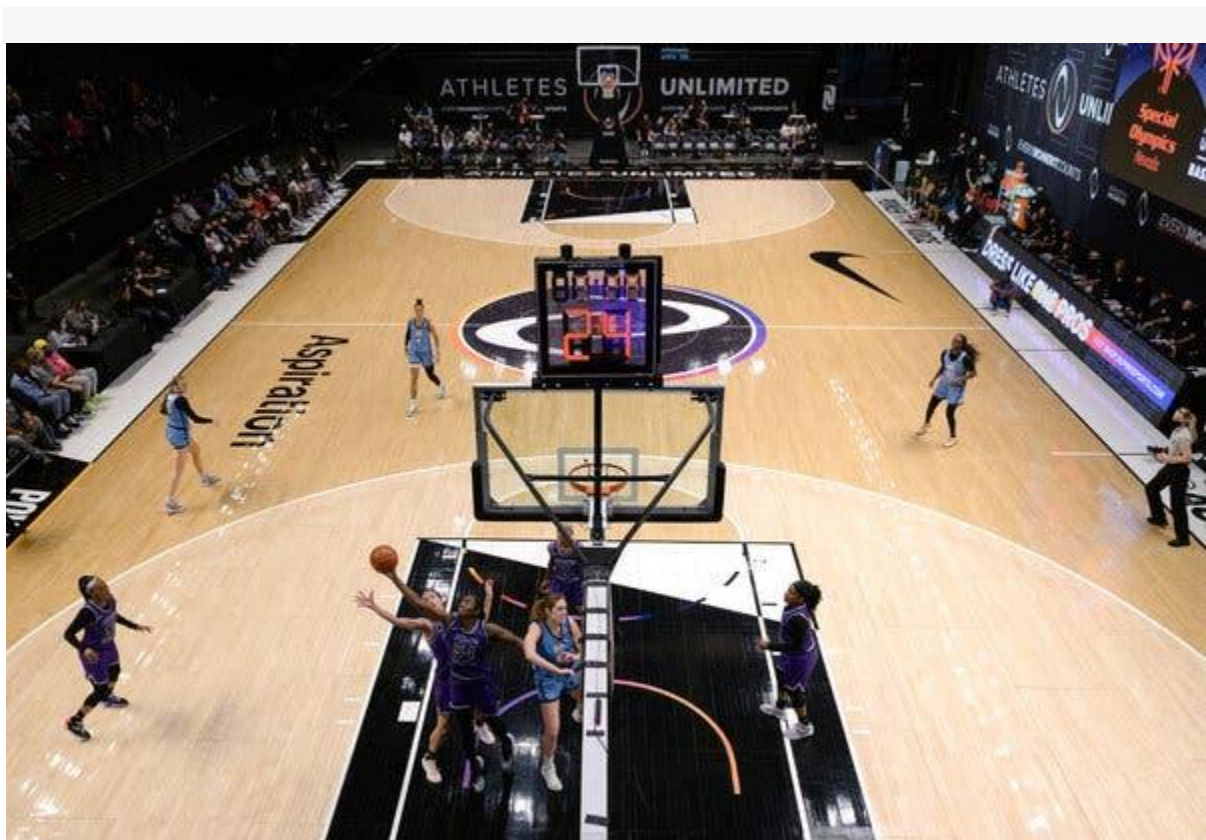


The New York Times

Women's Basketball Players Get a New Lifeline, Close to Home

The five-week Athletes Unlimited season has given some players an alternative to playing overseas during the W.N.B.A. off-season and a way to earn extra money.



For some women, the league is an opportunity to course-correct a career beleaguered by bumps and false starts.

By Tamryn Spruill

Photographs by Bridget Bennett

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Lauren Manis was drafted, and waived, by the Las Vegas Aces before the 2020 W.N.B.A. season. She then signed with a team in Belgium, where intermittent lockdowns because of the coronavirus pandemic left her stuck in her apartment.

She was unable to enter the gym, touch a basketball or return to her hometown, Franklin, Mass. But the time she eventually did get to spend on the court in Belgium proved fruitful: Manis [averaged nearly a double-double](#) in points and rebounds for the 16-game season and, in 2021, was invited back to the Aces' training camp. Waived a second time, Manis signed to play for a team in Hungary. It didn't go well.

"I was living in a campground for three months," Manis said. "The team was not honest with the living arrangements."

Under mental strain, she told her agent to prepare a termination agreement to get her out of the contract. Her agent told her about an opportunity to compete in Athletes Unlimited, a network of player-driven sports with a new basketball league based in Las Vegas. The next day, Manis boarded a flight out of Hungary. One Zoom call was all it took to persuade her to sign on to play in the inaugural A.U. basketball season.

