

# [***Two WNBA players were among a dozen Americans who played in Russia after Brittney Griner's arrest***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYX-CMG1-DYMD-62N4-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW YORK — Two WNBA players were among a dozen Americans that opted to play in Russia this past offseason, a decision New York Liberty forward Kayla Thornton said raised a few eyebrows following [*Brittney Griner’s incarceration in 2022*](https://apnews.com/article/brittney-griner-wnba-russia-olympics-3ad3b4052744fd426415329129ffebf5).

“I had a lot of people trying to question my decision and were like, ‘Are you sure?’” Thornton told The Associated Press. “Me and my family prayed about it and that’s where my heart went, and I went. My mom is a pastor. She believes God’s going to take care of you. She prayed every night and obviously nothing bad happened.”

Other Americans haven't been as fortunate. Russia is known to be holding a number of Americans in its jails, including corporate security executive Paul Whelan and Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich. The U.S. government has designated both as wrongfully detained and has been trying to negotiate for their release.

[*An American soldier*](https://apnews.com/article/soldier-arrested-russia-korea-ca2842597a0af45062667f8cc552eca6) was recently arrested in Russia and accused of stealing, according to two U.S. officials. Cynthia Smith, an Army spokeswoman, confirmed that a soldier was detained Thursday in Vladivostok, a major military and commercial Pacific port, on charges of criminal misconduct.

WNBA players routinely play in international leagues during the league's offseason. Russia has one of the highest-paying leagues and was the favored destination for top players like Diana Taurasi, Sue Bird, Breanna Stewart and Griner. It’s lost its favored status following Griner’s arrest and 10-month imprisonment, as well as Russia’s ongoing war with Ukraine.

“What she went through, my heart goes out to her,” Thornton said of Griner’s plight.

But [*despite what happened to Griner*](https://apnews.com/article/brittney-griner-freed-viktor-bout-swap-us-russia-ee51f5c14f35dc4d4cf21224a8e44eaa), Thornton and Monique Billings, a forward for the Los Angeles Sparks, made the trek to Russia and played for Dynamo Kursk. Billings, 28, is entering her seventh WNBA season. She was not available for comment on this story.

It is unclear how much the WNBA duo earned in Russia, but they had company: Several other former WNBA players were in the league — including Megan Walker and Bria Holmes.

Griner, a Phoenix Mercury center entering her 12th year in the WNBA said she holds no ill will toward any American who plays in Russia. She's more concerned about their safety.

“I have an old teammate that’s playing on my old team,” Griner told the AP. “I’m not mad or angry. I’m worried about them because the threat is there. They can do whatever they want over there. I ask them to be careful. Let everyone know where they are at all times.”

Thornton said she mainly just went between the gym and her house, so she didn’t interact with many people outside of her team. Her teammates were very friendly and Dynamo Kursk officials made her feel safe, she said.

“I keep to myself. It’s rare I go out. I hung out with some of the girls on the team, they were very welcoming and understood our situation," said the 31-year-old Thornton, who is entering her 10th season in the WNBA. "Their families cooked dinner for us. That was a blessing.”

Thornton, who also has played in Egypt, South Korea and Italy, said she did venture out a few times to take a trip to the ballet and to see the Kremlin when her team played in Moscow. She was nowhere near the city when a [*terrorist attack killed more than 130 people in late March*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-attack-concert-hall-putin-islamic-state-f6f89c4c39965da6c11c3c111053f0e2).

“We heard about it, kind of like an eye opener to be aware of your surroundings,” Thornton said. “I don’t go out like that. I'm a low-key person. All I did was really go to the gym and go back to my house. I didn't go out too much. Took care of my business and came back home."

Thornton said overall she had a positive experience.

“I think it's just like when you go overseas to any other place, everyone has this (thought) about that," she said. "It’s just a regular country. I understand the ***politics***, but it was normal.”

Thornton is undecided on whether she'll return to Russia next year.

“Right now I’m not thinking about that," she said. "That season is done with and I’m focusing on the Liberty.”

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Associated Press Writer Lolita C. Baldor in Washington contributed to this report.

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AP WNBA: [*https://apnews.com/hub/wnba-basketball*](https://apnews.com/hub/wnba-basketball)

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