actor Leslie Jones stepped into a tired stereotype of WNBA basketball players for a skit on NBC's "Saturday Night Live" in March, a chorus of boos on social media followed. Among those voicing offense was Connecticut Sun vice president Amber Cox, who tweeted (<https://twitter.com/MoheganMaven/status/1104851120898408449>), "Female comedians have been vocal about the fight for equality. Sad they were tone deaf (regarding) female athletes in the same fight (and) silly stereotypes."

The skit, "Gold Diggers of the WNBA," (<https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/gold-diggers/3920141>) featured "playaz" in baggy, three-piece suits congregating in a motel dining room to seize on "WNBA ballaz" for romance and funds. It was a

representation of gold-digging on players earning “60 to 90Gs a year” with hopes of becoming “a kept man of a WNBA star,” complete with padded pockets and a “two-bedroom condo, time-share vacations in Orlando and shopping sprees at Nordstrom Rack.”

In other words, the skit seized on the vastly inequitable salaries of WNBA players and turned them into a punchline that appeared to fall flat in front of the live studio audience. The skit continued by knocking the athletic prowess of WNBA players, with one “playa” saying he wants to meet “a lady who can almost dunk.”

Enter Jones as Tamika Williams, “one of the highest paid ballaz in the league” at just under six figures per year, plus “an endorsement deal with Palmer’s cocoa butter.” The playaz approach Tamika, but a woman appears and puts her arm around Tamika to make it clear that the pair is a couple. “So you messin’ around with Trish now?” one playa asks. But before the skit can sling its biggest blow, “Gold Diggers of the WNBA” stuffs in the stereotype that athletes are unintelligent. Tamika mispronounces the name of a restaurant and, when corrected, says, “That’s why I play ball.”

The chief zinger concerned sexuality, with one playa asking, “What are the odds she leaves with another woman?” and another answering, “like, nine out of 10.” That rounded out just under four minutes of derogatory remarks, under the cover of comedy, about women athletes, black women and queer women.

This trifecta of traits, and the stereotypes attached to them, make up what Connecticut Sun guard Layshia Clarendon calls the “layers upon layers” of barriers that the WNBA allowed to thwart its success. This is why many in the WNBA found it troubling that Jones, a dark-skinned black woman, appeared in the derisive skit.

As a Hollywood heavy-hitter, Jones has used her platform to address an array of social issues including, most recently, Alabama’s abortion ban (<https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/weekend-update-leslie-jones-on-alabamas-abortion-ban/3958346>). In 2017, she took on the cause of cyberbullying after an alt-right personality (<https://www.essence.com/celebrity/leslie-jones-condemns-milo-yiannopoulos-book-publisher/>) targeted her with racist harassment on Twitter and incited others to do the same. The incident forced Jones to leave the social media site for a while and Twitter banned the perpetrator who had violated its policies.

With these events serving as the backdrop, and the reality that a large percentage of WNBA players are African American women, Jones' appearance, to many, felt like betrayal. She had used her platform repeatedly to defend and protect women on other issues, but now — in collaboration with the SNL writers, producers and other actors (including Hollywood heavyweight Idris Elba) — used it to perpetuate negative stereotypes of a specific segment of women: basketball players in the WNBA. (*The Athletic* WNBA reached out to Jones' agent for comment from the actor, but an interview was declined.)

Clarendon, who also serves as first vice president of the WNBA players' association, characterizes the league demographically as having a strong representation of “queer women of color.” That fact, coupled with a long-standing cultural animus toward athletic women, queer women and black women, creates what Clarendon calls “layers on top of layers” of challenges the league has faced in its attempts to market the league and its players to the masses.

In terms of the WNBA's prior efforts to market this demographic, Clarendon says, “They failed us.”

Recently, however, the tides appear to be turning.

The Athletic WNBA caught up with Clarendon on June 12, which happened to be the three-year anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting that claimed the lives of 49 clubgoers and left 53 others injured. Although there is no silver lining to the tragedy that occurred at the gay club, Clarendon notes a cultural shift that transpired in its wake.

After Pulse, she says, “It became acceptable to wear Pride things supporting Pulse. ... Especially with companies starting to realize that you can make money off rainbow flags and gay people and being inclusive and accepting.”

