

Addressing the Inequalities in Professional Sport

Applied Policy Project



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Dedication

This APP is dedicated to the women worldwide that continue to face the challenges and inequities of a patriarchal society. We must always continue to fight for equality, whether that be for opportunities or investment. Every woman and every person deserves the dignity and respect of not being considered less than because of their gender, race, religion, sexuality, or anything else.

Disclaimers

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed by and are independent of the Women's National Basketball Players Association.

Honor Pledge

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Hannah L. Griffin

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Acronyms and Glossary

- Applied Policy Project (APP)
- Central Bargaining Agreement (CBA)
- Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
- Chief Financial Officer (CFO)
- Executive Vice President (EVP)
- Overton Window
 - The Overton window is a model and term for understanding how ideas within a society or organization can change or evolve over time . A shift in the Overton window can refer to a proposed alternative now due to the shift being feasible or now due to the shift not being feasible.
- Major League Baseball (MLB)
- Major League Soccer (MLS)
- National Basketball Association (NBA)
- National Women's Soccer League (NWSL)
- Senior Vice President (SVP)
- United States Men's National Soccer Team (USMNT)
- United States Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT)
- Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA)
- Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA)

Executive Summary

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) athletes continue to face inequities of monetary and support benefits. These range from travel accommodation, salaries, and revenue-share percentage to investment and visibility from media and owners and resource investment from the WNBA and individual team owners.

The following analysis assesses four policy alternatives to address the inequity in monetary and support benefits for WNBA athletes:

1. Change Air Travel from Commercial to Private
 - a. Presently, WNBA athletes travel on commercial flights nationwide for all travel. Private air travel yields positive mental and physical health benefits.
2. Alter the Revenue Sharing Model
 - a. Altering the revenue sharing model would significantly increase player salaries.
3. Advocating for Increased Resource Visibility from Media and Owners
 - a. If media and owners do not invest in the WNBA and its players, they will not reap the potential financial benefits from their investment.
4. Maintain the Status Quo
 - a. Requires monetary and support benefits remaining as they are, with the assumption that these benefits will improve with time.

Each of these alternatives have different fundamental tradeoffs in their approach to help the players of the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA). Each of these alternatives addresses the systematic inequalities that players of the WNBA continue to face, challenges that would be perceived as impossible to occur in a male dominated league and setting like the NBA. The four criteria used to evaluate each alternative are: equity, cost, effectiveness, and feasibility.

The analyses conducted by researchers suggests that a team is 60% more likely to lose a game when they travel to away games, which research links directly back to airport delays and other travel associated challenges. The final recommendation is to change air travel from commercial to private during the league season. Over half of all 30 WNBA games are played on the road. Therefore, players would spend a substantial less amount of time at the airport, with fewer connecting flights and shorter travel days. Not having charter flights is an equity concern for female athletes. This option presents the highest rate of effectiveness, high equity, moderate feasibility, and high costs. Furthermore, it

allows players more time for recovery and practice, while having access to nutritional meal options, privacy, and more room on the aircraft.

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate the systemic inequalities that not only the women of the WNBA face, but the women in all professional sports face. Female professional athletes face discrimination in their sport at acute rates. These inequalities and discrimination range from unequal resources and medical care to extensively lowered wages and unequal revenue sharing models to flying economy while male counter parts in the NBA fly private. The monetary benefit gap is a result of the gender pay gap around the globe. Women make 82 cents to every dollar that a man makes (Morad, 2021). If you take into consideration sports and the massive salaries that many men are making, the gender wage gap in professional sports is then exacerbated. The WNBA average salary is \$120,648 (Farkas, 2021). While the NBA average salary of \$8.32 million is a staggering 6796.09% more than the average WNBA player's salary (Gough, 2021). One may argue that the disparity is justified because of revenue, which in part is the reason how the NBA revenue share model elevates their salary to this level (Adelphi University, 2021). However, what I will be evaluating is that with unequal investment of resources, whether that be by the league with travel or by the media with media coverage and visibility, then there will continue to be monetary and support benefit gaps so long as there is not change. If the media were to cover the WNBA as much as the NBA, then this would yield significant positive results as research later in this report examines. Similarly, if the WNBA flies private as often as the NBA, then the quality of play on the court increases tenfold and the players physical and mental health will benefit (Mustafa, 2021; Ruthven 2019; Spruill, 2018; Thurber, 2017). Improving these conditions for the women of the WNBA would have a far reaching impact on all female professional sports (Waters, 2020).

When the WNBA finals or another large important sporting event is coming up, people pay attention. They pay attention to the game itself. They pay attention to the athletes. They pay attention to who these athletes are as people. Furthermore, they pay attention to the media and what the media is saying. A monetary and support benefit gap of any kind sends a message that gender inequality is acceptable. It sends the message that women have to be ten times as great as their male counterparts to receive a fraction of the benefits of their male counterparts. This prevalent issue goes further as professional women's sports leagues look to the WNBA for leadership. This issue has the opportunity to set the standards for equitable treatment, resources, investment, and benefits for female professional athletes across the globe.

Problem Statement

The monetary and support benefits that Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) athletes receive are drastically less than what male athletes in the United States receive.¹ The gender wage gap in the WNBA exacerbates investment inequalities, as male athletes in the National Basketball Association make anywhere from 15% to nearly 100% more than what a female professional basketball player makes in the WNBA (Adelphi University, 2021). Without immediate and decisive action, the lack of equitable investment and pay will continue to have a negative mental and physical impact on the players of the WNBA.

WNBPA Overview

The WNBPA's mission and core principles is to represent, engage, function, and take all steps to implement and carry out objectives to improve working conditions, economic benefits, job security, and to protect their athletes. This Association is made up of every WNBA player (WNBPA, n.d.). It is governed by Player Representatives from each WNBA team and an Executive Committee. The WNBPA is the first labor union that is composed of professional women athletes. The WNBPA was formed in 1998 and is responsible for handling collective bargaining agreement (CBA) negotiations (WNBPA, n.d.). A CBA is the way that the WNBA athletes work through their union, the WNBPA, to negotiate contacts with their employer, the WNBA, to determine the terms of benefits, pay, resources, travel, safety policies, and more. The WNBPA is a resource for current players, whether they are competing at home in the WNBA, or if they are competing internationally during the off season (WNBPA, n.d.). Furthermore, the WNBPA provides players with the opportunity to take part in union activities, such as team representatives positions, executive leadership roles, and worldwide community outreach initiatives (WNBPA, n.d.). The WNBPA is foundational to the support and advancement of the WNBA, whether that is through their part in CBA negotiations, agent certification, player programs, legal representation, or as a liaison with management; they are a key part to the success of the WNBA.

