

WNBA Draft

Friday, April 9, 2021

Rebecca Lobo

LaChina Robinson



RON HOWARD: Thank you to everyone. A couple of quick housekeeping items. As most of you have probably seen by the email, WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert will be available for a media conference call on Tuesday, April 13 at 3:30.

Also early next week we will have issued information regarding draft night media availability sessions with select draft picks. They will be conducted via Zoom.

You've seen the list of players who have opted in for consideration for the draft. We do have information on a few who have withdrawn their names. Players do have through tomorrow to withdraw their names from consideration.

As of today, the following four players have withdrawn their names: Cece Hooks of Ohio, Nancy Mulkey of Rice and Georgia players Que Morrison and Jenna Staiti.

We're going to open it up to questions for Rebecca and LaChina.

Q. What player or players improved or lowered their stock from performances in the NCAA Tournament?

LACHINA ROBINSON: There were a couple of players that stood out in my mind as far as those who increased their draft stock. Obviously, Aari McDonald was fantastic in the NCAA Tournament. I do believe that unfortunately oftentimes with the Pac-12 Conference the average fan is maybe not up late enough to see the Arizona Wildcats play.

I think Aari probably was one of the more underestimated stars coming into the NCAA Tournament. I just thought the way she played on both ends of the floor, obviously shot the ball at a higher percentage than she did during the regular season, which definitely helped her draft stock. But she is just fantastic. Though there were some questions about her size coming in, and there still may be, as she would probably say, she proved a lot of people wrong around what she was capable of.

And then other player that stands out to me that improved their draft stock would be DiJonai Carrington. I think we've watched a player that is continuing to get healthy. She's suffered from some significant injuries throughout her career. I think she is really starting to play her best basketball and really shined on the big stage, in particular the game against Connecticut.

I think she's a player who showed her defensive versatility, showed that she can take over on the offensive end. Just tough, strong. It was great to see her play at a high level in the NCAA Tournament. I think she also improved her draft stock.

I think the only players that really come to mind that may have hurt their draft stock were those that we didn't get to watch for very long, teams that were out of the NCAA Tournament. I definitely thought Rutgers was going to have a longer run and we could have seen more of Arella Guirantes, or Chelsea Dungee of Arkansas. Two players I thought really could have really given us some memorable moments in the NCAA Tournament, and we didn't get to see them play as much as I'm sure a lot of the GMs and head coaches would have liked to during the prime time of year for our sport.

Q. I wanted to get a sense of your overall impression of this draft class compared to previous draft classes.

REBECCA LOBO: It's not as strong. I think people kind of understand that this class isn't as strong as maybe last year's class, and it's not as strong as the classes in the next couple years. I think that's pretty much how everyone feels about it.

Q. The Fever have a talented young core with Teaira McCowan, Kelsey Mitchell and Lauren Cox. But is there a player in this draft that they could add to help them get over the hump?

LACHINA ROBINSON: I think I love Indiana's roster and what they've built over the last few years. It's obviously a very young team. I like some of the moves in the offseason as far as firming up the point guard spot, especially not knowing what is going to be done as far as



international obligations. So Lindsay Allen being able to come in and play some at that point guard spot I think is major. Danielle Robinson.

I don't think they need any size, obviously, with Cox and McCowan, two young players who I think need time on the floor to develop.

One thing that I think kind of stands out to me or a player I think could help in their roster is just a big wing, and there are a lot of those in the draft. You've got the athletic Tiffany Mitchell and you got a smaller Kelsey Mitchell. Athletic players, but not as big as what we're seeing in this particular draft.

We've got some wings like Rennia Davis, for example, that I think could really change the complexion of what you do on both ends. That may be something that could just add a different type of player to the skill set of what Indiana already has.

Q. Rebecca, you talked about this draft class not being as strong, but I wonder if either of you can speak specifically to the group of guards in this draft class and specifically as it pertains to the Sky, who are looking for a backup point guard. Who do you see falling to that No. 8 pick, and do you feel like the Sky can get a talented backup in the draft class?

REBECCA LOBO: Yeah, I should have talked a little bit longer when I talked about the draft class. Of course there are really good players in the draft and of course teams are going to be able to find players who can fit a need for them.