Asked if she ever experienced homophobia in the league, or in carrying out her duties in the broader space of sport, Clarendon said, “Never.”

She doesn't claim to speak for all players, but her affirmation of the WNBA as being a place where players can be their authentic selves indicates the role sport has played in providing a safe haven for gay or gender non-conforming women. Safety is important for LGBTQ individuals given the persistence of discrimination and violence against them — facts that underscore why passing off homophobia as comedy causes harm.

These negative perceptions based on gender, race and sexuality presented the league with a marketing challenge: Get society to embrace and champion athletes from a group that historically has been marginalized and discriminated against.

“You're trying to market black women, right, who haven't been looked at as traditionally beautiful,” Clarendon said. “Dark-skinned women. People who aren't the first choices in advertisements and in the beauty industry.

“So, you're dealing with the racial issue and then you're dealing with the gender issue, which is women in sports not being seen as equal or as valuable or as good as the men. And then you have the queer issue, and you just continue to add layers on top of layers. It's been so hard to market us because we're a big chunk of queer women of color.”

In Clarendon's view, the causes of the WNBA's marketing shortcomings in its history have never really been addressed. Gender, race and sexuality are, to this day, what some consider hot-button issues. With money-making opportunities potentially at risk, it is easy to see why the league painted an inauthentic package that the public at-large might find more palatable than “queer women of color.”

After all, the first WNBA season was played in 1997 — the same year Ellen DeGeneres came out as gay (<https://time.com/4728994/ellen-degeneres-1997-coming-out-cover/>) and, subsequently, lost her television show on her way to becoming a social pariah. Society has become more accepting than it was 20 years ago, but the financial risk at the time of the league's inception was very real.

So, while a person may have easily been recognized as a woman and/or person of color, queerness can be downplayed, and often was, to protect careers. When Sheryl Swoopes came out as gay in 2005, she said she had previously been “living a lie” and, for a time, was married to a man.

“To be perfectly honest with you, five years ago I probably wouldn’t have (come out),” Swoopes said in an interview with the New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/27/sports/basketball/swoopes-says-she-is-gay-and-exhales.html>) then. “I was just afraid of what type of effect it would have, afraid of losing endorsements. I am at a point in my life where I’m very happy, very content with who I am, content with what I’ve accomplished.”

Although Swoopes’ public coming out was somewhat marred by the revelation that she also had entered into a relationship with Houston Comets assistant coach Alisa Scott, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” environment Swoopes described is one LGBTQ people of an earlier generation know well.

“It’s unfortunate that people, and those not only in the WNBA, are not able to feel like they can be who they are,” Swoopes said at the time. “ They lose endorsements; they lose friends and family.”



Skylar Diggins (No. 3), Elena Delle Donne (2) and Brittney Griner (1), the top 3 picks in the 2013 WNBA Draft. (Tim Camuso / NBAE via Getty Images)

Clarendon cites the 2013 draft as a turning point toward the WNBA's greater acceptance of its players. The very existence of 6-foot-9 Brittney Griner — who donned a suit on draft night along with Clarendon — played a major role in shifting attitudes, she says.

“Literally, by her sheer size, you kind of couldn't deny (her),” Clarendon said. “She literally was, like, a larger-than-life, queer, black woman of color.”

But Griner did not stop with her undeniable presence; she brought the issue of sexuality front and center by coming out publicly before ever playing a game in Phoenix Mercury orange. Thus, new efforts toward inclusivity began in earnest, with Pride Nights eventually emerging for every team.

Now, Clarendon says, the league has been embracing its queer players and marketing to its queer fans, in contrast to the past approach of ignoring the existence of both.

These breakthroughs came about in large part due to players becoming more vocal about their misgivings over how they were being represented. But change started with the league first owning up to its errors of the past.

Last year, the league sought input from league stakeholders, including team owners and players, and consultancy from Sylvain Labs on brand strategy. WNBA COO Christin Hedgpeth acknowledged that the league's prior strategies came up short in garnering interest from the demographic of women also represented on the court.

“They are aware of us, and our values resonate with them, but we are not showing up where they live digitally,” Hedgpeth said

(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alanaglass/2019/04/08/wnba-enters-23rd-season-with-a-brand-reset/#2fc697ee53b7>). “We need to show up where they will find us.”