¹ Support references the benefits and investment that benefits that the players receive. This includes travel, media coverage, hotel accommodations, owner investment, and more.

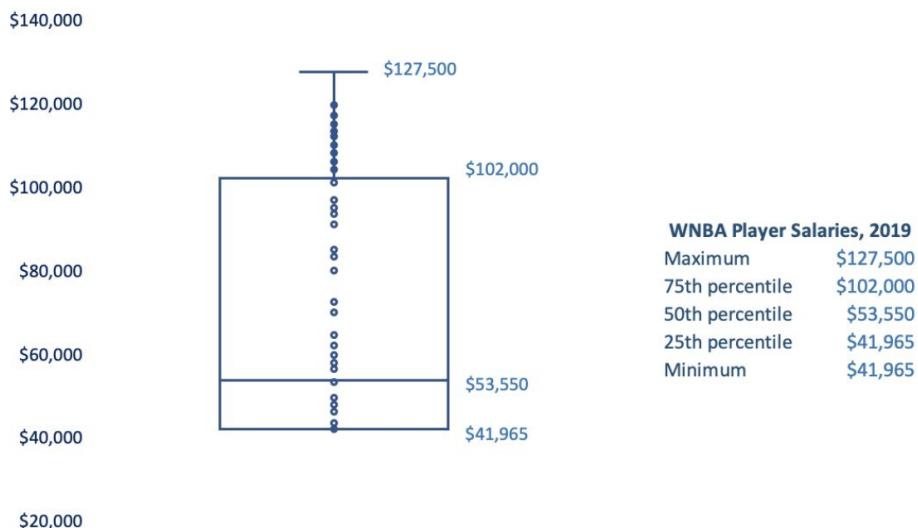
Background

CBA History and Advancement

Since the formation of the WNBA in 1996, there has been a historic precedence of disparity among benefits and pay (Munnelly, 2020). The WNBPA's inception in 1998, led to a creation of a CBA, which led to foundational and key advancement for athlete monetary compensation and benefits. At the time, this included a 75 percent minimum salary increase for the rookies, a 100 percent increase for veterans in their minimum salary, retirement plan set up, dental and health insurance year round, mid-season guaranteed contracts for rostered players, and player-identified licensed product royalties guarantee percentage for WNBA (Bowman, 2014). These were crucial wins for a league that was only three years into its history at the time.

Monetary and support benefits would not be addressed by the WNBA again, until they headed into CBA negotiations with the WNBPA in 2003. The next CBA was effective for two seasons before being extended an additional year into the 2007 season (Bowman, 2014). Players faced pushback from NBA commissioner at the time David Stern, who helped to found the WNBA in 1996 following the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. Stern and NBA partners had just provided the league with an additional \$12 million dollars of funding to help with its transition to an "individual ownership model" (Bowman, 2014). One where reliance upon the NBA by the WNBA becomes obsolete. Therefore, they were unwilling to supply additional resources and funds, and they threatened to cancel the season in 2003 if an agreement could not be reached by a set date (Bowman, 2014). This CBA agreement saw free agency and a 17 percent increase in how much teams could spend on salaries over four seasons (Bowman, 2014). Free agency is when a player is eligible to sign with a different team or even franchise. CBA's in the years to come saw guaranteed salary increases annually, player maximum and minimum salary increases, five year veteran guaranteed individual hotel accommodations, and a revenue model stipulated by if ticket sales teams accrued an excess of \$2.5 million, they would benefit (Bowman, 2014). The most prevalent CBA wins at the time came from league minimum increases, salary cap increases, and time-off bonus funds allotment (Bowman, 2014). Figure 1 outlines how the salary structure of the 2019 season was prior to the new 2020 historic CBA wins. The most recent CBA saw salary increases, pregnancy benefits, premium economy travel, no airline middle seats, and mental health support. Although huge wins, they still do not close many of the inequities that exist between the WNBA and other male professional leagues, specifically the NBA.

Figure 1: 2019 Salary Information



Source: Jenn Hatfield of High Post Hoops

Monetary and Support Benefit Gap Goes Deeper to Highlight Unequal Investment, Treatment, and Resources

Not having equal resources impacts an athlete's performance, their likelihood of leaving their sports, and it weighs heavily on an athlete's mental health (Taylor, 2016). Breanna Stewart is a WNBA player, who was voted league MVP in 2018. She tore her achilles in 2019 while playing for Dynamo Kursk, a Russian Basketball club (Lee, 2019). This club incentivized her with a \$1 million dollar annual salary to come and play. This was a 1,245.37% increase above her WNBA league salary of \$74,349 (Gough, 2021). The main reason for Stewart and other WNBA players playing abroad is for the financial security and benefit that an overseas salary can provide. However, this leads to exhaustion and injuries. The off season for a professional athlete is intended to give their bodies a rest from their grueling season (Lee, 2019). Playing abroad makes these athletes' bodies tired without a rest, leading to injuries such as the one that Stewart experienced (Lee, 2019). Stewart's injury had a negative effect on the WNBA as she was not able to play for the entirety of the 2019 season, and she was unable to return from injury to her club team, the Seattle Storm, until part way through the 2020 season (Lee, 2019). This placed her and her club at a disadvantage. Increased investment and WNBA salaries would

incentivize WNBA players to prioritize their health rather than financial benefits during the WNBA's offseason.

Scale and Scope of the WNBA - Revenue

When examining discrepancies between the National Basketball Association and the Women's National Basketball Association, it is vital to keep in mind the revenue that is generated by each organization's individual team. The average WNBA team generates \$60 million annually; however, it costs \$70 million. Therefore, the NBA has to subsidize the WNBA's net loss of around \$10 million per year since the league's inception in 1996 (Women's Basketball, 2021). The WNBA is not presently making money. However, one cannot expect the two leagues to compete with one another if equal investment and commitment is not there (Anzidei, 2021). Viewership is up, but investment and media coverage still lags in the dust (Anzidei, 2021).

