

The San Jose Lasers:
A New Beginning

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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Table of Contents

Selection

Page

1. Preface	1
2. The ABL: A League of New Beginnings	2-3
3. The San Jose Lasers	4-5
4. The Coaches	6-7
5. Team Members of the San Jose Lasers	8-14
6. Conclusion	15
7. Endnotes	16-17
8. Bibliography	18-19

Preface

The history of women's basketball in the United States has survived many obstacles over the years and has peaked in the last three years. It has now arrived in San Jose in the form of the "San Jose Lasers." The Laser's are the first women's professional basketball team in San Jose, and there was much excitement and anticipation for the initial season to the start which commenced in October, 1996. Finally fans had the opportunity to witness history and get acquainted with the players, coaches, and owners of the Lasers.

The ABL: A League of New Beginnings

The American Basketball League (ABL) is a league that was formed in September of 1995, to showcase the most outstanding players and to give women athletes a chance to compete and fulfill their dreams of playing basketball in their own country. The ABL was developed with the help and support of America's top players and was founded by Gary Cavalli, Anne Cribbs, Steve Ham, and Bobby Johnson who all share the same interest in women's sports. "The "Founding Players" of the ABL announced the formation of the league at a press conference in September of 1995." (1) The league's first game took place a year later on October 18, 1996, in San Jose, California. The regular season consisted of forty games from mid-October to mid-February. It ended in early March after the Championships. The players of this new league's salaries range from \$40,000 to \$125,000. If the ABL is successful, and continues to prosper, each player will eventually get to own 10% of the league.

The ABL could not have begun at a better time. With the United States women's 1996 Olympic basketball team having won a gold medal, people were becoming more enthusiastic about watching women play. "In fact, the '96 NCAA women's championship game outdrew the men's final and had the highest television rating in history for a women's game." (2) Although women's basketball has become successful in the past several years, there are still many obstacles the league faces. Will people come to the games? Will people watch the games on television when they are broadcasted? One question that is on the minds of many people is whether the league will last long, or whether it will fail. "In life you have

to take chances. The ABL has taken a chance." (3) The players of the ABL have worked hard to get to where they are today. They are all on a mission and have a point to prove to everyone. "These women will not get a second chance to make a first impression." (4)

The San Jose Lasers

The San Jose Lasers were established on September 26, 1995. They are one of the eight teams of the American Basketball League. "San Jose got a team in part because the Stanford women's basketball team, coached by Tara VanDerveer, has been so successful, sometimes out drawing the men's team." (5) The Lasers attracted many Stanford fans because they have several ex-Stanford stars including Jennifer Azzi, who was on the 1996 United States women's Olympic basketball team and was also the first player the Lasers drafted.

The team colors of the Lasers are black, white, silver, and green. Their logo is a beam of light moving horizontally through the word "LASER" with a ricochet of light going vertically through a basketball popping off of a printed board. Christine Forter, the first-ever General Manager for the San Jose Lasers, has been a big impact in the team's success. She has gotten many people to support the San Jose franchise. The Lasers were coached by Jan Lowrey who is ranked 25th in career victories among all active women's collegiate basketball coaches. The assistant coach is Basketball Hall-of-Famer Denise Curry.

The Lasers consist of eleven top women athletes: point guard Jennifer Azzi; center Val Whiting; center Kimberly Wood; guard and forward Sheri Sam; center Anita Kaplan; guard Sonja Henning; forward Trisha Stafford; guard and forward Samantha Williams; guard Jenni Ruff; and Shelley Sandie who plays the forward and guard positions.

The San Jose Lasers played their first game on October 18, 1996, in San Jose against the Atlanta Glory. It was also the inaugural game. The turnout was

outstanding! "It was a sold out crowd with over 4,500 people attending." (6) The fans were into the game from the beginning until the time on the clock said 0:00. The game concluded with the San Jose Lasers thrashing the Atlanta Glory 78 to 70. The post game was just as exciting as the pregame. Jennifer Azzi and Teresa Edwards (both members of the United States 1996 women's basketball team) made speeches, and gladly signed autographs for the young eager kids awaiting them.