I think James Wade has said one of the things they're looking for is a backup at the point guard spot for Sloom [Courtney Vandersloom], and there are multiple players in this class who could help Chicago.

You've got some good guards who might be available at that 8 spot: Aari McDonald, Dana Evans, Kiana Williams, Destiny Slocum. There's an international presence at the point guard spot as well.

If you're a point guard in this class, that would be a great place to go because you would definitely learn from one of the best in the game in Sloom, and you would be able to have minutes without having all of the pressure that can come from running the show right away.

I think James, if he does go with a point guard at No. 8, will get a good one and will get one who will be in a great situation to learn as a rookie and get some minutes and play with a really great group of players who come in off the bench. So certainly there is somebody there that will

be able to help Chicago.

Q. Can you guys talk about Tiana Mangakahia and what you think is a perfect spot for her? And not playing in the ACC Tournament, do you think that hurts draft stock at all?

REBECCA LOBO: I'll take that. I covered quite a bit of the ACC this season. I think Tiana is a fantastic talent. She sees the floor extremely well. She has innate ability when it comes to passing and knowing where and how to deliver the ball to her teammates. Extremely high basketball IQ. You don't lead the nation in assists in consecutive seasons unless you really have a high-level understanding of the game.

I think we all understand some of the challenges that she had to face in coming back after missing last season due to breast cancer. I think what we didn't probably talk about enough this season was just kind of the toll that it took on her body, on her ability to come back and really play at a high level.

I know she had a foot injury at some point, and then as you mentioned she missed the ACC Tournament. I don't think that what we saw this season is the full picture of what Tiana is really capable of, and I think she will continue to kind of work her way back into form, in the way we saw her play earlier in her career.

She could definitely be drafted. I could see it happening late second round or third round. I just think there is an understanding that she's still kind of working her way back, but she's a fantastic talent and I think she would have an opportunity to get into camp and prove what she could do.

Q. We saw so many performances from a lot of outstanding freshmen this year. Where do you stand on the possibility that because of what we saw this past year in the college game that perhaps it could lead to changes as far as the eligibility requirements for the draft?

REBECCA LOBO: Because I get to cover women's college basketball and the WNBA, selfishly I would like to see them stay in college for four years, or three years, whatever it is now, depending on a player's age, so we get to watch these players develop.

In college, we get to see them develop their star power and then continue to follow it through to the WNBA.

I think it's really exciting when you look at the current freshman and sophomore class in college and think about two or three years down the road and what that's going to

mean for the WNBA, because it's loaded with talent. But at the same time, I also am excited to see what that means for college basketball one and two years down the line.

You know, because I cover both, I like the requirements right now selfishly because I think it grows women's basketball. We saw the ratings this year in women's college basketball and the tournament and the Final Four. These women are on a huge stage on that platform, and I'd like to see them continue to be on that stage until they're completely ready for the WNBA.

But again, that's my selfish perspective because I get to cover both leagues.

Q. I'm curious as to what type of player you believe the New York Liberty would be looking for, especially with Asia Durr's status a little bit uncertain, and they don't really know how long they'll have Marine Johannes for.

REBECCA LOBO: Well, to play in that system you would expect they'll be looking for a big wing who can shoot threes and maybe get to the free throw line.

New York is going to be really interesting because I don't think we got the clearest view of what they were going to be or can be last year because of the injury to Sabrina [Ionescu] and then some of the international players who didn't play, the trades made in the offseason.

They did great in free agency, now that they have [Natasha] Howard there and some other great players.

I'm interested to see what's going to happen in the draft. I'm interested to see what the Liberty are going to look like this year, especially where they'll have a chance finally to play at home in Brooklyn.

But Walt [Hopkins] showed last year that there's a certain style that he wants to play, so you would expect the players to have size, be able to shoot threes and try to get to the free throw line.

Q. Do you feel like there are going to be any surprises on draft day in terms of anticipating any draft-day trades? And just some perspective on how many names actually were in the WNBA Draft this year, is that an unprecedented number, and how does that concern you with obviously just the 12 teams?

LACHINA ROBINSON: What is the deadline for trades? I don't want to speak incorrectly.