Recent Investment

In 2022, the WNBA raised \$75 million in investment from more than two dozen investors. This is in an effort to improve the business model as players and the WNBPA continue to seek better monetary and support benefits (Hirsch & Lowe, 2022). This investment also will open up the opportunity for the financial capacity to welcome new expansion teams (additional WNBA teams), something players continue to call for. Notably, this is the first occasion that from investors, the WNBA has raised funds. This level of investment speaks volumes to how investors are eyeing that with their increased investment, and it will generate more interest, resulting in viewership and profits that will lead the WNBA to a more sustainable business model (Hirsch & Lowe, 2022). These funds have yet to be entirely allocated, presenting an opportunity for the WNBPA to advocate for their allotment in the manner that they deem fit. These investments will go a long way to inspiring further and future investment. Furthermore, with these funds in part being allocated to marketing and the league pass (where fans are able to subscribe to a service to watch out of market games not on television nationally), it is expected that fan engagement and fan bases will only continue to grow with each new investment. This will lead to



Source: Norm Hall/Getty Images, located from NY Times article by Lauren Hirsch and Shauntel Lowe, 2022

the increase of players' monetary and support benefits (Hirsch & Lowe, 2022).

Review of Literature

There has been extensive research and attention paid to the fight to change the WNBA's league investment due to their existing Collective Bargaining Agreement from changing air travel from commercial to private, to changing revenue sharing models, and increased resource visibility from media and owners. These have been ongoing contentious issues that have received extensive scholarly, media, public, government, and player attention since the WNBA leagues inception in 1996 (WNBA). The NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL and other professional male team sport athletes fly private for the simple reason that it improves their performance on the court, field, pitch, and ice. Revenue sharing models are high as players are the reason for the revenue, and owners and media invest because of the possible financial capital they can gain. By examining each of these leagues (NBA, NFL, MLB, & NHL), consideration will be given to the impact that the quality of play has as a result of increased investment. This will be taken into consideration when determining which policies will be the most effective at improving investment for the WNBA, and ultimately improving their lives as professional female athletes. Three areas have been identified to improve WNBA investment and policies including changing air travel from commercial to private, changing the revenue sharing model to be modeled off of the NBA's revenue sharing model, and increased resource visibility from media and owners. This section will review the existing literature in regard to all three of these areas and initiatives along with the research that is applicable to these discoveries.

Impact of Air Travel Accommodations

Significant scholarly attention has shown positive mental, physical, and quality of play benefits that result from athletes traveling private versus commercial by plane (Mustafa, 2021; Ruthven 2019; Spruill, 2018; Thurber, 2017). Below, Figure 2 explains how the WNBA league has control over whether its owners are allowed to fly their teams private or not (Mustafa, 2021; Spruill, 2018). The literature makes assumptions without adequate evidence that poor play is directly linked back to travel arrangements (Mustafa, 2021; Ruthven 2019; Spruill, 2018; Thurber, 2017). Some scholars and researchers have identified that players perform better and are happier in leagues that fly privately (Mustafa, 2021; Ruthven 2019). Researchers have identified that WNBA chartered flights are currently banned by the league as not all teams can afford them, but due to increased media, public, and player attention and pressure, these chartered flights are not out of reach for the WNBA (Mustafa, 2021; Spruill, 2018). Charter flights are presently only used for playoff travel for games. One study found that flying privately would allow players time for rest and recovery for their bodies to adjust to new time zones and place

the players in a position for optimal on court success (Spruill, 2018). This is outlined in Figure 2 through examination of the problem, issue, and impact. This study further examined how players lose sleep from commercial travel due to delays and being crammed into seats that are not meant for a player that is 6 foot 6 inches, which results in sleep debt. Sleep debt is when there can be catastrophic results from accumulated loss of sleep, and this poses a grave risk for athletes since these players are traveling and playing multiple games weekly (Spruill, 2018; Thurber, 2017).



Source: Michael Rand, Star Tribune

Another study found how one particular team lost a game after arriving late, before having to then travel home for a home game, which they almost missed entirely due to travel delays. This would have resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars of lost revenue for both teams and players involved (SB Nation, 2021). Intuitively, this research leads to the belief that if all WNBA teams were to fly privately, then the level of the game would increase and the health of the players would benefit. While much of the research has predictions about the benefits, there is little concrete evidence specifically in regard to the WNBA. However, the evidence is clear when examining how other leagues such as the NBA, NFL, MLB, and NHL leagues players and leagues have benefited as a result of exclusive private air travel (Thurber, 2017).

Figure 2: Analyzing Impact of Private Air Travel



Importance of the Revenue Sharing Model

Scholars have identified how altering the revenue sharing models for the WNBA to one similar to the one that the NBA uses would create equitable pay (Mathewson, 2020; Ellentuck, 2020, Robinson, 2021). One study reviewed how NBA players receive 50% of shared revenue within their league, whereas the WNBA receives 20% (Mathewson, 2020; Robinson, 2021). With this new revenue sharing model, the average WNBA player's salary would increase by 30% (Ellentuck, 2020; Robinson, 2021). Scholarly research examined how this new revenue sharing model would incentivize athletes to not play abroad in the off season and risk injury (Ellentuck, Hopkins, 2018; Mathewson, 2020). As mentioned above, many athletes make the decision to play abroad due to the favorable high six to seven figure salaries that they can find abroad in countries such as Belgium, Hungary, or Russia (Driver, 2019; Ellentuck, 2020; Hopkins, 2018; Mathewson, 2020). This study examined how in 2018, 90 of the 144 WNBA players chose to play overseas in

the offseason, which led to many high profile injuries and physical exhaustion for the athletes (Driver, 2019; Ellentuck, 2020; Hopkins, 2018). Another study examined how without this revenue sharing model, WNBA athletes will still not prioritize the WNBA compared to other premier women's basketball leagues that offer more competitive salaries, resources, and investment (Hopkins, 2018; Mathewson, 2020). Often, the more an athlete is paid, the higher valued and respected that they feel (Mathewson, 2020). The research is lacking in regard to how much this would influence players to prioritize their rest and recovery over an overseas paycheck and playing opportunity as they only have a finite playing window within their careers. Altering the revenue sharing model would be costly for owners; however, the long-term benefits outweigh the short term costs as players would return each season feeling mentally and physically ready to compete (Hopkins, 2018).