The Lasers started off the season fittingly, until their star player Jennifer Azzi dislocated her shoulder and had to undergo arthroscopic surgery. She sat out the remainder of the season. The team finished with a record of eighteen wins and twenty losses. They finished second in the Western Conference. Their season came to an end when they were swept in the playoffs by the Columbus Quest. Although they lost, they were still winners in many young girls eyes in San Jose. The Lasers gave them something new to look forward to every year.

The Coaches

Jan Lowrey

Jan Lowrey, the first-ever coach of the San Jose Lasers, is a native of Fort Worth, Texas. She is also the three-time All District player for Boswell High School. She attended Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, in 1974 after transferring from Weatherford Junior College. Lowrey played college basketball for the Tarleton TexAnns and was the Most Valuable Player her senior year. She received her bachelor's degree in physical education from Tarleton State in 1976, and took over the job of head coach of the girls' program that fall. Lowrey coached at Tarleton State University for two decades and has compiled an overall record of 403 wins and 225 losses. (7) The Tarleton's basketball program became the second most successful program in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and is listed among the nation's top fifteen programs of all time.

During her twenty years at Tarleton State University, Lowrey conducted Tarleton to thirteen Texas Intercollegiate Athletic Association (TIAA) Championships in fifteen years, eleven consecutive NAIA Division II National Basketball Championships in 1992 and third in 1993. In fourteen of her twenty seasons as coach, the Tarleton TexAnns won twenty or more games. (8)

Though Lowrey unquestionably knows how to win, the Lasers relieved her of her coaching duties at the end of the season and are looking to find a replacement for her soon.

Denise Curry

Denise Curry is an excellent assistant coach for the San Jose Lasers because not only has she had experience in coaching (she was assistant coach for the University of California, Berkeley) but she has played at both collegiate and professional levels.

Curry spent four years playing collegiate basketball for UCLA from 1977 thru 1981, and spent eight seasons playing professionally in Europe from 1982 thru 1990. She played in Germany, France and Italy also. While playing in France from 1985 to 1989, her team won the French National Championship in 1986 and '87, and she was also voted the French Player of the Decade for the 1980s. (9)

During her collegiate career, Curry made the 1978 National Championship Team and was selected as a Kodak-All American three consecutive years in a row. She averaged a double-double throughout her career with twenty four points and ten rebounds. Her jersey was retired at the 25th anniversary of Pauley Pavillion along with the jerseys of Bill Walton, Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Ann Meyers. Curry's knowledge of the game has helped the Lasers out in all perspectives and will continue to do so in the future.

Team Members of the San Jose Lasers

Jennifer Azzi

Jennifer Azzi was born on August 31, 1968, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. She became known to America when she played college basketball at Stanford University from 1987 to 1990. In her four years at Stanford, Azzi accomplished many things. In 1988, '89 and '90, she was named to the First Team All-Pac-10. (10) Her biggest achievement came in 1990 when she led the Stanford Cardinals to their first-ever NCAA Championships. Not only did she win a championship, but she was also named the Naismith Player of the Year, the MVP of the 1990 NCAA Final Four, the Pac-10 Player of the Year, the MVP of the NCAA West Regional, and was selected to the Kodak All-American first team. (11) Azzi is also among Stanford's top ten leaders in the following: points scored (fourth); points per game (fifth); field goal percentage (tenth); three point field goals made (first); assist (first); steals (second) and free throw percentage (eighth). (11) Her success does not stop there though, it keeps on going.

Jennifer spent five seasons playing professional basketball overseas after college. She was also a member of the 1996 United States women's team that went on to win a gold medal. After the Olympics were over, she got ready to play for the ABL whose games were to soon begin a few months later. Azzi is probably the most well known Laser around the Bay Area. Since she is well known, more people came out to see her play. She brings publicity to the Lasers as well as the ABL. She is also one of the "Founding Players" of the league. Azzi started off her season as a Laser even better than she ended her college career. In only eleven games, she averaged 16.6 points, had 52 assist and 20 steals. (12) Then tragedy struck. On Thursday,

November 14, 1996, the Lasers were scheduled to play the Portland Power. Late in the fourth quarter of the game, Azzi went up for a layup, and fell on the court landing on her right shoulder. She underwent arthroscopic surgery at Stanford's Ambulatory Surgery Center and had to sit out for the remainder of the season. (13) Though her presence was not felt on the court, it was definitely felt on the bench. Jennifer Azzi is a team player. She is the heart of the Lasers.