RON HOWARD: I apologize. I don't have that off the top

of my head. I'll have to look that up and can get that to you.

LACHINA ROBINSON: I will start with the first part of your question. I never put it past any teams to make some moves, especially like Dallas, which has a lot of picks in the first round and early second round. I think the challenge is what Rebecca talked about early on the call, which is this is not as strong of a draft as we've seen in recent years.

The one thing that may prompt the move is salary cap, right? With the new CBA, we're seeing teams load up and there may be some teams that could benefit from having a first-year player to help them with some cap space. That is definitely a possibility.

And then as far as the number of names in the draft, I don't know how many are normally -- I feel like this is a year where we're counting more than ever, so I don't know if it's average or on par. But I would say that in this unique year where players had an opportunity to go back to school, I was happy to see many of them do that.

I think it's incredibly hard to make a WNBA roster, and another year of college development can only help you. I think sometimes we can underestimate the jump that it really takes to go from college to the WNBA.

So if I'm in college, I may be the best player on my team, I may even be the best player in my league and I may even be drafted in the first round and still not make a roster.

To your point and the latter part of your question, yeah, we definitely need more teams. There's a ton of talent, and right now it just feels like roster space is tighter than it's ever been.

RON HOWARD: Just to close the loop on that question, there has not been a number, per se, of players for the draft in prior years. This is the first year that we have had a formal opt-in process. Again, that's due to the NCAA offer to players for another season.

Q. Can you talk about what you like about Charli Colliers, what she brings to this draft and whether you think the struggles in some of the games, like the Baylor game, is a concern?

REBECCA LOBO: When you look at Charli, she looks like a WNBA player. She's big and strong, has a great frame, plays really hard. She added the three-point shot, which a stretch 4 needs to have now in the WNBA. She's got a good-looking stroke. She's got decent hands.

Yeah, I think when you see her performance against some teams, in particular Baylor, it makes you take pause a little bit. But I think you also have to understand the system she was playing in, a dribble-drive offense, what she was surrounded by. A big is in heaven when they are surrounded by shooters because it gives them space to be able to operate. Charli wasn't necessarily surrounded by shooters this year.

There's of course a lot to like about her game. You do have questions when you see some of the struggles that she may have had against her opponents, but you also understand kind of the bigger picture of what she was playing with, the system she was playing and all of those things. Certainly a lot to like about Charli.

Q. Would you be surprised to see Rennia Davis drop out of the top five picks? What do you like about her, and what are some things you think she needs to work on to become a big impact player at the next level?

LACHINA ROBINSON: I think the world of Rennia Davis. She's an incredible athlete, first and foremost. Look at her size, wingspan, how she runs the floor, her catching ability and then her shooting.

I know her shooting wasn't as consistent as she probably would have liked, and I'm sure a lot of players can say that. I think that's maybe one area that she will improve in at the next level.

But she looks like a pro. She has all the assets, the skill set to be a difference maker. As I mentioned earlier on in the call, when I look at big wings, they're at a premium. When you are a 6-footer or 6-2 and can play the 3 spot and can guard two or three different positions, that's big.

I think the one thing, and this is something I think that we see across the college landscape in general, but consistency. I think that's probably the one thing with her that I would say would need to improve at the next level, and not just even consistency in her numbers but in her motor, in her ability to lead. I think those are some areas. But I really like Rennia's game. I think it would translate well to the next level.

Q. I have two questions if you'll indulge me. The first would be the Sparks had several roster changes during the offseason. What needs could they address in the draft? And the second is where do you think Michaela Onyenwere from UCLA fits into the WNBA and this draft?

REBECCA LOBO: Michaela is really intriguing. She could be one of if not the best athlete in the draft. A player like

her and her size, the question always is are they going to be able to transition to a 3. At only 6 feet, will she be able to transition to the 3 spot? She's intriguing because she's such a high-level athlete. She's got a great motor. She works really hard.

She's a player that I think can really, really be a good pro and a player who's going to continue to get better and better.

I don't know where she's going to get drafted, but I think she'll make a roster. I think she can be impactful not only in her rookie year, but I think she is one of the players who can be impactful for her team in years to come because I think she's just going to get better and better.