Importance of Resource Visibility and Investment

An additional body of research reviewed how women's sports are an untapped revenue stream and market. Research shows how leaders from marketing companies throughout the United States believe that the stakeholders on the commercial side of sports are always searching for the next frontier and the next opportunity to grow and expand revenue (Strauss and Hensley-Clancy, 2021). This study examined how many of the stakeholders on the commercial side of sports are in consensus that this next frontier is women's sports (Cohen, Strauss, and Hensley-Clancy, 2021; Cooky, 2021). An additional study examined how placing womens sports on big ESPN, not a paid subscription service, is just one step that investors in women's sports can do to help close the gender wage gap (Cooky, 2021; McCAnn, 2017). Collective bargaining agreements govern a wide range of conditions and terms of employment (Empowering Athletes, 2018). The players associations could bargain with their respective leagues mandating more advantageous TV licensing agreements that would place WNBA games on ESPN 1, rather than ESPN 3 or ESPN+ (Cooky, 2021; McCAnn, 2017). The evidence is sparse and unclear on how best to get buy-in from media outlets, other than by public social pressure that they must increase their efforts of equality in sports of covering men and women equally (Cooky, 2021). An additional study examined how putting all WNBA games on TV and not on paid subscription services, will demonstrate to owners that through increased investment, they can expect increased returns (Cooky, 2021). Despite sparse evidence, this can be accomplished through buy-in from media and league owners for increased investment.

Additional Information

The monetary and support benefits issue is affecting not only the WNBA, but thousands of female professional athletes throughout the United States (Waters, 2020). Title XI was created to correct the imbalances that exist in sports and to protect athletes from sex based discrimination in educational programs and institutions that receive any financial assistance from the government (The United States Department of Education). It was intended to create equality among male and female students. This was particularly important as men received the most athletic scholarships previously (Gaille, 2017). This opportunity increased and elevated women's participation in sports. By examining the University of Virginia male and female basketball team, it is evident how this has created equality as both the men and women fly a charter to every game. However, a recent alumni of the University of Virginia's basketball team noted that if it were not for Title XI, then there would be no way that the school would justify flying women on a chartered flight as they do not bring in the revenue that the men's team does (The United States Department of Justice). Although outside of college level sports, Title XI has no bearing on professional sports (Taylor, 2016). Much of the equality that women athletes become accustomed to in educational level sports, evaporates in professional sports as seen in the WNBA. This leads many women to not continue professional sports, as the resources are not equitable to their male counterparts (Taylor, 2016). When examining discrepancies between the National Basketball Association and the Women's National Basketball Association, one must remain cognizant of how the revenue generated by each organization's individual team will remain unequal, so long as there is unequal investment (Anzidei, 2021). Scholarly research displayed how despite viewership being up, the investment and media coverage still lags in the dust (Anzidei, 2021).

Through reviewing research, the prevalence of the importance of private air travel rather than commercial flights where the athletes fly economy premium prevailed. Research regarding altering the WNBA's revenue sharing model to one similar to that of the NBA's, demonstrated how this could significantly improve the lives and wellbeing of the athletes of the WNBA. Increasing league investment through increased resource visibility from media and owners exemplifies how in order for an organization to grow, it must first invest. Improving these three areas of the WNBA, will improve the lives of the 144 WNBA professional athletes.

Evaluative Criteria

The policy approaches listed later in this document are each an approach to mitigate the systemic inequalities within the WNBA; however, each have implications for the structure of the organization that is the WNBA. For many of the outcomes evaluated here, to measure quantifiable projections are neither plausible nor desirable as the travel budget that each individual league team uses varies from market to market. Rather, using these evaluative criteria will serve as a metric to observe and decipher fundamental tradeoffs that exist among different policy approaches and their outcomes. The evaluative criteria allow for a logical comparison of each policy approach, as this will later be used to construct an outcomes matrix before ultimately forming a recommendation. In evaluating the policy approaches that the WNBA may take to improve monetary benefits or investment inequalities within the WNBA, each of the following criteria will be used:

1. **Equity:** Equity is defined as the degree to which a proposed alternative treats WNBA and NBA players equitably. Equity will be assessed by examining how WNBA players' improved monetary or investment benefits compare to NBA players, while also evaluating female basketball players outside of the United States. Equity measures how each of the policy alternatives will impact the players benefits. The equity of each proposed alternative will be assessed as low, moderate, or high. High equity will be measured by equal treatment in comparison to NBA athletes. Medium equity will note treatment improvement. Low equity will represent equity of treatment being vastly different between the WNBA and NBA. The data used to evaluate each of the prior equity measures will come from publicly available data.
2. **Cost:** Cost is defined as the cost of implementing the alternative. Cost estimates for each alternative will be gathered from news sources along with any publicly available information. The cost of each proposed alternative will be estimated, as lowest, middle, or highest. Due to the broad range of data, there will not be an exact dollar figure used to assess cost in the outcomes matrix. Rather, costs will be ranked across the three alternatives.
3. **Effectiveness:** Effectiveness is defined as the degree to which a proposed alternative is successful in improving the monetary or investment benefits helping to ameliorate the inequalities that players of the WNBA face. An alternative will be highly effective if the alternative is able to fully achieve its intended impact, while also addressing many of the monetary and investment benefits. An alternative will be moderately effective if it is able to in a limited capacity achieve part of the

desired impact, while addressing some of the monetary or investment benefits. The alternative will be considered low in terms of effectiveness, if it is unable to effectively achieve its intended impact, while not addressing any of the monetary or investment benefits. The effectiveness of each proposed alternative will be measured and scored in an outcome's matrix, indicating the alternatives effectiveness as low, moderate, or high. An alternative will be considered highly effective if it is able to achieve its mission. To measure this, analysis will be employed for comparison of these proposed measures that are in effect in other professional leagues, largely the NBA.

4. **Feasibility:** Feasibility is defined as the degree to which an alternative can reasonably be implemented with and the degree there are potential barriers of league restrictions, owner cooperation, and third-party partnerships for implementation. Using publicly available information of past measures that were feasible in professional sports will allow for assessment of this criterion. Each of the proposed policy alternatives for feasibility require coordination, cooperation, and governance from the WNBA league administration, owners, media, as well as collaboration with other involved third parties. The feasibility criterion will evaluate the practicability of the WNBA being able to implement a proposed alternative, while analyzing the amount of control that they would have over the outcomes. This administrative feasibility criterion will qualitatively assess the level of which a proposed alternative is to overcome potential boundaries, hurdles, barriers, or challenges for implementation. These potential barriers include league restrictions, owner cooperation, and third-party partnerships. The feasibility of each proposed alternative will be assessed as low, moderate, high. A score of high feasibility means the alternative would be able to be readily implemented despite the prior discussed barriers. A score of medium feasibility means the alternative is able to be implemented with moderate push back and challenges. This score will keep in mind that success for the initiative will be more difficult and could result in not occurring. A score of low feasibility will reference the unlikelihood of the proposed alternative being able to be implemented due to potential barriers and challenges.

