

# Sportico

The Business of Sports

## A REVOLUTION IN WOMEN'S HOOPS STARTS WITH THE RIGHT SNEAKERS

BY NATALIE WHITE



Natalie White of Moolah Kicks

COURTESY MOOLAH KICKS

Today's guest columnist is Natalie White, CEO and founder of Moolah Kicks.

Basketball has always been a constant for me. Growing up in New York City, it was easy to fall in love with the game.

As my teammates and I dribbled behind-the-back through trash can cones in hot gyms, we dreamed of playing in the NBA. We modeled our games after those we saw on television, LeBron and Kobe, and NYC streetball legends we watched on YouTube, like Skip to My Lou and Shammgod. We idolized them and were excited to buy sneakers named after them. It never occurred to us that wearing their shoes could carry negative implications.

As I got older, the difference in treatment, opportunity and resources between men's and women's basketball became clearer. I went on to manage the women's basketball team, play club ball and study finance at Boston College. It was in 2019 that I came across an advertisement featuring four marquee WNBA players, where they were holding and promoting four different sneakers, all named after NBA players. Seeing this ad prompted me to think about the negative social implications, and stigma, that young female athletes face. The advertisement sent a clear message: As a girls' basketball player, you can become the best of the best, but you will be used to promote products built and named after your male counterparts. As a lifelong fan and player of women's basketball, that was all the motivation I needed to create Moolah Kicks—providing premium performance sneakers that fit our feet and reflect our game.

While conducting early-stage research, I was shocked to find that only 6% of all sports exercise science and research conducted between 2014-20 focused on females. This was a tremendous opportunity to utilize my women's basketball network to gather my own research. To inform the sneakers' design, I collected input from hundreds of athletes. I stood outside of my college's basketball arena at every home game, handing out surveys, and asking female athletes what they want in a performance sneaker. During this process I learned that the shape of men's and women's feet differ in four major areas, that sneakers are built on a "last" (the inner shape of the sneaker) which reflects male or female biomechanics, and that when female players perform in "men's"/"unisex" sneakers they are more at risk for injury. With the research in hand, we worked with trainers, physical therapists, and industry leaders to engineer the Moolah Kicks last to be specific to the female foot. Once we perfected our proprietary last, we added other state-of-the-art technologies, identified the right manufacturer, and produced our first model, the Phantom 1.

Once we had developed a great shoe, we needed to get our sneakers out in the market and find a partner who was as dedicated to female athletes as we were. In early 2021, I saw a Good Morning America segment in which the CEO of Dick's Sporting Goods, Lauren Hobart, was emphasizing the company's renewed focus on serving the female athlete. After a cold email to her, the company generously extended me the opportunity to pitch Moolah Kicks. With their guidance, distribution and investment, Moolah has been propelled from a basketball start-up to a category pioneer with a national footprint.

In November of 2021, the Phantom 1 made its debut in more than 140 Dick's Sporting Goods stores. The Phantom 1 launch was an incredible opportunity for Moolah, and showcased the commitment Dick's has to properly serve its female athletes. In October 2022, we debuted our Neovolt Pro model and expanded the distribution from 140 to over 450 stores.

While we were growing our presence in stores, we were also increasing our awareness among the basketball community through our relationships with college players, regional girls' basketball tournaments and high-profile athletes. We secured Chicago

Sky point guard Courtney Williams, Indiana Fever guard and NCAA national champion Destanni Henderson, and UConn guard Caroline Ducharme as brand ambassadors.

Title IX has also played a crucial role in the Moolah Kicks story. The tireless efforts and hardships endured by so many incredible women who paved the way in athletics and academics have brought women's basketball to an inflection point. We can now begin to strive for more than equality; we can establish our own legitimacy, without the need for comparison. When starting Moolah, I gravitated to words like "equality" and "equity," and toward offering solutions to the disparities between men's and women's basketball, but this perspective was shortsighted.

We have moved away from talk of equality, because the comparison to men's sports stunts our growth. It hinders the unique value that women's basketball offers. When we compare women's basketball to men's, we cement men's basketball as the standard that women's basketball is graded against. When someone says, "She'll never dunk like LeBron," or even a "positive" comment such as, "She shoots like Curry," an impossible comparison is created—one that positions women's basketball as "other" and men's basketball as the ultimate goal.

For women's basketball to grow, we must stop seeking legitimacy by drawing a connection between ourselves and the men's game. Moolah is focusing instead on the independent value of women's basketball. Every dollar we earn is reinvested into making more products exclusively for women's basketball players, sponsoring youth across the country, and marketing, all of which create better products and more opportunities for female ballers.

Women's sports are booming, with increased broadcast ratings, attendance, merchandise sales and participation numbers. Moolah is honored to be at the forefront of performance for women's athletics, and to be a driving force in shaping the next era of women's basketball.

*A graduate of the Carroll School of Management at Boston College, White founded Moolah Kicks in 2020.*