"I was very, very down after Hungary," Manis said. "I thank God, because a few months ago I would have never imagined a situation like this coming up."

For Manis, the league is an opportunity to course-correct a career beleaguered by bumps and false starts. She is joined by women at various stages of their basketball careers, many focused on redemptive arcs of their own. Some see the league as a chance to compete in front of family and friends, some for their first time in their professional careers, rather than in obscurity overseas. It can also be the rare paycheck, and playing time, for professional women's basketball players in the United States during the W.N.B.A.'s off-season.



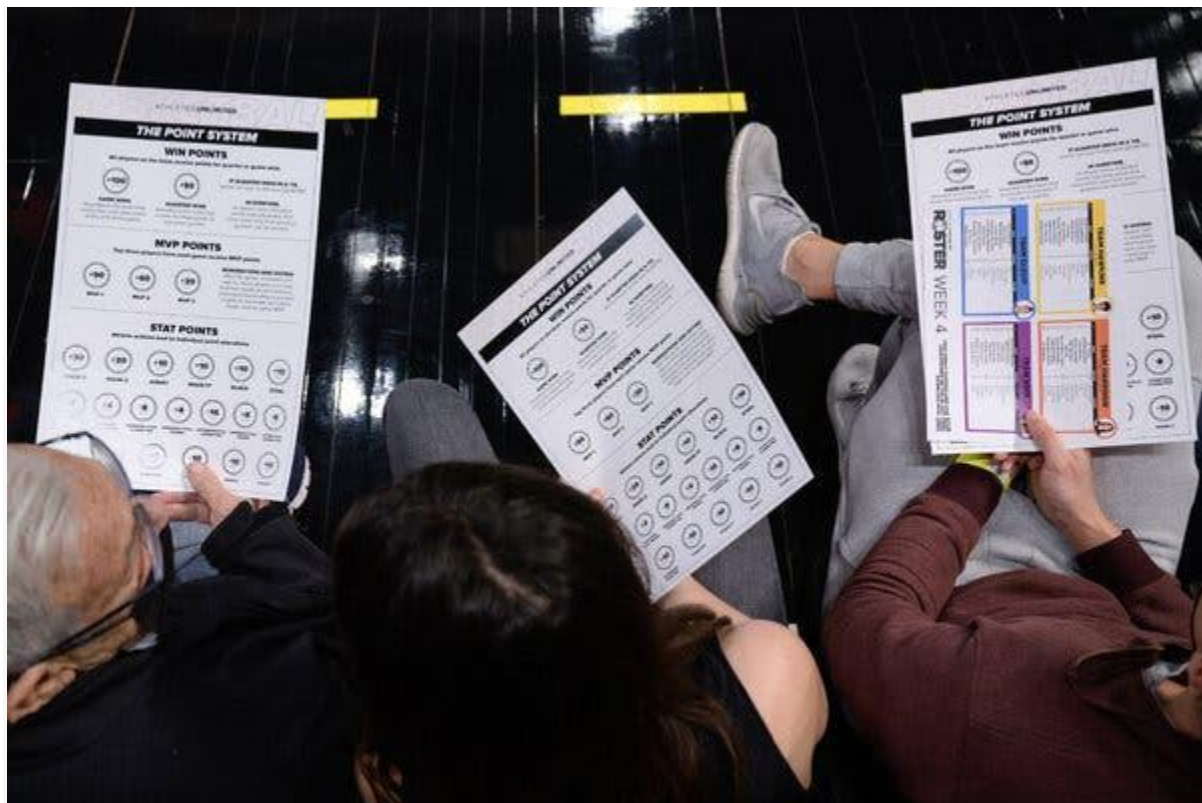
Image

Lauren Manis, center, agreed to join the league after one Zoom call.

Four weeks into the inaugural five-week A.U. season, many people have found reason to want success for this newest venture in a long line of [upstart basketball leagues that have come and gone](#). On-court competition has been thrilling because of its intensity, but A.U. is judging the success of its first basketball season by player experience. “Track how the players are doing and how much they’re enjoying the experience, and the feedback has been incredibly positive,” said Jon Patricof, A.U.’s chief executive and co-founder.

Athletes Unlimited started in March 2020 with softball, volleyball and lacrosse leagues. The first A.U. basketball season tipped off on [Jan. 23](#) at Athletes Unlimited Arena at the Sport Center of Las Vegas, with recruiting help and oversight by its player executive committee: the veteran W.N.B.A. players Natasha Cloud, Sydney Colson, Tianna Hawkins, Jantel Lavender and Ty Young. The season ends Saturday.

It’s probably not what most fans would expect: There are no general managers, coaches or set teams, and four teams of 11 players are redrafted each week. Their captains are the top four players on a leaderboard for points accrued by on-court actions like scoring, drawing fouls and stealing the ball, and by votes from fans and players. Opposite actions, like turnovers and missed shots, cost points. Teams win games by collecting the most points through outscoring the other team each quarter (50 win points per quarter) and in the overall game (100 points).