Policy Approaches and Analysis

Each of these alternatives have different fundamental tradeoffs in how they are helping the players of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). The alternatives that are being evaluated include changing air travel from commercial to private, altering the revenue sharing model, advocating for increased resource investment from media and owners, and maintaining the status quo. The four criteria that are being used to evaluate each alternative are: equity, cost, effectiveness, and feasibility. After analyzing the proposed policy approaches and criteria, a proposed recommendation will be made that evaluates the policy approach that most strongly addresses the inequalities that the players of the WNBA face.

Approach 1: Change Air Travel from Commercial to Private

Changing air travel from commercial to private yields positive mental, physical, and quality of play benefits (Mustafa, 2021; Ruthven 2019; Spruill, 2018; Thurber, 2017). Experts and stakeholders suggest that poor play is directly linked back to travel arrangements (Mustafa, 2021; Ruthven 2019; Spruill, 2018; Thurber, 2017). Flying on commercial airlines makes a team 60% more likely to lose their game when crossing time zones. The WNBA ownership is split 42.1 percent for the NBA and WNBA, with the additional 15.8% made up by a group of new investors. All male basketball teams fly privately. Therefore, as the NBA is a part of the ownership model of the WNBA, a way to accomplish private flights could be by placing public pressure on the NBA to provide and require equal resources for both leagues that they have ownership in (Lowe, 2022). Presently, the WNBPA's collective bargaining agreement requires teams to provide for premium economy seats and no middle seats (Lowe, 2022). The issue with this is that certain teams have a financial ability to afford this over others, as certain WNBA owners have lower financial capital than others. Therefore, the WNBA in the future should only accept potential new ownership individuals/groups who have increased financial means, along with a strong commitment to further invest in their players. Owners who do not have the financial capability to afford their players the ability to travel like true professional athletes, do not have a place in the WNBA or any league.

To achieve private air travel, the WNBA could form a coalition and partnerships with either a private air charter or commercial airline to charter flights at little to no price to the individual teams. Corporations are often open to sponsorships such as these, as they can then use the athletes in advertisements that drive up sales. However, this could pose a feasibility concern as the Liberty WNBA team stated in a recent report that they had secured a method for private flights for everyone for three full seasons. This offer was not accepted, as there were owners who had concerns that players would grow

accustomed to this change in policy and then would call for private travel to be permanent (Lowe, 2022).

Another direction the WNBA could adopt that is a partial solution, is that of a similar structure to Major League Soccer (MLS). The MLS uses a private air travel structure that includes four roundtrip private flights per season, excluding playoffs. This could be achieved at a limited cost to owners.

However, this partial solution would need to include airport lounge access, as one of the greatest concerns for the WNBA athletes is that they end up waiting in public airport waiting areas for hours on end. These athletes are public figures, idols to countless people worldwide, who are each easily recognizable by members of the public. Therefore, it is important for owners and league officials to acquire lounge access for every player and staff member of the WNBA when they are traveling commercially, so that they can get adequate mental and physical rest.²

Ultimately, changing air travel from commercial to private is in the best interest for players' safety, mental health, and physical health. Flying privately would allow players access to nutritious meals, comfortable accommodations, privacy from the public and media, as well as adequate recovery time (as players will recover quicker due to shorter flights, less connecting flights, and not sitting in airports for hours).

1. **Equity:** There is high equity associated with this alternative. This alternative will see the NBA and WNBA each receiving the same air travel accommodations.³ This alternative has high equity as it will give WNBA athletes the same platform to succeed by receiving the same level of support in regard to air travel and being treated equitably.
2. **Cost:** This alternative has high associated costs. This will cost each team an estimated \$1.7 million per season.⁴ Cathay Engelbert, WNBA Commissioner

² Note: Lounge access is multifaceted, as different airlines, airports, and lounge companies have different requirements and fees. Lounge access per visit fees range from \$25-\$75 in the United States. This could be a cost borne either by the owners or through corporate partnerships with these groups.

³ Note: This alternative will have a moderate level of equity if there are still a few commercial flights per season. This poses an equity concern, as NBA athletes will still be benefiting from travel benefits that members of the WNBA do not get to experience.

⁴ Note: the evidence is lacking about current travel costs for individual teams. The average round trip cost for an economy ticket in the United States was \$355 in 2019, with the average for a premium economy ticket in the United States at around \$600 (per the WNBPA CBA agreement, teams are required to fly their teams in premium economy and in no middle seats). Teams travel with extensive equipment and luggage, placing baggage cost estimates at upwards of \$45,000 for the duration of an entire season. Therefore, for a 20-member travel party, using these estimates for 15 games per season, this equates to around an

estimates that private air travel would cost upwards of \$20 million for all 12 teams for an entire season (Lowe, 2022). This would cost each team around \$1.67 million per season.

3. **Effectiveness:** This proposed alternative is strong regarding effectiveness, as it will effectively contribute to equitable travel and benefits for mental and physical health for members of the WNBA. The manner in which the WNBA travels should be the same way that the NBA travels in order to effectively achieve equality of travel benefits between the two leagues. This alternative would effectively level the playing field and the benefits of travel between the NBA and WNBA. Furthermore, this alternative would effectively benefit players' mental and physical health, while contributing to positive quality of play benefits. Private flights effectively allow players to spend less time traveling and in airports, and more time recovering, practicing, and relaxing. When a player is well rested, they are more likely to play better than when a player is exhausted, as an exhausted player is more prone to injury.
4. **Feasibility:** This is a moderately feasible alternative. This alternative will face pushback from numerous stakeholders, including the WNBA league administration and league owners. This is because certain teams cannot feasibly afford to fly their teams private for an entire season because some owners do not have the financial capital or desire to allow their teams to travel privately. This alternative will face pushback from WNBA leadership as they will not want to alienate these owners and risk the stability of the league by mandating private travel. The view of WNBA leadership is that if they "mandate" private air travel, it could do more harm than good, as it would be met with strong support from the players, but strong condemnation from multiple owners.

