

Women are breaking barriers in the NBA, other big leagues

More women are climbing the executive ranks in the male-dominated industry of professional sports.

Published on March 4, 2023—8 min read



Swin Cash, vice president of player operations for the New Orleans Pelicans, looks on before a preseason game against the San Antonio Spurs on Oct. 13, 2019, at the AT&T Center in San Antonio. (Photo by Joe Murphy/NBAE via Getty Images)



Written By Rashad Milligan

Tori Miller was en route to her seat during an away game. Just like any other day at work, Miller, then manager of basketball operations of the Erie BayHawks, NBA G League affiliate of the Atlanta Hawks, entered the visiting arena. “Who are you?” an arena security guard asked Miller. The front-office executive gave the security guard her name and title as she tried to make her way onto the court to watch the BayHawks’ shootaround. “I don’t believe you,” the guard responded.

Miller, dressed in business formal game-day attire, was taken aback. “Ok, so what do I have to do to prove myself?” Miller asked. “What do you want me to do? You just let my

interns walk by you with just a collared shirt. If I had a collared shirt on, would that have sufficed?" After a few minutes, Miller was eventually vouched for and allowed onto the court. It was one of the many microaggressions Miller has faced in her career as a Black woman in a sports leadership position, she said.

In July 2020, the College Park Skyhawks — the BayHawks changed its name in 2019 — promoted Miller, 29, to general manager, making her the first woman to have the title in NBA G League history. Her hire was part of a remarkable a two-year span in professional sports that saw Callie Brownson become the first woman to work as a position coach in a regular-season NFL game; Bianca Smith became the first Black woman hired to coach baseball on a professional level with a minor league Boston Red Sox squad; Danita Johnson of the D.C. United became the first Black president in Major League Soccer; and the Miami Marlins' Kim Ng became the first female general manager in MLB history.

To have so many women ascend to leadership roles in professional sports may have seemed inconceivable just a decade ago. Miller believes the current trend will inspire more young women to pursue a career in the sports industry.

"I feel that women are getting the traction we all so well deserve," Miller said. "The league, whether it's the NBA, NFL, you see women coaching, you see Kim being named the GM of the (Miami) Marlins, you feel that the change is coming. You see the progression and it gives hope for the young girls who you reach and are maybe having a bad day. When they're watching ESPN and see (the news) that Kim's been named the first woman GM in Major League Baseball, or myself being the first GM in the NBA G League, when those girls see that, giving them hope, it's something I can't even put into words."

In American professional sports leagues, it's a common practice to afford former players — especially those who performed at an all-star level — an opportunity to work in the front office. This tradition, however, hasn't been the norm for women basketball players until the past decade or so.



Assistant coach Becky Hammon of the San Antonio Spurs talks with Bryn Forbes during the first half of an NBA game against the Phoenix Suns at Talking Stick Resort Arena on Nov. 14, 2018, in Phoenix. (Photo by Christian Petersen/Getty Images)

In 2009, basketball Hall of Famer Nancy Lieberman was hired by the Texas Legends, the NBA G League affiliate of the Dallas Mavericks, becoming the first woman to coach a professional men's basketball team. Lieberman also would go on to win a championship while serving as a head coach in Ice Cube's and Jeff Kwatinetz's BIG3 basketball league in 2018. Fellow basketball Hall of Famer and BIG3 coach Lisa Leslie would win the championship in 2019.

Also in 2019, former WNBA star Lindsey Harding became an assistant and player development coach for the Sacramento Kings and the New Orleans Pelicans hired Swin Cash as the vice president of basketball operations and team development.

Cash, a five-time WNBA All-Star, three-time WNBA champion, and two-time Olympic gold medalist, initially faced skeptics when she served as an ESPN commentator for men's basketball games during the WNBA offseason. However, her knowledge of the game was undeniable and allowed her to smoothly transition into the role as an NBA executive once her playing days were over.

“A lot of times as women, even if you played at the highest level, you get people questioning how that translates to the NBA,” Cash said. “I think the great thing about working for someone like (Pelicans executive vice president of basketball operations) David Griffin is he's very innovative in his thought process. This isn't about having a male or female (in the position), it's about having the best people. That's why it was an easy decision for me to want to come here to work.”

The San Antonio Spurs also has led the charge when it comes to promoting women to significant roles.

In 2014, the Spurs named six-time WNBA All-Star point guard Becky Hammon an assistant coach. On Dec. 30, 2020, in a game against the Los Angeles Lakers, Spurs' head coach Gregg Popovich got ejected from the game and pointed at Hammon to lead the team the rest of the way. Popovich's finger-pointing made history, as Hammon became the first woman to be the head coach in an NBA regular-season game. In the post-game press conference, Popovich revealed that the Lakers are Hammon's team to scout.

"She's somebody who's very skilled and could very easily fulfill the duties of a head coach in the NBA," Popovich said. "That goes without saying. There are women in every other endeavor in the world, whether it's government, science, technology, aviation ... Women do the same jobs and, if not, (do them) better than men. That's a fact, so there's no reason why somebody like Becky and other women can't be coaches in the NBA." In 2022, Hammons joined The Connecticut Sun's women's pro basketball team, leading them to a WNBA title in her first year as Head Coach.

Although former WNBA players like Hammon and Cash are making history in NBA leadership positions, it can be difficult for some women athletes to adjust to life once their playing days are over.



Swin Cash, right, plays for the Seattle Storm during the Western Conference Finals of the 2010 WNBA Playoffs at US Airways Center on Sept. 5, 2010, in Phoenix. (Photo by Christian Petersen/Getty Images)

Cash was uncertain of where her career would take her after retirement, so she dabbled in multiple fields so the public wouldn't box her in, she said. She modeled, took media gigs, led community outreach efforts, and takes pride to this day in the Jordan brand sneakers she showcased as a self-proclaimed "sneakerhead."

Cash said her off-the-court moves at the time were a bit taboo for WNBA players because female athletes weren't afforded the same opportunities as male athletes to brand themselves away from sports. In 2020, five new WNBA athletes signed with Nike's Jordan Brand; Las Vegas Aces center Liz Cambage graced the cover of Playboy magazine; and the league notched a brand deal with Glossier, a beauty products brand.

Cash is happy the playing field is leveling for female athletes during and after their playing careers. She compared the journey of women advancing to the executive ranks to a schoolyard experience.

"It's the same (as) being in middle school and playing against all guys," Cash said. "If you're the only female, they want to challenge you because of this thing of, 'Oh, I'm better than her.' Then after you give them a couple of buckets and your team wins, it's that head nod, that level of respect. A lot of times, women have to prove themselves and it's not anything to do with them, it's just mostly because... society is teaching a lot of young men ... that they're better than, stronger than and not equal to."

More 'firsts' for the NBA

In other historic news, also notable because these women did not ascend to their leadership positions from within the world of professional basketball:

- In 2014, Michele Roberts, an accomplished lawyer, became the first woman to lead the players union in one of the Big Four (NBA, MLB, NFL and NHL) professional leagues when she was hired as Executive Director of National Basketball Players Association.
- In 2018, former AT&T executive Cynthia "Cynt" Marshall was named CEO of the Dallas Mavericks.

Edited by iPondr narrative editor A.R. Shaw