LACHINA ROBINSON: It's a very different Los Angeles Sparks team, even simply the departures of Candace Parker and Chelsea Gray. So I'm interested to see what Derek Fisher does. I think those two moves in particular change your identity on both ends of the floor.

Obviously what Candace was able to do defensively and how she works as a facilitator, and Chelsea Gray really being your main ball handler. I think getting Kristi Toliver back in the fold is very helpful, someone who has championship experience and can serve as a leader.

I think this is a team that needs to continue to create space and opportunity for Nneka Ogumike to really shine and do what she can do. We saw some great things last year from Brittney Sykes. I really like the addition of Amanda Zahui B, who is playing at a very high level and has really shaped into what we thought she could be as a pro.

Erica Wheeler is one of the toughest guards in the league because of how quick she is in transition, how she can also stretch the floor and how much pressure she can put on your defense, really from anywhere on the court.

I think this is a fun roster. I'm not exactly sure how the pieces are going to fit together.

In terms of the draft, I think this is a team that can still add a shooter, maybe someone with some size. Sydney Wiese has done a nice job. Maybe a big shooter that's athletic can help, creating that inside space for Nneka Ogumike, and hopefully Chiney [Ogumike] as well.

But yeah, those are some of my initial thoughts. I think if Maria Vadeeva, comes over this is going to be a good team. I think she's probably a key to L.A.'s success and how much she's actually playing in the WNBA this year.

Q. I wanted to ask about Atlanta. Where do you think

they might go with that selection in the first round? Do you feel like it's a situation where they get another guard to go along with Chennedy Carter?

REBECCA LOBO: I think one of the interesting things when we look at drafts, too, especially now with the new collective bargaining agreement, you're not necessarily just looking at what a team might need this year. You kind of also have to look at their roster makeup and when do people become free agents.

It looks like they might need this position, but wait, next year they have an entire forward core or guard core or whatever it is whose contracts are up.

Atlanta is kind of in one of those situations where you wonder do they go with one of the big guards because they have so many of those players who in the near future have contracts coming up.

You know, will they be looking for like Renna Davis or Guirantes, not only to help them this year but to help them prepare for the future. I think that's one of the interesting and fun things when you're looking at teams. It used to be just what is the need they have right now, and now I think you look at it a little bit bigger picture and what is the need they maybe facing in a big way the following year.

Q. I just wanted to get your thoughts on Jasmine Walker from Alabama. I've seen a lot of mock drafts where she's going to Minnesota. If that is the case, what do you think her impact is going to be?

LACHINA ROBINSON: Yeah, I like Jasmine Walker a lot, and actually she's coming up several conversations with GMs and head coaches. She may be the best pure shooter in the draft at the wing position, the way she can come off screens and spot up. She just has a knack for hitting shots.

We talk a lot on this call about size and strength and athleticism because those things really matter at the next level, and she has that. A big that you hope at the next level could play the 3. That's probably the next conversation, like can she really develop her perimeter skill enough to play the 3 spot in the WNBA instead of really being a little bit of a smaller 4 at 6-3.

She does have that size and ability, but when you look at what she can do on the perimeter, I think that's really going to ultimately be the place for her.

But I just love her game. The power she can play with around the rim, but also, again, I think she's one of the best shooters in this draft.

Q. With the freshman and sophomore talent coming up the next two to three years, do you think an expansion of the league is necessary instead of people going overseas to be able to continue their basketball careers?

REBECCA LOBO: I'd love to talk about this. I think every year it's important for us to remind people how hard it is to make a WNBA roster. You've seen players wear the 1 in 144 shirts. It's not 144. Not every team, with the salary cap, is going to be able to carry 12 players. Multiple teams have 11. It's less than 144 roster spots. It is really, really, really hard to make a WNBA roster as a result.

So the women who do -- and the women who get drafted and don't make it this year, they might go overseas and play their way into a roster spot in the future. But I don't think we can overstate how difficult it is to play in the WNBA.

Would that be a little bit easier if there was expansion? Absolutely, and I certainly hope that there is expansion on the horizon. If it's one team, if it's two teams, if it's in the next year, if it's in the next two years, I certainly think the depth of talent could support an additional two teams in the very near future. There are just a lot of really good women's basketball players, and especially the freshmen and so much more classes. The junior class is really good right now, too.

