

Why are some WNBA teams getting booted from their home venues during the playoffs?



By Tamryn Spruill (/author/tamryn-spruill/) 2h ago



Monique Currie played her last WNBA game on Sept. 12, 2018, calling it a career after 13 seasons. Instead of finishing on top with the Washington Mystics, the Seattle Storm swept Currie and her teammates in the Finals on the Mystics' home floor.

Well, not exactly.

Due to scheduling conflicts, the Mystics played three 2018 playoffs games at Charles E. Smith Center at George Washington University, a 15-20 minute drive from their home venue at the time, Capital One Arena. In the Finals, the Mystics had to make a westward trek of 40 minutes to an hour, depending on traffic, to play their critical win-or-go-home Game 3 at George Mason University's EagleBank Arena in Fairfax, Va.

For Currie, the inconvenience of playing games an hour away from a team's home arena presents many problems, some with health and safety issues.

“I think it's ridiculous that teams have to move arenas at all, but *especially* during the playoffs,” Currie said. “Having to leave the comforts of your home arena to play in places that are not professional-grade arenas causes a string of negative effects on everyone involved, from the players (and) the staff of the team and arena, all the way down to the fans who oftentimes are misinformed or not willing to make arrangements to attend a game outside of where they're used to.”

The 2018 Mystics are not alone in getting booted from a home arena during the most critical time of the WNBA season. A J. Cole concert pushed the Phoenix Mercury out of their Talking Stick Resort Arena home in 2018, sending them to Wells Fargo Arena at Arizona State University, in Tempe.

This season, the Los Angeles Sparks find themselves in a 2-0 deficit in their semifinals series with the Connecticut Sun. Instead of returning to Staples Center for their win-or-go-home Game 3, the Sparks will play Sunday at Walter Pyramid at Long Beach State, an hour drive from Downtown Los Angeles.

The Las Vegas Aces also head west down 2-0, after dropping two games on the road in their series with the Washington Mystics. Unlike the Sparks, they will return to the familiarities of their Mandalay Bay Events Center home. An Alejandro Fernández concert had previously displaced them from Mandalay for their Round 2 single-elimination game. They beat the Chicago Sky in thrilling fashion instead at the Thomas & Mack Center on the campus of UNLV, across the street from the university's Student Services Complex.

As temporary homes go, Thomas & Mack — with its seating capacity of almost 19,000, plentiful on-site parking and prime location (less than a mile from McCarran International Airport and a five-minute drive from the Las Vegas Strip) — is probably as good as it gets. But the 36-year-old arena still poses many differences from the Aces' true home, a swanky and modern 12,000-seat venue for entertainment and sport.

A three-mile drive to Thomas & Mack is a minor inconvenience as far as arena displacements go. But athletes are creatures of habit and routine. Trading in a familiar setting for a less familiar one can throw them off their game.

Preparation, on the part of both the players and the organization, is a key factor in the transition. Getting a team ready to play at a different arena requires detailed planning, whether the move is one hour away, as was the case with the Mystics in 2018, or just up the road, as was the case for the Aces in 2019. For Aces assistant general manager Christine Monjer, replicating the fan experience at Mandalay Bay Events Center was of utmost importance. She knew filling Thomas & Mack Center with the screaming Aces faithful was the best way to support the players.

“Preparing for a game at an alternate location isn’t easy, but we focused on making sure that fans knew where we were playing and tried to honor as many of the same experiences that are available at our home arena,” Monjer said. “We made sure to maintain free parking to our Premium/Plus members, fulfilling the Courtside Club for premium seats, having a membership sales table, retail items for purchase, sponsor activations, etc.

“Our fans also really understood that we would need them to show up in order to make the larger venue feel full, and they rallied around the old UNLV mantra of ‘Pack the Mack.’”

For Monjer and the Vegas organization, it was a mission accomplished. Nearly 9,000 fans showed up to see Dearica Hamby’s last-second shot just inside half-court give the Aces a one-point Round 2 win over the Sky. (The Aces usually average 5,000 fans per night at Mandalay.) A special chartered flight organized by the league followed, to the nation’s capital for the semifinals.

