An Oral History of the WNBA Bubble

The inside story of a momentous season in women's basketball played against a backdrop of a global pandemic and social unrest.
2020 was a year like no other. COVID-19 affected all our lives. Schools closed, businesses shuttered, travel plans were cancelled. In the US, every professional sports league was forced to close down in March 2020. The organizers of the Women’s National Basketball Association, coming off the back of a stellar 2019 season, faced a cliff-edge decision: cancel the season and lose all momentum, or attempt to stage a 22-game season, with 144 players, in a secure ‘bubble’.

Commissioner Cathy Engelbert: Cancelling would have meant being out of the sports landscape for 20 months. That is existential for women’s basketball. Women’s sport already lacks the coverage and sponsors of men’s sport. I’m not sure we would have survived being away for 20 months, quite frankly.

Taj McWilliams-Franklin (Player relations & player development, WNBA): When I heard they were thinking of running the season? I was apprehensive. The pandemic was raging at this point, and I wanted to know how they were going to keep everyone safe in a single-site location.

Cathy: We’d come off the back of a successful Collective Bargaining Agreement earlier in the year and then held the 2020 WNBA Draft in my living room with ESPN on Zoom. That was April. That’s when we started scenario planning. We had five scenarios, from no-season to a condensed, single-site season, tipping off in July.

Sandy Brondello (Coach of the Phoenix Mercury): I was excited. It meant we could get back to what we love doing. Yes, it would be different, but I liked the challenge of trying to get a team together in these circumstances. These are the best players in the world, at the peak of their game.

Tianna Hawkins (Player with the Atlanta Dream): As a mom, my first question was ‘can I bring my son with me?’. There was no way I could be somewhere for an extended amount of time and he not be with me.

Cory Matthews (Manager of the scorers’ table staff): I felt we could be part of something historic. On a personal level, I thought, ‘I get to go to Florida, watch games, do the stats, and they’re going to pay me and feed me?’ I love basketball. I’d have gone if they’d just promised to feed me!

Cathy: We needed guiding principles. We aspire to be a player-first organization. We wanted to run a competitive season, but we needed to ensure all 144 players were comfortable.

Taj: Players want to play. But no one wants to play if their safety is at risk. Also, if we [the WNBA] were going to attempt this, it had to be about something more than making money.

Players love to play.

Sandy Brondello
Coach of the Phoenix Mercury
On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African-American woman, was fatally shot in her Louisville, Kentucky apartment by plainclothes police officers. On May 25, George Floyd, an African-American man, was killed after police officers knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes. The deaths sparked protest throughout the United States, and across the world.

Taj: We’re a league that is 80% African-American women – a double minority. As black women, it’s important our voices are heard.

Cathy: Then it was on to our player-first agenda and what the purpose and focus of the season would be. If you’re running a player-first agenda you can’t help but recognize the importance of the social justice movement. The players of the WNBA – amazing athletes, diverse women – have taken a courageous stance on these issues for years.

Sandy: Being a white coach of black athletes, it was important for me to step back and listen. We’re a family, and what happens in the daily lives of our players affects us all.

Tianna: The league did a great job backing the players. They understood we are humans first, then athletes.

Taj: Collectively, our voices are strong. We [the WNBA] saw an opportunity to use the season, and the attention, as a platform. The WNBA facilitated a true dialogue on social justice.

Cathy: This was never about the money. It wasn’t about sponsorship or the media. It was about creating a platform for players to thrive

In May 2020, the WNBA committed to running an abridged season – 22 games, rather than 34, at the IMG Academy in Florida. Players and officials would be housed on campus for 97 days, with COVID-19 testing conducted daily.

Taj: It became clear very quickly that the WNBA was laser-focused on safety protocols. The process was detailed, they had medical people to speak to. Every t was crossed, every i was dotted. They did a great job of easing our anxiety.

Sandy: We could see what we needed to do to put on a successful season – and how each of us had to hold ourselves accountable.

Cory: We knew we could be an example of how to reopen safely. If we could run this season, safely, with no glitches, it might help other pro sports get up and running again. All of us took that responsibility seriously.

Tianna: I was ok once I’d seen the plans to keep the bubble COVID-free. I felt the season would be different, but worthwhile. That the league was able to put all these pieces together and enable us to play, was remarkable.

Cathy: It’s counterintuitive but in a crisis, you have to take some risks. We had tough conversations but, with our health and safety protocols in place, I knew we would prevail.”
Teams would have to play a game every two days, with staggered starts to suit ‘home’ audiences in different time zones. Unlike a normal season, there would be no travelling, no flights between games. The season tipped off on July 25 with a game between Seattle Storm and New York Liberty.

“Cathy: It was important we put on a sporting spectacle. All stakeholders agreed we couldn’t run this thing without competitive matches.
Sandy: We had five new players at the Mercury, and we had to quickly create the right chemistry. Playing games more frequently helped get us into that flow, but it was a struggle to begin with.
Cory: The physicality of the women’s game has improved immensely in the last few years. The speed, skill, power. I think not having to travel between games helped the players. Shooting percentages were up, three-pointers were up.
Taj: Maybe it was just the closeness of the atmosphere, but the play seemed faster. Teammates feeding off each other’s energy.
Tianna: I think we showed this is the greatest women’s basketball league in the world. We competed every night.
Cathy: We had the highest points per game ever, the highest number of three-pointers ever. These players came to play. They showed up.
Sandy: I don’t think our players get the credit for how talented they are. We pulled in a new audience for the 2020 season, and I think the exposure for the game was positive.