Fans are given sheets explaining the point system at each game.

The league has focused on engaging fans through social media and TV broadcasts for every game rather than in-person attendance. The arena can hold just 740 fans.

“From the beginning, we really wanted to build a global national audience,” Patricof said.

That was welcome news to Imani McGee-Stafford, who is competing in A.U. and last played in the W.N.B.A. in 2019, for the Dallas Wings. “Even in the W, we don’t have every game televised,” McGee-Stafford said. “I send my grandmother the schedule every week and tell her what channel to turn to, or what’s the link, and she texts me after every game. It’s really dope, and it’s also not very common in the women’s basketball world yet.”

McGee-Stafford, a 6-foot-7 center, stepped away from the court in 2020 to begin law school, but now finds her professional career mired in uncertainty.



Image

Imani McGee-Stafford balances playing time with law school studies.

To accommodate law school and the W.N.B.A., she chose a three-year, semesters-based program. But after four W.N.B.A. seasons and international stints in Israel, China and Turkey, McGee-Stafford, 27, hadn’t played professionally for three years before A.U. came along. In 2019, she signed to play in Australia, with the Perth Lynx, but she said she “got cut because I was taking the L.S.A.T. and showed up late to something.”

In A.U., she is able to battle hard on the court, and retreat to a private room afterward to complete her coursework. “They’ve made it possible for players to do it all,” she said. “I’m taking three courses this semester, a lighter course load, because I knew I was going to be doing this.”



Image

Tianna Hawkins and her son Emanuel after a recent game.

For Tianna Hawkins, a 6-foot-3 forward who won a championship with the Washington Mystics in 2019, A.U. has allowed her to rediscover the joy of playing. In 2021, she played for the 8-24 Atlanta Dream, who suspended a player for conduct detrimental to the team and lost their coach to another job just weeks before the season.

“It’s been a great opportunity for me to regain my confidence because I’m coming off, maybe, the worst professional season I’ve ever had,” Hawkins said.

She continued: “I’m able to work on the things that I’ve been working on this off-season. And, also, if I make one mistake, I’m not getting snatched out of the game. I’m able to play through my mistakes, and also learn different perspectives of the game.”

Hawkins said being a captain in A.U. had given her more respect for coaches.

“They go through a lot, and they’re not even playing,” she said. “So, imagine if you had to coach while playing, too. I have a newfound grace for coaches.”

A key challenge for W.N.B.A. coaches is the effect of off-season overseas games on their players, who may arrive for the W.N.B.A. season late, tired or injured from competing year-round. For many players, the grind is necessary to supplement low W.N.B.A. pay and limited domestic opportunities.

Image



Courtney Williams celebrated with teammates after a recent win.

But will Athletes Unlimited quell this need?

For Hawkins, it’s a matter of weighing the options: money, location and the needs of her first-grade son. McGee-Stafford is all in for as long as A.U. will have her. She finds the base salary of \$8,000 “just for showing up” to be attractive, she said, and she can simultaneously pursue her law degree. Plus, players who finish in the top 10 on the leaderboard can expect bonuses upward of \$10,000, making the full take-home pay for five weeks of basketball potentially more than \$20,000, according to Patricof. The minimum salary for the four-month W.N.B.A. season is about \$60,000, with a max of around \$230,000.

[David Berri](#), a professor at Southern Utah University who has studied sports economics and gender issues, sees long-term potential for A.U., so long as the league maintains low operating costs.

“Athletes Unlimited is definitely doing much to save money,” Berri said, citing its focus on TV and social media instead of in-person audience. And by centering individual players over teams, Berri said, A.U. could build an audience faster than what the traditional league model allows.

Image



Sheryl Swoopes provides color commentary to the games, and advice to the players.

At the start of the A.U. season, Sheryl Swoopes, who provides color commentary for games, spoke to players about her Hall of Fame career in professional basketball. Her words resonated with Manis. “I think playing basketball for a living is really difficult because you never know when it’s going to come to a sudden end,” Manis said. “And she had some really wild things to say about being able to manage your money, and having a plan to fall back on.”

Swoopes said in an interview that had A.U. existed during her playing days, she would have seized the chance to play.

“Some players love going overseas, some players don’t,” she said. “It’s not for everybody.”

Manis, who has dazzled with her gritty play on both sides of the ball, has become one of this season’s stars and captured Swoopes’s attention during broadcasts. Her redemption seems to be underway.

“It’s unreal,” Manis said. “It’s great when you hear people praise your game and love to watch it, but when it comes from someone as influential as Sheryl Swoopes, it’s a pretty big deal.”