Approach 2: Alter the Revenue Sharing Model

Under this alternative, the WNBA, owners, and the WNBPA would bargain to come to a new agreement on a more beneficial revenue sharing model for players. Scholars have identified that altering the revenue sharing models for the WNBA to one similar to the one that the NBA uses would create equitable monetary benefits (Mathewson, 2020; Ellentuck, 2020, Robinson, 2021). This model includes how WNBA players of their respective team are entitled to an agreed upon percentage of team revenue from ticket sales, merchandise, and any other sale of goods and services. Altering the revenue sharing models for the WNBA to one similar to the one that the NBA uses would create

estimated travel budget of \$225,000. Using these estimates, the above associated costs would be around a 655.56% increase in associated travel costs.

more equitable pay among athletes of the WNBA and NBA (Mathewson, 2020; Ellentuck, 2020, Robinson, 2021).

Presently, NBA players receive 50% of shared revenue with their league teams, whereas the WNBA receives 20% of shared revenue with their league teams (Mathewson, 2020; Robinson, 2021). The WNBPA would need to directly partner with the WNBA league administration to achieve this new revenue sharing model. This would require a ratification and renegotiation of the WNBPA central bargaining agreement (CBA). This money would come directly from each individual team's administration. It is important to take into consideration that a large portion of the 50% of shared revenue that NBA players receive is from television contract broadcasting rights deals. Therefore, the WNBA, the WNBPA, and ESPN (which holds the broadcasting rights to WNBA games through the year 2025) would need to collaborate to find a mutually sustainable and beneficial agreement for all. Many owners would not be agreeable to increasing the profit share percentage to increase WNBA salaries by upwards of 30%, as the owners in the WNBA are not receiving comparable revenue for media rights (\$12 million) versus the NBA's (\$2.6 billion) annually (Young, 2021 & Paulen, 2012).⁵

1. **Equity:** There is strong equity associated with this alternative, as it would provide an equitable sharing model between the two leagues. This alternative takes into consideration the revenue differences that exist between the NBA and WNBA, as the NBA is substantially more profitable than the WNBA at present (in part due to a lack of investment from the league and owners). Having an equitable revenue share model would allow for the same revenue share percentage between the two leagues. This would take into consideration the current differences in profit between the two leagues, while still having the same revenue share percentage (which would increase WNBA athletes salaries by 30%).
2. **Cost:** This alternative has high associated costs. It would take 30% of the revenue from teams/ownership and give it directly to the players. This would be a sizable profit loss of around \$5 million per team annually.⁶
3. **Effectiveness:** This proposed alternative is estimated to be moderately effective. It would increase player salaries by 30%, but could effectively cause owners to not want to make further future investments in their players in terms of resources. This

⁵ *Note: both the WNBA and NBA are in the process of renegotiating their media rights deals. Presently, the NBA is working towards a media rights deal worth an estimated \$75 billion.

⁶ The WNBA generates around \$60 million in revenue. Divided across twelve teams, equates to \$5 million in revenue per team. This equates to \$1.5 million from WNBA revenue per season, being reallocated directly to the WNBA players. There are 12 WNBA players per team; therefore, each player would receive an additional \$150,000 in monetary compensation annually.

would be due to the owners having to incur a 30% net loss in revenue, as the players would be profiting from the increased revenue-share percentage.

4. **Feasibility:** This alternative has low feasibility. It will be challenging, but not implausible for the WNBPA, league, and owners to come to this agreement. There are many different stakeholders in this issue, but due to the influence of the players and the weight that they have with the public, it can be used to feasibly pressure other parties in opposition to this initiative. This alternative will face pushback from league owners, as the WNBA is yet to be a profitable league. It presently loses around \$10 million annually (hence, the NBA's involvement in subsidizing the WNBA). Therefore, this alternative is also likely to face pushback from the NBA as they are unlikely to want to have to subsidize the WNBA above any more than they already are.

Approach 3: Advocating for Increased Resource Visibility from Media and Owners

Women's sports are an untapped revenue stream and market by media and WNBA league owners. Leaders from marketing companies throughout the United States believe that the stakeholders on the commercial side of sports are always searching for the next frontier and the next opportunity to grow and expand revenue (Strauss and Hensley-Clancy, 2021). These leaders are in consensus that this next frontier is women's sports (Cohen, Strauss, and Hensley-Clancy, 2021; Cooky, 2021). Despite about 40% of sports participants being women, they receive a mere 4% of media coverage (Sport Action, 2019). Furthermore, WNBA games are scheduled at less desirable times, thus leaving their games to barely be discussed in the media (Sport Action 2019). The WNBPA can advocate with league partners to adjust game times, as this would have a positive financial benefit for the media, league owners, and the players (Sport Action, 2019). Placing women's sports on big ESPN, not a paid subscription service, is one moderate advancement forward that investors in women's sports can take to demonstrate investment (Cooky, 2021; McCAnn, 2017). The WNBPA could advocate and bargain through their collective bargaining agreement with the WNBA league to mandate more advantageous TV licensing agreements, as CBA's govern a wide range of conditions and terms of employment (Empowering Athletes, 2018). These agreements would include placing WNBA games on ESPN 1, rather than ESPN 3 or ESPN+ (Cooky, 2021; McCAnn, 2017). To get buy-in from media outlets, public social pressure that media and owners must increase their efforts of equality in sports of covering men and women equally could help achieve this initiative (Cooky, 2021). Placing all WNBA games on TV and not on paid subscription services show increased returns, as a direct result of increased resource visibility and media investment (Cooky, 2021). This approach can be

accomplished through strong advocacy by the WNBA to help with buy-in from Media and league owners for increased investment.

This alternative could drive up viewership and would lead to increased benefits for players, as TV rights deals are directly associated with the revenue sharing model. However, until media coverage is equitable between the two, one cannot accurately account for the result of the equitable distribution of coverage. This will be a challenge of feasibility for the WNBA to implement, as there is strong support for the NBA within sports fans nationwide who will not want to have less coverage of the NBA or have to pay for it behind paid subscription services (as the WNBA is not privy to the same resource investment from media and owners that the NBA benefits from which has given them the advantage in viewership). This alternative will come at a direct cost to the NBA, as it would likely require ESPN to move NBA games to its paid subscription service to accommodate more WNBA games. This would be met with pushback from a variety of stakeholder groups, most predominantly, the leadership of the NBA. Less viewership for the NBA will result in less advertising dollars as well as media rights deals. The NBA is a global sport and media business. Therefore, much of this alternative is reliant upon the NBA's decision of what they (if any) are willing to give up and agree to, in order to help their partner of the WNBA to grow and have a chance to see the level of success that the NBA does.