You're going to have some really high-level talent, available talent, too, over the course of the next three years, and certainly I think there's enough of it to support one or two expansion teams.

Whether or not the fan base is there, the infrastructure and all those things is there to have a team, I don't know. But is there enough talent to expand and still have great talent through every team in the league? Absolutely, there is.

Q. I just want to go back to Tiana Mangakahia. She is 25, one of the oldest players in this draft, and she did go through five months of chemo and radiation. Do front offices take all that wear and tear into consideration when they're thinking about selecting her?

LACHINA ROBINSON: I think they absolutely do. I will say the WNBA has some very astute head coaches and general managers. They do their homework. They also understand the game at a very high level, including the storylines.

On ESPN, we talk extensively about what Tiana has been

through, so I definitely think that would be something that would be under consideration, as with any player that may have gone through something that could have impacted the way that they finished their career.

Q. I've got two kind of quick-answer questions for you guys. One is who will be the first non-Power Five player selected in the draft? And second is how many players do you think over or under are going to make rosters, speaking to Rebecca's point, about how difficult it is when we're somewhere in the upper 130s in terms of players in total?

REBECCA LOBO: I can start with the first part of that question. I think Chelsey Perry could be the first non-Power Five player picked in this draft. I think the world of her game. She's incredibly skilled, 6-2, big, strong body, plays on balance, can shoot the three, works extremely hard for position in the post.

Anybody that's watched her this year I think has said in their mind that she's a WNBA talent. I watched her against Louisville. She didn't start the game off great but really showed against one of the best defenses in the country that she can hold her own.

She's a player that, again, kind of that 3-4 space, which is interesting in the WNBA. Can she be a 3 or will she be able to play the 4 consistently? But she's someone that I think could be the first non-Power Five prospect picked in the draft.

LACHINA ROBINSON: And I'll hit the second part of that question about how many players will be on rosters. It's interesting, because I looked at last year's draft and there were a number of second-round picks that were on rosters, but you also had 10 or so players who opted not to play last year. Within an Olympic year, will that affect players' ability to at least be on rosters earlier in the season if an international player isn't going to come until after the Olympics or an international commitment or even an American player with dual citizenship who might play for her country's national team.

I don't know. I don't know how many players will be on a roster at some point this season, but there are other factors that play into it.

Q. We have the 48 players now who have opted in from college, counting the players that withdrew. Who do you see maybe on the international side who may be a surprise in the draft that we haven't thought about because they don't have to opt in?

REBECCA LOBO: You know, everybody has on their

mock draft Awak [Kuier] as being in the top two. She's a player who when you watch, when you talk to people, you hear that she's one of the players, if not the player in this draft who can be a true star in the WNBA. [Iliana] Rupert from France, the young big kid, is interesting as well.

With internationals, too, what's interesting, because of the difficulty with roster spots, you might see international players taken not to play this year, maybe not to play next year, but more as a deferred pick because they're young, and then teams can bring them back later on.

You've got the point guard from Australia, Shyla Heal, who could be an interesting player who may come over this year, who may not until the future.

But there's certainly international players who people are talking about who can have an impact on this draft even if they don't play this year, because like I said, they could be chosen so that they are available for a team in future years.

Q. Central Michigan point guard Micaela Kelly is in the draft. Gotten kind of high national recognition. I was wondering if you could speak to what you see in her game, what you like about it and what you think her chances are of being drafted.

LACHINA ROBINSON: I'm a big Micaela Kelly fan. Obviously, at 5-6 she can do a number of things. I think she could be a combo guard, play the 1, possibly the 2. She's a tremendous talent. She reminds me a lot of Erica Wheeler with her explosiveness, something you really can't teach. She is one of the best athletes in this draft.

You know, 22 points a game. Just puts a lot of pressure on your defense. She also at 5-6 averaged seven rebounds a game last year, around five this season. Can defend.

Sometimes I think we look at conference and we give that too much stock. But I've seen her play against a number of teams, Power Five and not, and she's been effective. I just think she's the kind of player that could translate well to the WNBA. Yeah, I really enjoy her game.

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