Val Whiting

Valeria "Val"Whiting was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on April 9, 1972. She went on to attend Stanford University after high school. Val has had many achievements in her collegiate career. She was a member of Stanford's 1990 and 1992 NCAA Championship teams. In her first year at Stanford, Val was named the National Freshman of the Year, the Pac-10 Freshman of the Year, and was selected to the Pac-10 All Freshman Team. (14) Val had a lot of success her junior and senior years also. She started in all thirty three games her junior year and led the Cardinals to their second NCAA Championship title. In thirty of her thirty three games, she scored in double figures. She averaged a team high of 18.5 points per game (ppg), 9.1 rebound per game (rpg), and 1.4 blocks per game (rpg). (15) In her senior year in 1993, her team won the Pac-10 Championships for the fourth consecutive year in a row, but they did not go on to win the Championships.

At Stanford, Whiting holds records for a numerous amount of things. She holds the record for the most career points, rebounds, field goals attempted, and most career games played.

Whiting, along with Jennifer Azzi, was one of the Lasers two premier players. Whiting proved her "premier" status by averaging 12.6 ppg along with 6.5 rpg for the lasers. Her presence on the was a threat to all opponents and will continue to be

in the near future.

Sonja Henning

Sonja Henning, one of the four Stanford stars that played for the Lasers, was born on October 4, 1969, in Racine, Wisconsin. She played for the Stanford Cardinal team from 1988 to 1991. Like all the other Stanford stars, Henning had much success also. She played on the Cardinal 1990 NCAA Championship team along with current teammates Jennifer Azzi and Val Whiting. She still holds the record for the most career steals with 280, and the most assist in one season with 237. (16)

During her college career, Henning received many awards. In 1988, she was named team MVP, and she was named the National Freshman of the year by the Women's Basketball News Service. (17) In 1991 Henning was named the Pac-10 Player of the Year, and was selected as a Kodak All-American. (18) After graduating from college in 1991, Henning spent on year playing professional basketball in Sweden. Afterwards, she went back to the United States and attended Duke University and became a labor law and employment associate.

Sonja returns to the game of basketball after a four year resting period. A four year break did not affect her game much at all though. She went on to average 7.6 ppg with ninety five steals, 134 assist for the season.

Jamillah Lang

Jamillah "J" Lang was born and raised in Kansas City, Kansas, on June 23, 1972. She played collegiate basketball for the University of Colorado. During three out of four seasons at Colorado, Lang's team were ranked on the top twenty nationally and also appeared in three NCAA Tournaments. As a freshman in college, she saw a great deal of playing time. She is ranked number five among all the freshman at Colorado University in both scoring and rebounding. In her

sophomore year she led the Buffalo's in scoring averaging 14.3 ppg. Her senior year was the best and most successful year of all. She averaged 19.2 ppg. Her team was ranked fourth in the nation but did not go on to win the NCAA Championships.

When her collegiate career ended, she went overseas to Stockholm, Sweden, and played basketball for the J.B. Knights. She spent the past year ('95-'96) as a youth counselor for troubled kids in Denver, Colorado.

As a Laser, Lang has not seen very much playing time and has not done as well as she probably could, but her contribution to the team was well utilized.

Jenni Ruff

Jenni Ruff was born on September 12, 1974 in Mossyrock, Washington. She played her collegiate basketball career in Washington at Washington State University. She attended WSU from 1993 to 1996. In her freshman year, she played in all twenty seven games. She started in all twenty six games her sophomore year. As a junior, Ruff led her team in scoring averaging 14.8 ppg. Her senior year was the most beneficial out of all her years at WSU. She scored thirty points or more seven times, and had a twenty five or more in twelve games. She also had thirteen double-doubles, and scored ten points or more in every game. (19) Ruff finished her college career ranking second in points scored, three point field goal percentage, and free throws made.

Sheri Sam

Sheri Sam, the youngest member of the Lasers, was born on May fifth, 1974 in Duson, Louisiana. She attended Vanderbilt University. Sam had a limited amount of playing time her freshman year, but her sophomore year, she led the her team in rebounding as well as assist. She scored in double figures thirty three times out of

thirty five games. She finished off that season with ten double-doubles.