The bubble was hosted in Florida at the IMG Academy. Whilst the staff and players had little downtime between games, the setting (with 50 tennis courts, an 18-hole golf course, weight rooms, swimming pools galore, and two basketball gyms, spread over 500 impeccably maintained acres) did make life easier for some.

“Taj: Look, I’ve lived in Russia. I spent four weeks in the Olympic Training Center, in a room with a single bed, a chair, and a closet. And it’s too cold to go out. There are worse places to spend 100 days than Florida!
Cory: I had my wife, who was pregnant, and my young daughter with me. I could go swimming in the hotel pool with my daughter for an hour each day. That was golden.
Sandy: We had testing every day. The bubble felt like the safest place we could be.
Cory: I was reminding people to wear masks, wiping surfaces with Clorox, I went to 35 games straight…It was relentless.
Taj: I love nature – the ocean, mountains. The hardest part for me was not being able to wake up and go anywhere. I’d be walking around a big rectangle, wearing out the grass, imagining I was in Phoenix.
Our players are leaders. They wanna make sure that they’re heard and that they’re seen.

Sandy Brondello
Coach of the Phoenix Mercury

Sandy: My two kids were with me, and my husband was coaching with one of the other teams. There were games every two days and very little downtime.

Tianna: I found it tough. Downtime? What downtime? I’m a person that likes to separate my personal life from the game, and it was very hard to step away from the bubble. You were surrounded by basketball.

Cathy: I took five books with me and never started one.

Taj: During my playing career, after a game, I didn’t want to see the coach, the ref, the players. I needed some time away. But here, it was much more of a shared experience. I loved being able to spend time with the players. The intimacy. Having the time to have a conversation.

Cory: I love the game of basketball. There’s a children’s book for the men’s game, B Is For Basketball, targeted at young boys. There is no equivalent for the women’s game, targeting young girls, so I used my time to make one for my daughters. It was awesome to have the time to do that.

Across the NBA and WNBA, 172 games were played within 97 days. Along with regular testing and social distancing, it was a grueling schedule for everyone involved.

Taj: I think I had ten days out of the 97 where I wasn’t working. I’d be doing everything, from fixing TVs to braiding hair. Testing all the time. But that’s fine. I like to be busy.

Cathy: I spent a career at Deloitte – on IPOs, on midnight deadlines, around-the-clock workloads, yet I don’t think I’ve ever worked so hard as last summer. Every day was setting the clock back to zero. 92 days walking on eggshells.

Cathy: The game is easy. It’s the other 22 hours of the day that are hard.

Tianna: The league did a great job of keeping everyone safe and running the season, but I was happy to get out of there. I missed my family, I missed my bed, I missed being able to walk away. Would I voluntarily go back to another bubble season? No.

Taj: I kept six feet distance at all times. A lot of players would come up to me and want to hug. I’d have to say ‘we’ll hug next year’. That was tough.

Cory: They say if you want to make a career in sports, you’re going to miss a lot of family events. That can be a strain. To have my family here with me, that meant a lot.

Cathy: We had two players return inconclusive tests on the morning of the second semi-finals game. That was the hardest moment. We’d had zero positive cases for players during the regular season until that point, and it looked like we were going to fall at the last hurdle. We postponed the game for 24 hours and waited on the new tests. Thankfully they were clear.

Success is an endurance test.

Cathy Engelbert
WNBA Commissioner
By mid-summer, Black Lives Matter protests were taking place across the world. In the US, protestors had clashed with far-right groups. On August 23, police shot and killed another African-American man, Jacob Blake. Blake was shot seven times in the back.

Cathy: Emotions were raw. A lot of players found their voice during that time.

Tianna: We had a players-only meeting – all the players in the league, to express our feelings and decide how to move forward.

Taj: After Jacob Blake, the players didn’t want to play.

Cory: I don’t know if someone had a T-shirt press with them. It felt like if something was said on a Tuesday, the players would be wearing a T-shirt on the Wednesday.

Tianna: The league allowed us to use the bubble, not only to play basketball and compete but stand up and speak out against social injustice.

Sandy: As a leader, a coach, it was important I allow the players to talk about the situations happening in the world – and how that makes them feel. This is bigger than basketball.

Taj: It was an amazing stance from the voices of amazing women. I was just happy to sit back and marvel at the maturity of many of our players.

The 2020 WNBA Season ended on October 6 with Seattle Storm beating the Las Vegas Aces in the final. Game 3 of the 2020 WNBA Finals was up 34% year-over-year over Game 3 of the 2019 WNBA Finals. WNBA fans engaged via social media in record numbers.

Cory: I think the players used this opportunity to show a few people how far the women’s game has come.

Cathy: I’ve learned a lot in the last year. I was pretty vulnerable, which isn’t my style. I think the stress on the players has been enormous. They’ve had to deal with some of the stresses their whole lives, and they’ve helped me. There is a greater awareness of mental health, inside and outside the game.

Sandy: I loved the challenge, but we really missed playing in front of our home fans. We have a great following in Phoenix. I can’t wait to be playing in front of fans again.

Cathy: I couldn’t be prouder of the players association, the leadership team. We faced a lot of challenges and we came through. We made decisions in the middle of this crisis that will have a positive impact for years to come.