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2023 WNBA Season Brings Uncertainty for the Storm

Leila Bunker , News Editor

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) season is underway, with preseason action tipping off recently. For the Seattle Storm, a lot of unknowns have entered the equation due to major roster changes. The Storm finished the 2022 season with a 22-14 record and won a playoff series last year, but this isn't the same team that won two titles in the past five seasons.

Free agency, altered by the league's 2020 collective bargaining agreement, has allowed players to move more freely throughout the league, being subject to movement limitations far less. Yet it has created unforeseen circumstances and sparked uncertainty for teams like the Storm.

This offseason, the team looked to restock in the draft due to the retirement of four-time champ Sue Bird and the free agency loss of former MVP Breanna Stewart. Jewell Loyd, Ezi Magbegor and Mercedes Russell are some key returning players this season.

In April's 2023 WNBA Draft, Seattle welcomed four new players. The Storm selected Tennessee guard Jordan Horston ninth overall, forwards Madi Williams from Oklahoma Dulcy Fankam Mendijadeu from South Florida with their 18th and 21st selections and guard Jade Loville from Arizona with the 33rd overall pick. The rookies will have the opportunity to showcase their skills for the Storm, who will welcome more depth following their rough offseason.

Seattle has a track record of rebuilding through the draft, developing a strong foundation for the team through youth over the better part of the last decade. After drafting Loyd in 2015 and Stewart in 2016, both first overall selections, the Storm saw seven straight playoff appearances, two league titles and an WNBA Commissioner's Cup Championship.

However, the question is if that success will continue, especially when the Storm will be competing against newly formed super teams in the league such as the New York Liberty and the Las Vegas Aces.

Both the Liberty and Aces achieved great success last season yet decided to go all in during free agency. The Liberty acquired perennial MVP candidates Jonquel Jones and former Storm star Breanna Stewart to pair with rising star Sabrina Ionescu, creating a force in the Eastern Conference. The Aces responded in kind, adding two-time MVP Candace Parker to their championship corps, establishing the west's premier squad.

Even as the Storm face tough competition this season, the departures of Stewart and Bird, as well as an array of new faces, leave Jewell Loyd with more space to push for her own MVP season. The four-time All-Star averaged 16.3 points, 3.4 assists and 1.1 steals per game last season. Yet, as the Storm is left with a major scoring gap with the absence of Stewart, who led the WNBA in scoring last year, it's suspected that Loyd will face higher demands as her team will require her to rise to the occasion.

Magbegor will also have the opportunity to push herself this season. When WNBA legend Tina Charles signed with the Storm last season, Magbegor lost her starting spot. Even though she may not be a veteran player, entering her fourth season, Magbegor has averages that are well in her favor with 11.3 points, 6.5 rebounds, 1.2 steals and 2.3 blocks per game on 55.9% shooting. Her efforts were also enough for her to earn her first All-Defensive Second Team honor. With Charles' departure this season, also due to free agency, Magbegor has the opportunity to get back to the same level she was at and get more time on the court.

With all these dynamics at play, fans got their first look at the team when they opened the preseason on Monday night with a game against the Phoenix Mercury. In a 77-71 loss, as well as Loyd and starters sitting out in the third quarter, it seemed as though winning was not a high priority. Instead, Head Coach Noelle Quinn called a timeout to put multiple rookies and free agent additions as the Storm played 15 players in total Monday night.

Quinn's intentions appeared to be evaluating the abilities of the newly-drafted players. As the team is still in training and preseason, figuring out who can play who and the strengths of the players in offense and defense seem to be the goals.

The Storm led 43-36 at halftime thanks to their defense. Some highlights from the game include Loyd scoring eight points in the first half before leaving the game early in the third, she put Seattle up 47-42.

The Mercury would soon take control and outscore the Storm 18-4, which put them ahead 60-51, highlighting their need to find alternative scorers when Loyd is out of the game.

The Seattle Storm has been a force in the WNBA since the team's inception. But with the departures of franchise pillars Bird and Stewart, the 2023 season marks the beginning of a new basketball story in the Pacific Northwest. That tale will begin May 20 when the Storm begins their regular season and takes on the Aces in a rematch of last year's playoff duel.