The Mystics didn’t fare as well last year. Currie said the Mystics felt lucky to have their fans make the trek to Fairfax, because arena moves affect players’ psyches and ability to do their jobs at the professional level.

“Moving arenas last season was disheartening to say the least,” Currie said. “Not only did we move once, but we had to play in two different arenas (in the postseason) — one being almost an hour away from where we usually play our home games.”

To make it work at EagleBank in Fairfax, players had to change their at-home routines because the distance made it impossible for them to sleep in their own beds.

“Players had to stay in hotels in the area because the commute was so far,” Currie said. “It was an hour drive for me (to the arena) instead of the usual 20 minutes. That throws off everything — from your typical commute to your pre-game preparation — which all factors

into your performance.”

While any basketball court may feel like home to basketball players, foreign ones take some getting used to.

“From a player’s perspective, it’s very difficult to quickly adjust to new baskets, new backdrops and a new setting,” Currie said, “all the while preparing for the most crucial time of the season.”

“Luckily, the fans still turned out,” she added.



Monique Currie, driving to the basket here in Game 3 of the 2018 WNBA Finals at Eaglebank Arena, called teams having to play away from home “ridiculous.” (Ned Dishman / NBAE via Getty Images)

The Athletic contacted the WNBA for comment and a league source suggested that arena movement is not uncommon in sports and not unique to the WNBA. Monjer believes scheduling conflicts are “inevitable” in multi-use arenas.

“When there are other live events in the building, it makes it difficult to have exclusivity on any specific window of time,” Monjer said. “While we share the Mandalay Bay Events Center with concerts and conventions, we’re fortunate that there isn’t another anchor tenant in the building that has multiple dates required.”

For the Aces, the need to use an alternate arena arose because an Alejandro Fernández concert was already on the books.

“Scheduling for concerts can be done months or years in advance,” Monjer said. “For key weekends in Las Vegas, such as Mexican Independence Weekend, scheduling is a priority and can be planned over a year in advance. When submitting our 2019 scheduling, we were aware that weekend would present conflicts.”

Considering the myriad factors influencing scheduling in professional sports, it is surprising that these conflicts do not happen more often, especially in leagues like the NBA and NHL where the regular season is 82 games. According to the WNBA source, some of these considerations include travel needs, production/equipment requirements, arena availability based on other events or venue upgrades, broadcast windows and matchups, with specific attention given to competitive balance and rivalries.

Preparing a season schedule, therefore, is a team effort, with multiple parties involved in juggling many moving parts. The WNBA does not make a schedule and distribute it to the league’s 12 teams. It creates the schedule in collaboration with the teams, venues and media partners — with all parties weighing in before a season schedule is finalized. Even with these preseason plans, teams find themselves bounced from their home arenas during the most critical part of the season — the playoffs.

To prevent teams from being ousted from their home arenas in future WNBA seasons, Currie believes venues should be reserved for the whole season, “regardless of what they think a team’s postseason future will be.” She also believes the league would be better served by releasing the schedule earlier, before other events can make it onto venues’ respective calendars.

The league source, when asked, was unable to provide an example of an NBA or NHL team that had been moved from its home during the playoffs. Yet, the Sparks will play away from home on Sunday, while the Staples Center’s three other anchor tenants — the NBA’s Clippers

and the Lakers and the NHL's Kings — don't face the same problem. These teams play a combined 246 regular-season games per season at the same time of year, every year, from October to June.

For Currie, it's about priorities.

“I understand that more lucrative events may want to use (a team's venue),” Currie said. “But if you are committed to the growth of women's basketball and committed to making sure that (teams are) put in the best position possible to win a championship, we can start with allowing them to play in their own gym during the entire season.”

(Top photo of the Aces' at Thomas & Mack: Jeff Bottari / NBAE via Getty Images)

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