1. **Equity:** This alternative has moderate equity implications, as this would more equitably distribute media coverage. The media coverage for professional basketball is 22.7% for the WNBA, and the remaining 77.8% is for the NBA (Abrams, 2022). Further coverage would help to equitably cover the WNBA players and give them and their league the same opportunities to receive the same benefits that the NBA players and league receive. Increased media coverage will result in more viewership. This will lead to more attendance at games, merchandise sales, social media engagement. This will also at a grassroots level encourage more young girls nationwide to believe that they can be professional basketball players. It is not seen as a norm for young girls, but it is for young boys. This alternative works to also close the equity gap, as it encourages children no matter their gender, that they too can achieve what the professional athletes that they see in media coverage are achieving.
2. **Cost:** This alternative has high financial costs that media partners and the NBA would bear. These costs could be substantial for this group. For example, ESPN knows the profitability from their coverage of the NBA, as they pay the NBA around \$2.6 billion annually for media rights versus \$12 million for WNBA media

rights (Young, 2021 & Paulen, 2012). Less coverage of NBA games will cost ESPN money in terms of viewership and ESPN+ subscriptions. League partners, such as ESPN, would have to adjust their television schedule and commercial schedule to include additional WNBA games. This could lead to increased WNBA viewership, but frustration from NBA fans.

3. **Effectiveness:** This proposed alternative is low in terms of effectiveness. This could effectively lead to increased WNBA viewership, but could lead to frustration and backlash from NBA fans. The increased viewership could directly lead ESPN to have to pay the WNBA more annually for media rights. However, this still is not directly addressing many of the other inequities that other alternatives directly address, such as travel and revenue share percentages.
4. **Feasibility:** This alternative has low feasibility, as it will be met with likely opposition from media partners. There is low feasibility that the NBA would agree to having their games moved and experiencing any sort of revenue loss, regardless of the NBA's investment and ownership with the WNBA. Their first priority will remain with the NBA, rather than with what they may consider their subsidiary of the WNBA. However, it will be met with widespread support from WNBA leadership, players, and owners.

Approach 4: Maintain the Status Quo

Maintaining the status quo would involve monetary benefits and levels of investment continuing as they are with the assumption that benefits could gradually improve over time. These benefits would gradually improve in regard to the revenue share model with the assumption that as revenue from ticket sales, merchandise, and other ventures increases, players will have improved monetary benefits. Presently, players frequently use social media as an avenue to connect with the public about the inequities that they face regarding investment inequalities. Therefore, media outlets and owners could make the decision to increase their investment for fear of public reprisal and backlash as players continue this venture.

1. **Equity:** There is low equity associated with this alternative, as it will maintain the present inequities between the WNBA and NBA. This option will not be working towards any future achievements or advancements regarding equality between the two leagues.
2. **Cost:** This alternative has low associated costs. By maintaining the status quo, teams will continue to incur the same costs as they do at present. Specifically for travel, they will continue to incur the costs for a 20-person travel team flying

commercial. Regarding the revenue sharing model and investment from media and owners, this will continue unchanged.

3. **Effectiveness:** This alternative has a low rate of effectiveness, as it will effectively continue to follow present norms, rules, and regulations of league practices.
4. **Feasibility:** This is a highly feasible alternative, as it will not take substantial additional effort for current conditions to continue as they are at present.

Outcomes Matrix

	Equity	Cost	Effectiveness	Feasibility
Alternative 1: Change Air Travel from Commercial to Private	High	High	High	Medium
Alternative 2: Alter the Revenue Sharing Model	High	High	Medium	Low
Alternative 3: Advocating for Increased Resource Visibility from Media and Owners	Medium	High	Low	Low
Alternative 4: Maintain the Status Quo	Low	Low	Low	High

Table Note

The cells highlighted in green represent beneficial outcomes. The yellow accounts for ambiguous/moderate results. The red accounts for bad/poor impact.

Recommendation

Based on the projected outcomes from the analysis, I recommend **Option 1, changing air travel from commercial to private**. This alternative has the highest positive assessment of equity and effectiveness, while being moderately feasible. However, this alternative would lead to high financial costs. In comparison to the other alternatives, this alternative provides the best opportunity and probability for positive change that will directly impact and benefit the players. This approach will be multifaceted in that it will require coordination between WNBA leadership, owners, and airline companies. The WNBPA should encourage the WNBA to partner with the Liberty to accept their proposal to establish private air travel for 3 consecutive years for teams. Following this three-year term, individual teams would be required to bear the burden of this associated cost. This would give teams an additional three years of projected growth, where the monetary benefits of this period of time could be applied to the change in travel costs. Furthermore, as future owners are screened to join the WNBA, they must have the financial capacity to afford increased resources and investments for teams, such as with private air travel. It is pertinent that there is equitable investment of resources, so that the monetary benefit and investment inequalities gap can gradually cease to exist. Changing the way that professional women athletes travel, to a manner similar to their male counterparts, is a large step in the fight for equality by giving these athletes equitable travel benefits to their male counterparts to succeed. Improving these conditions for the women of the WNBA is one step in the right direction for outlining that inequality of any kind will not be tolerated in professional sports.

Implementation

Implementing this alternative in a quick and effective manner has the potential to provide tangible monetary and investment benefits to the athletes of the WNBA, as well as set a precedent of equality for female athletes nationwide. To achieve implementation of private air travel for the WNBA, the WNBPA administration should begin advocacy efforts and sponsorship conversations directly with corporate airline partners. There is a “do good to feel good” motto that the WNBPA has the opportunity to take advantage of with these partners. Specific people to reach out to include C-Suite level executives with American Airlines, Delta Airlines, and United Airlines, as these are the three largest airlines in the United States, each of which presently operate and have a presence in team markets.⁷

⁷ Note: The C-Suite Executive named directly are the same individuals to reach out to regarding airport lounge access. While remaining cognizant that private air travel is truly the only and most optimal outcome,

American Airlines

- At American Airlines, Steve Johnson (Executive Vice President and Strategic Advisor), Derek Kerr (Vice Chair, Chief Financial Officer), and Robert Isom (Chief Executive Officer) are the three people who have the ability to approve an American Airlines charter sponsorship (American). It is important to note here that Isom is new to the position of CEO at American, having joined recently in March of 2022; therefore, this could present an opportunity to begin new discussions on what a partnership could look like.