Now the WNBA that they see will be “culturally relevant,” according to Hedgpeth, “and within our means based on the values that we have around diversity and inclusion and equality, and the conversation around women today.”

“The league has admitted they haven't always gotten (marketing) right, both of their own fault (and) society's,” Clarendon said. “But I think we're truly starting to turn the corner in terms of truly embracing some of the people who do make up this league — you know, queer women of color, people who are outspoken about it, and I think that's where we need to go moving forward.”

In 2019, the WNBA is “making way” for greater acceptance and inclusion of all of its players, not just those fitting heteronormative, Eurocentric standards of beauty. The “Watch Me Work” campaign (<https://www.wnba.com/video/watch-work-3-0-skylar-diggins-smith/>) of 2018 featured documentary-style, sitdown interviews with players conservatively dressed in team uniform. Few, if any, had tattoos visible and most of the players — including Skylar Diggins-Smith, Elena Delle Donne, Stefanie Dolson and Alyassa Thomas — have long hair.

The “Take a Seat, Take a Stand” campaign (<https://www.wnba.com/video/wnba-take-a-seat-take-a-stand/>) of the same year showed slow-motion video of WNBA players in action on the court with Anna Mae's power ballad, “Can't Knock Me Down,” as the background music. The video also included scenes from women's marches.

Enter “Make Way” (<https://www.wnba.com/video/make-way/>) of 2019. Instead of the campaign telling the public what the WNBA is about and stands for, it shows the players as they are and trusts that their authenticity will resonate with younger, hipper audiences. In place of a songstress tune is a stripped-down club beat. In lieu of sitdown interviews are the women of the WNBA in action — on courts, in cities and in gyms. And out of their official team uniforms, the women rock true-to-them outfits with funkiness and flair.

It took the efforts of WNBPA Executive Director Terri Jackson in meeting with the league, Clarendon said, to foster progress.

Clarendon also credits the league for finally embracing the authenticity of its players. But it took steadfast commitment for these shifts to happen.

“We’ve preached, like, over and over again that they need to market us more authentically,” Clarendon said. “And that’s everything from, like, the queerness side of it to the blackness side of it. We’re fierce, badass, competitive women. Like, stop playing these frilly songs. ...

“We are athletes. We’re here to go hard and bang. We’re dynamic and we’re fierce. And that’s all messaging that the player input has preached to the league.”

(Photo of Laysbia Clarendon: Ethan Miller / Getty Images)

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10 COMMENTS

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Erica A. Jun 21, 8:20pm

Loved this!



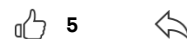
Bryan G. Jun 22, 12:29am

This was FANTASTIC! It's so important to recognize that the player's basketball skills are just a facet of their human experience. The WNBA is working towards capturing the zeitgeist by marketing their place and relevance within an ongoing social conversation. Powerful, powerful stuff.



Katee F. 22h ago

I sincerely mean this 100%. — This article has convinced me more than any other I've ever read about the WNBA that I definitely want to emotionally (and when I can, financially) invest in this league! I've had "good intentions" for as long as I can remember, but that's it. This changes now. Thank you so much for this! 🏀❤️



Jimmy S. 21h ago

I love the authenticity of the players in the W. There are many great athletes and roll models. I really enjoy rooting for them in games, however it goes beyond the game. These athletes are fighters and have to work so hard for what they have and what they want to accomplish both in and out of the game. I have a LOT of respect for that.



Lindsay G. 13h ago

Great story.



Clay K. 11h ago

Good solid story ... it's a shame it took the WNBA so long to embrace the queer, black identity of many of its players. The league could have been out in front on this issue instead of playing catchup -- but better late than never.



Daniel G. 23h ago

Excellent story! Love the move toward authenticity.

 1 


Nikolai N. 23h ago

Layshia is a tremendous example of how like, captivating and interesting WNBA players are as personalities off the court. I really hope to see more done by the W to highlight the players as people who are as unique and fascinating as they've constantly proven themselves to be.

 2 

Hodaka K. 23h ago

Tamryn with another excellent article! Keep fighting the good fight. 🙌

 2 

Miles S. 22h ago

Great read! Authenticity is so important in athletes and leagues. Thank you for highlighting some of the challenges and personalities involved.

 1 

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