

Opinion: Growth in women's basketball highlighted by Dyaisha Fair's national recognition

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — If you have followed Syracuse Women's basketball, even to a casual degree over the past few years, it will come as no shock that the start of the 2023-24 season is running parallel with senior guard, Dyaisha Fair, receiving national attention.



Syracuse Women's Basketball star Dyaisha Fair, named to Wooden Award Preseason Watch List

If you are not familiar with The Wooden Award, it is awarded to the top player in college basketball every year. This week, Fair was one of the 50 female athletes named to the Wooden Award watch list. And that in itself deserves a discussion.

In order to successfully do that, I think it is first important to take a grand look at women's basketball at the college level and the insane growth the sport has experienced over the last two years.

When Breanna Stewart broke onto the scene – I think there was a shift in the perspective of many Central New York Basketball fans. Her story of success began here, graduating from Cicero-North Syracuse High School in 2012.

Stewart took her talents to the University of Connecticut, where she flourished under the leadership of Naismith Hall of Fame Coach, Geno Auriemma.



INDIANAPOLIS, IN - APRIL 05: Breanna Stewart #30 of the Connecticut Huskies looks on in the first quarter against the Syracuse Orange during the championship game of the 2016 NCAA Women's Final Four Basketball Championship at Bankers Life Fieldhouse on April 5, 2016 in Indianapolis, Indiana. (Photo by Joe Robbins/Getty Images)

A 6-foot-4 forward, she won four national championships in four years at UConn and was the NCAA Tournament's most outstanding player each year. I urge you to read that again.

Her list of accolades on Wikipedia is 31 lines long. And that doesn't even account for all the times those lines begin with 2x, or even 3x.

The hometown kid went on to do big things and likely hasn't even reached her peak yet. A community takes pride in things like that, especially a community as basketball-crazed as Syracuse.

Even with all the success Stewart has found, now at the professional level with New York Liberty, issues of inequity that plagued the college game when she ruled it persisted.

In the midst of the 2021 NCAA March Madness Tournament, female players took to social media to point out major inequities, that were long past due on addressing.

This video was posted by Sedonia Prince, who previously played for Oregon. It highlights the difference between the men's and women's weight rooms during the NCAA tournament. The women have a single rack of dumbbells, while the men have a full gym with nearly every machine under the sun.

Following severe criticism, apologies came down from some of the top dogs at the NCAA, including former President Mark Emmert. A law firm was hired by the association to investigate equity issues, which then resulted in a 113-page report.

Over 100 pages were dedicated to ripping apart the NCAA's so-called commitment to promote "diversity, inclusion, and gender equity among its student-athletes, coaches, and administrators."

The 2022-23 season was the first taste of long-awaited change. The NCAA took action to improve the branding for the women's game, increased full-time staff working on women's tournaments, and began a program to identify and track areas that need to be the same, comparable, and different in men's and women's tournament experiences.

The result? A 95.2% year-over-year viewership increase for the women's championship game. Iowa's Caitlin Clark and LSU's Angel Reese brought in an audience of 9.95 million.

This is not a conversation about people not caring about women's sports. It's a conversation of women's sports finally being cared for.



DALLAS, TEXAS - APRIL 02: Angel Reese #10 of the LSU Lady Tigers reacts towards Caitlin Clark #22 of the Iowa Hawkeyes during the fourth quarter during the 2023 NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament championship game at American Airlines Center on April 02, 2023 in Dallas, Texas. (Photo by Maddie Meyer/Getty Images)

The people in charge are starting to figure out the importance of female sports at the college level. Basketball has evolved, the talent has evolved, and in turn, investing in women benefits everyone. When you nurture something and feed its potential, the positive impacts aren't limited to what happens on the court.

When I first saw this photo, it took my breath away. I sat and looked at it for a few minutes and reflected on being this little girl's age. Eventually, I scrolled past it, feeling a convoluted mix of pride and guilt.

I've never paid as much attention to women's basketball as I have men's. However, I find comfort in knowing that wasn't entirely my fault.

The sport was given the bare minimum up until a year ago.

Head Coach Felicia Legette-Jack, a.k.a. FLJ, is in her second season at the helm of Syracuse women's basketball — and there is no better person to lead this program. FLJ in Orange means success. She proved that when she wore this city's name on her

chest from 1984-1989. She scored 1,526 points and brought down 927 rebounds. Those statistics have earned her the accolades of being one of the best players in program history.



GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA - MARCH 02: Head coach Felisha Legette-Jack of the Syracuse Orange reacts to a call by the officials during the second half of their game against the NC State Wolfpack in the second round of the ACC Women's Basketball Tournament at Greensboro Coliseum on March 02, 2023 in Greensboro, North Carolina. (Photo by Grant Halverson/Getty Images)

After her playing career, she went on to coach at Indiana University, the University of Buffalo, and even Team USA. But she came back home and brought an absolute stud back with her.

Dyaisha Fair had a historically good freshman year at UB, ranking fourth in the nation, and averaging 22 points per game. Her success continued into her sophomore year, earning a spot on several watch lists and even becoming a finalist for the Becky Hammon Mid-Major Player of the Year.

Her individual stats from last year are nothing short of dazzling. She was second in overall scoring across the ACC and was named to First Team All-ACC & the All-ACC Defensive Teams. Perhaps more impressive is the leadership she offered to a program

just beginning to rebuild, playing her role so well that the team made an NIT Tournament appearance last March.

In my experience, there are few relationships that compare to that of a coach and player. Maybe I'm biased, as I've had the opportunity to play for coaches who continue to play an imperative role in my life to this day. The best coaches and teams are the ones that understand their identity. A successful and respected coach knows how the pieces within their system best fit together, and conveys to their players that they each have a role to play within it. Fair has bought into Legette-Jack's system and is the focal point of it.

It is clear that FLJ knows Fair is the type of player and person that you build a program around. She sets the standard, and earning a spot on the Wooden Award watchlist etches that in stone.

It's players like Fair who will continue to challenge the boundaries of what it means to be a female athlete. Central New Yorkers have the opportunity to see her excellence continue, specifically, for young girls in Central New York.

In 2011 I was 10 years old. As a 5th grader, I played my second year of organized basketball. I chose to wear #00 on my jersey because that's what Rick Jackson wore for Syracuse.



My coach pulled me from a game that year for spiking the ball. I learned my lesson.

I wonder if I would have chosen that number if the women's game had been nurtured the way it's beginning to be now.

If you have a little girl who loves sports, take her to an SU women's basketball game this season. Let her witness the passion Felica Legette-Jack brings on the sidelines. Instill in her that if she works for it, she could be a college athlete. Maybe she'll decide that she wants to grow up and write about the game she loves.

Make sure she understands that sports need her.