Delta Airlines

- At Delta Airlines, Ed Bastin (CEO), Tim Mapes (Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing and Communications Officer), and Steve Sear (EVP- Global Sales and Distribution) are the executive point of contacts regarding a corporate partnership (Delta). As CEO, Bastin remains committed to Delta's shared values of respect, perseverance, honesty, integrity, and servant leadership, many of the same values that align with the WNBA. Furthermore, Sear is responsible for relationships and programs with organizations, making him a strong potential target and point of contact for forging a WNBA and Delta partnership. Furthermore, Delta has a history of airline sponsorships for sport organizations from the Atlanta Braves Major League Baseball Team to Team USA (Delta, 2021).

United Airlines

- At United, Scott Kirby (CEO), Josh Earnest (SVP and Chief Communications Officer), and Brett Hart (President) are the points of contact to begin sponsorship conversations (United). Earnest works closely with leaders across United and other organizations to help shape United's public image, which would include partnerships. Furthermore, United was the airline partner and sponsor of Team USA for four decades until the Tokyo Olympics in the summer of 2021 (United). Therefore, the conclusion of this partnership opens the door for a new sports partnership, such as the WNBA. The WNBA should emphasize how these partnerships would also benefit American, Delta, or United in order to get a deal across the finish line.

The next step in this process would be to meet with the WNBA Board of Governors to discuss this proposal further. This board is conducted by majority team owners and

it will take time for implementation. In the meantime, securing airport lounge access is key for players through these executives at American Airlines, Delta, and United.

league commissioner (Cathy Englebert), as this group is responsible for any relevant rule changes. Due to the divide among the ownership about opinions regarding private versus commercial travel, garnering a majority within this organization is pertinent in order to move this initiative over the finish line.

The next step in the implementation of this initiative would be goal setting. Goal setting for the future and the next areas that WNBA athlete investment benefits can be improved should continue. Adopting new goals or policies that work toward improving and working towards true equality, must remain at the forefront of the WNBA and WNBPA's focus in evolving this league.

Implementation Considerations

Feasibility

To achieve implementation, private air travel will have to be mandated by the WNBA administration. The administration of the WNBA will then have to work in collaboration with the WNBPA, as any change in policy will affect the CBA and need to be agreed upon. This is due to how the present CBA that was agreed upon in 2020 runs through 2027. There were many gains achieved through the 2020 CBA. However, league travel continues to be an issue causing disagreement among different stakeholders and groups. A lingering feasibility issue for the WNBA as it heads into its 26th season is there is a disconnect between older owners who want the league to continue the conservative approach that has defined the league's history and new owners who enter this league committed to investing in these players and league to signal confidence of growing the game and league worldwide (Medgal, 2022). A potential way to get around the CBA is by the WNBA mandating the requirement for private air travel, but the question remains who and how will this be funded?

Cost

Professional sport league finances worldwide are enhanced with a variety of sponsorships from Google, to Nike, to Amazon, and most importantly here are the major airlines such as Delta Airlines and American Airlines. Airline sponsorships range from providing for commercial flights to private charters. A specific example includes how Delta provides the Major League Baseball team, the Atlanta Braves, with exclusive team charters for each of their 81 away games.⁸ Garnering buy-in from airline sponsors for charters has proved to be difficult according to WNBA commissioner Cathy Englebert, as she recently stated that no major sponsors have stepped up. However, if the WNBA

⁸ This equates to 162 charters round trip. Whereas, the WNBA would only require for their 16 away games, 32 charters round trip. This is about an 80% decrease.

secured an airline charter sponsorship where the cost was divided evenly between individual league teams and airline charters, this could garner increased feasibility.⁹ Furthermore, the WNBA could allocate a portion of the recent \$75 million in raised investment from the new group of investors to help cover the costs of this initiative.

Owner Buy-In

The sustainability of this initiative is important to keep in mind. Once players receive continued access to private charters and the array of health benefits that it provides, they will not want to have to return to commercial flights. Therefore, owner buy-in is an essential part for the sustainability of this initiative. The league is presently divided between the teams that want and can afford to provide for private travel, versus the teams that do not want and either can but choose not to or cannot afford to provide for private travel. Liberty owners, Joe and Clara Wu Tsai, have been leading voices on this issue, going as far as reportedly presenting a plan that would give all teams private flights for three years at no cost to individual teams. This initiative faced push back from teams opposed to private travel, as they were concerned that players would grow accustomed to this initiative. This speaks to their lack of trust, faith, and commitment to bettering league travel benefits in the years to come. A fund could be allocated out of the recent \$75 million in raised investment to annually give teams a set figure to help offset private travel, as this would work to garner owner buy-in while they financially adjusted to this new policy. To achieve this initiative, the WNBPA needs to lobby individual owners, as this will help them to garner majority support and buy-in from the WNBA Board of Governors, as well as the NBA Board of Governors.

Conclusion

There is a substantial equity gap between the NBA and WNBA. One way to begin to close this gap is through private flights. Players need private flights to preserve their mental and physical health. This initiative will only contribute to increasing the quality of play on the court. An elevated level of play will result in more viewership, which will result in better attendance, merchandise sales, and sponsorships; all of which will result in elevated profits for the WNBA and individual teams. Investing in these players through private air travel has quantifiable benefits. For implementation, it is necessary that this is stressed to owners by the WNBPA, WNBA, athletes, public, and media in order to gain

⁹ Delta airline charter costs begin at \$5,995 per hour. This fee would range when divided evenly among parties for shorter trips of just an hour and up to 5 hours for cross-country games from as little as \$2997.50 to \$14,987.50 one way. With these cost estimates, the costs for private air travel would be a moderate increase over the present estimated season long costs for commercial travel.

➤ Note: This was estimated in a prior document to be around \$225,000.

buy-in support. This league will not grow and see the profits that teams want to see without elevated investment. This initiative is possible. The Overton window is presently open for this initiative to become a reality as it continues to garner increased attention nationwide. It would send a message that equitable resources and investment sets these women up for the kind of success that their male counterparts enjoy. Furthermore, it outlines that inequality of any kind will not be tolerated in professional sports.



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