When Sam graduated from college, she decided that she wanted to play professional basketball for the ABL. Her first year as a pro has been great. In the inaugural game of the ABL, Sam scored a game high of thirty five points to lead the Lasers to their first ever victory. She average a team high of 14.4 ppg this past season along with eighty one steals and 124 assist. (20) Sam is a major factor in the Lasers success. She is all for women's basketball and hopes to be a positive role model for young girls who would like to play this sport for a living.

Shelley Sandie

Shelley Sandie's career has been a bit different from the other Lasers. At the age of fifteen, she began playing in the Australian Women's National Basketball League (AWNBL). She played in a total of 232 games. Before she signed with the Lasers, Sandie played for the Sydney Flames winning Most Valuable Player honors in 1993, '94 and in '95. In 1994, she was the leagues MVP as well as their top scorer. She ranked in the AWNBL's All-Time Top Ten in the following: scoring (eighth); foul shooting percentage (third); three point shooting percentage (sixth); assist (seventh); steals (eighth); and rebounding (tenth). (21)

Sandie signed with the Lasers after the beginning of the season to replace the injured Jennifer Azzi. She is versatile and can play both the off guard and small forward positions. She has contributed to the Lasers scoring wise averaging 9.2 ppg. Her basketball wisdom has greatly benefited the Lasers as well.

Anita Kaplan

Anita Kaplan's basketball career began at Stanford University. She played for the Cardinals from 1991 to 1995. Out of all her four years at Stanford, Kaplan's team

were Pac-10 Champions three times. They also won a National Championship in 1992. As a sophomore, she averaged 10 ppg and 5.1 rpg. In her junior year, Kaplan led her team in scoring with an impressive 16.7 ppg.

Her career as a Laser has been extremely good. She is one of the five starters for the team putting in a good 9 points per game and pulling down an average of 5 rebounds. Kaplan is one of the youngest members on the Lasers, so her skills and playing ability are yet to be seen. She hopes that women's basketball is headed in the right direction and will do her best to help the ABL grow.

Kimberly Wood

Kimberly Wood, a native of Oak Forest, Illinois, was born on September 16, 1972. She played college basketball and graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (UWGB) in 1994. Wood was known at UWGB for having so many blocked shots. She led her team in blocked shots all for years that she attended college there. In her both senior and junior year, Woods led her team in scoring and rebounding. She also led her team in its first and only NCAA Tournament bid in 1994.

After finishing college, Woods went on to get a degree in Communications and Arts. She also coached girls and boys basketball before joining the San Jose Lasers.

Trisha Stafford

Out of all the Laser players, and all the Laser teammates that attended school in California, there is only one native. Trisha Stafford. Stafford's mother gave birth to her on November 11, 1970, in Los Angeles, California. She went on to go to school at the University of California at Berkeley from 1989 to 1992. Her basketball

skills were decent in her freshman and sophomore year, but she really improved her junior year when she almost averaged eighteen points per game. In her senior year, senior year, not only did she average 22.3 ppg, but she also grabbed down 8.7 rpg. (22)

After completing school at the University of California, Stafford went on to play professional basketball overseas in Spain, Italy, Israel, and Brazil. When the ABL was set to start, she came back to the states to play.

As a Laser, Stafford averaged 23.9 minutes per game and scored 11.2 points per game. She also had the third most assist on the team with ninety one.

Samantha Williams

Samantha Williams, one of the Lasers' players to enter the ABL directly from college, went on to play basketball for Auburn. She was well known at Auburn for her ability to shoot three pointers. She holds the record at Auburn with 161 three pointers made out of 500 attempts.

Samantha has not gotten a great deal of playing time as a Laser, but the minutes will increase with time. She is one of the youngest players on the team, so her skills are yet to be proven.

Conclusion

The San Jose Lasers have brought much joy and excitement to the San Jose area. They have taken women's basketball to new heights. Now little girls do not have to imitate the moves of famous men basketball players, such as Micheal Jordan or Grant Hill, but instead can model after Jennifer Azzi or Sherri Sam. These women have changed the game of basketball, the sport that was invented by men, but has been perfected by women.

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