



Wasserman

PROFILE

CASE STUDIES

ARTICLES

ABOUT

Wasserman is a global sports, entertainment, and lifestyle marketing agency with expertise in creating connections between brands, properties, talent, and consumers. Today, Wasserman offers global expertise in Athlete Management, Marketing, and Media.

<http://www.teamwass.com>

Los Angeles, United States

Founded: 2002

Staff: 850

[More](#)



This promoted content is produced by a publishing partner of Open Mic. A paid-for membership product for partners of The Drum to self-publish their news, opinions and insights on thedrum.com - **Find out more**

NEWS

Why the WNBA has the Audacity to Lead a

Movement

by Nefertiti Walker

3 November 2020 17:55pm



By Nefertiti A. Walker, PhD (Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts, Amherst and member of Wasserman's "The Collective Think Tank") and Amira Rose Davis, PhD (Assistant Professor, Penn State University)

WNBA players have wrapped up this season, but their grind off the court continues.

As Nneka Ogumike [describes](#), "The reason why you see us engaging and leading the charge when it comes to social advocacy is because it is in our DNA." Throughout the WNBA's existence, sexism and racism have colluded in the erasure of women, particularly Black women, as leaders of the social justice movement in sport, despite the players' early, provocative and public campaigns against racism.

It is high time we give them their flowers, and [in the words of Aerial Powers](#), "put some respect" on their names.

We are in a moment of racial reckoning. Black people are being murdered, and the pandemic has forced us to acknowledge the inequities that have plagued us for 400+ years. The WNBA is best positioned to navigate the sensitivities of this

moment because they have been here before. In the summer of 2016, months before Colin Kaepernick took a now-infamous knee, WNBA players spoke up forcefully about police brutality. In Minnesota, following the murder of Philando Castile, the Lynx wore black shirts proclaiming “Change Starts with Us” and demanding “Justice and Accountability”. Soon, the Indiana Fever, New York Liberty and Phoenix Mercury joined, wearing black shirts and refusing questions in pressers unless they regarded social justice. Initially, the league moved to fine the players and organizations. But the players were steadfast. When Tina Charles accepted her Player of the Month award, she did so in a black shirt and publicly affirmed athletes’ support for Black Lives Matter.

Charles then took it a step further, decrying the league’s fines and insisting that the WNBA see racial justice as important as Breast Cancer Awareness and Pride. The clear message: the WNBA should stand *with* their players. The league listened.

The WNBA’s very existence is political. Women playing professional basketball and demanding equitable investment and working conditions is protest. The WNBA decided to stand behind their players speaking out by amplifying their advocacy. They rescinded the fines and announced the “Take a Seat, Take a Stand” initiatives that donated proceeds of game tickets to non-profits working on social justice issues. Now, as a league, they’re moving the conversation forward, internally and externally.

The WNBA has the audacity to lead this contemporary movement, because of its Blackness and intersectional collectivism, and the unprecedented commodification of its advocacy.

The WNBA is a Black league, boasting just under **70% of its players** identifying as Black or African American. In 2019, the All-WNBA First Team selection was composed entirely of out LGBTQ+ players, including 2019 WNBA MVP Elena Delle Donne. This year’s WNBA First Vice President, Layshia Clarendon, identifies as Black, nonbinary, and queer. Black and queer women athletes have never been palatable to traditional (white, binary/heteronormative) marketing, so they have blazed their path by insisting on their own brand identity, leaning into advocacy and not contorting to fit others’ ideas (i.e. shorter shorts, lower rims). The WNBA leads this movement not in spite of, but *because* they are unapologetically Black, queer, and gender inclusive.

Although the power of diversity and authentic Black leadership is at the core of

the WNBA's leadership, the significance of white players leveraging their power and influence to amplify the voices of their Black and brown sisters is important to understanding their collective action. This blueprint of mutual respect, sacrifice and collaboration was born in the WNBA. **As Breanna Stewart has said**, "It's extremely important for white athletes to speak out for racial justice. Black people and the Black community have been fighting this for years. To help make real change, white people need to be involved." When white athletes in other sports have been much less vocal than their Black teammates, many of the WNBA's white stars have demonstrated the ways in which allyship strengthens progress.

The WNBA is a direct challenge to outdated marketing logic that sees outspoken athletes as a brand liability. If anything, the WNBA's social justice movement has brought to light their ability to move product. **A 2020 study of WNBA fans** by Dr. Elizabeth Delia shows that gender equality and contributing to social change positively impacts fan identification with their local WNBA team. Likewise, the Phenomenal brand's Justice for Breonna Taylor campaign was launched as a collaboration with WNBA players and has sold in large numbers. The orange WNBA logo hoodies from Fanatics have become a status symbol for gender equity and solidarity with the league. During the WNBA season opener weekend, LeBron James, Naomi Osaka and Lil Wayne donned the branded hoodies and quickly, the hoodies sold out. The #OrangeHoodie campaign **trended on Twitter** reaching a potential impression base of 623 million across social platforms and 95% positive sentiment.

The WNBA has explicitly tied its branding to the league's activism. Via their partnership with BreakingTee, they have sold shirts featuring a women's fist on basketball hoop. The hoop's backboard features the words "Vote," "Black Lives Matter" and "SayHerName."

Passion and purpose build connection. Fans are drawn to the WNBA because it is an opportunity to see the best of sports. They buy WNBA merchandise because they believe in the ethos of the league and its players. Authentic social justice advocacy sells. The WNBA as a product has never been better and there is no questioning the authenticity of the players' advocacy.

The WNBA and its fans have turned buying WNBA merchandise, going to WNBA games (when it's safe again!), consuming WNBA media, and tuning in to the WNBA playoffs into a steppingstone to activism. But that is just the beginning, and the WNBA advocacy goes far beyond performative purchasing.

People must also actively call out racism, undo systems of

oppression, hire Black talent, amplify the voice and experiences of the Black and brown people in your life, and vote.

There is a lot of work to do, but also exciting work being done now. As launch participants of Wasserman's women-focused division, **The Collective Think Tank**: a global consortium of some of today's greatest academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity, we implore you to engage. We need sponsors investing in and featuring WNBA players and celebrating their leadership. Why?

Because the WNBA and its players have demonstrated time and time again, that they are some of the most courageous and determined voices in the game. The WNBA has been vocal, clear, and unyielding. They have provided a game plan; it's time to follow it.

Tags

[WNBA](#) [sports](#) [social justice](#) [Wasserman](#)

Problem Solved.

[Europe](#) [Americas](#) [Asia-Pacific](#)

[News](#) [Creative Works](#) [Awards](#) [Live Events](#) [Drum Network](#) [Research](#) [Studios](#) [Jobs](#)

The Drum Recommends