

Leader of the Pack

For Sue Wicks, basketball arrived long before the WNBA.

By Bill Clovin

A

blonde blur known to her large circle of family and friends as Susan Joy Wicks dives to the floor to try to corral a loose ball. The adoring crowd at Madison Square Garden responds by singing "Suuuuu-Suuuuu" as two teammates hustle over to lift her back to her feet. Suddenly, the New York Liberty, seemingly over-matched and down by a dozen points a few minutes before, begin to fight their way back into the game. Afterward, reporters in their winning locker room surround leading scorers Tari Phillips and Tamika Whitmore while an exhausted Wicks (RC'88) sits quietly at her stall, her jersey drenched in sweat and a satisfied look on her face.

It's a scenario familiar to people who have closely followed the WNBA's Liberty for the past six seasons. Before retiring two days before training camp began on May 1, the Liberty cut Wicks's minutes each summer but continued to bring her back. The team's brain trust realized that the spirit and leadership she brought to the game had helped the franchise advance to the championship round in four of the WNBA's six seasons. "I can make more money as a coach, but being a player and part of a team, that has always been the dream," Wicks, 36, said last fall.

"Sue was the ultimate blue-collar player," says Theresa Grentz, her former Rutgers coach. "She did whatever it took and did not let the idea of who got the credit to get in the way of what needed to be done. Even in high school, she was mature, phenomenally team-oriented, and had a calming effect on her teammates."

Since graduating as the greatest female player to ever wear a Scarlet Knights jersey, Wicks had also become a leading advocate for the struggling WNBA, a role model for young female athletes, and the first WNBA player to publicly declare herself a lesbian. Most fans are familiar with her career at Rutgers and

WICKS, WHO LOVED TO PLAY IN MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, WAS FLATTERED WHEN A FEW KNICKS PLAYERS TOLD HER THAT HER STYLE OF PLAY REMINDED THEM OF FORMER KNICK CHARLES OAKLEY.

with the Liberty, but Wicks had spent the bulk of some 15 seasons as the American ringer on club teams in Italy, Spain, France, Hungary, Japan, Turkey, Israel, and the former Yugoslavia.

Many of those teams—members of established, successful leagues—paid her a six-figure salary and provided housing, vehicles, housekeepers, and even plane tickets so family and friends could visit. If Wicks's only means of support had been her regulated WNBA salary, she wouldn't be driving a black Jaguar convertible.

"Establishing a women's pro league in the U. S. that pays its players a decent wage has been a struggle; no question about it," says Wicks, stretching her 6'3" frame out in a cushy chair in the back of Coolbeans, a café near her Oradell home. "But we've made great strides in demon-

“We're on TV and countless young girls identify with us. They're the ones I'm banking on to take it to the next level.”

strating that women are athletes and that many people enjoy watching us compete. That's both a cultural and societal shift and a huge feminist statement. We're on TV on the college and professional level, and countless young girls identify with us. They're the ones I'm banking on to take it to the next level.”

Thin, with angular features, soft, blue eyes, and a knowing smile, Wicks made a huge splash last summer when she publicly stated that she is a lesbian, a move about which she had mixed emotions. While fearful that her sexual orientation would overshadow her basketball and impact the way she's perceived by the kids she works with at basketball camps, she finally grew tired of skirting the issue. "I can't say how many players are gay, but it would be easier to count the straight ones," she told the *Village Voice*. She also raised what she perceives as the WNBA's unwillingness to promote players who are committed to same-sex relationships in the same way as they do players who are wives and mothers. "I'm not

ashamed of who I am, but I don't think it has anything to do with basketball. You're a wife, a mother, a lesbian, who cares? The real victory will come when people just view us as athletes.”

Wicks grew up in the sleepy little hamlet of Center Moriches on Long Island, a few miles west of the Hamptons. Her father, now retired, was a commercial fisherman, and her mother took care of eight children and a house. With no other girls on the block her age, Wicks competed against her brothers and their friends in baseball and football. As a teen, she began practicing her shooting and footwork on her driveway and pretended she was a player on the championship Knicks teams. The practice more than paid off: Wicks averaged 39.1 points a game in high school and was recruited heavily by several top Atlantic Coast Conference schools.

Grentz persuaded Wicks to come to the Banks in 1984 by dangling a challenge before her: to establish women's college basketball in the Northeast. "She's an extremely good-hearted person and once she gets to know you, has a wicked sense of humor," says Grentz, now coach at the University of Illinois. From 1984 to 1988, Wicks led Rutgers to a 105-21 record, averaged 25.6 points per game, and won the Naismith Award as women's college player of the year in 1988.

With no pro league to join in the U.S., Wicks seized an offer of more than \$100,000 to play a season in Italy—the highest salary ever paid to a female player at the time. At first she was miserable. "It was gorgeous, but I didn't speak Italian and was lonely and isolated," says Wicks. "In my second year, I began to venture out on my own. By the third year, I felt Italian and life had become bigger than basketball.”

Eight years later, the New York franchise in the brand-new WNBA selected her as their first pick. Since then, Wicks had played in the league's all-star game and won its 2001 Sportsmanship Award, but she's most proud of a team achievement: the Liberty's ascent to the finals last summer against the Los Angeles Sparks. "There's no consolation without that trophy," Wicks said after losing. "Maybe when I'm 70 or 80 I'll be more philosophical about it, but we don't play for second place." She never did.

LED Rutgers teams to the NCAA East regional three times.

NAMED three-time all-American, and holds the all-time highest point total for both men and women at Rutgers: 2,655 total points.



HOLDS Rutgers career records in rebounds (1,357), blocks (293), and steals (287).

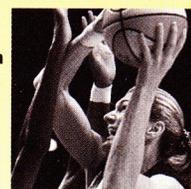
INDUCTED into the Rutgers Basketball Hall of Fame in 1994.



Her jersey, number 23, was retired and hangs from the rafters of the RAC.

SPEAKS Italian, Spanish, and Japanese.

Enjoys Spanish soap operas.



COUNTED among her supporters: a fan club called the Apostles of Saint Sue.

