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Growth is on the way

Fever CEO sees support building for team, women's basketball

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Indiana Fever CEO and general manager Kelly Krauskopf, has built the team into a winner in the WNBA by bringing in coach Brian Winters.

PHOTO COURTESY OF INDIANA FEVER

The WNBA is in the midst of its 11th season, and Kelly Krauskopf has been there every step of the way, either as an architect or as chief executive of one of the league's winningest teams.

Before becoming CEO and general manager of the startup Indiana Fever in 1999, Krauskopf served as the WNBA's first director of basketball operations.

Appointed to that position in 1996, she developed the WNBA's first set of playing rules, along with officiating and scheduling policies, and worked closely with the league's general managers and administrators in an effort to create an entertaining, viable product that would blossom and stand the test of time.

More than a decade later, the WNBA is, by her estimation, on solid footing and poised for explosive growth. And she expects the Fever, who have the league's second-best record and are coming off back-to-back playoff appearances, to be at the forefront.

Although home crowds aren't consistently as big as she'd like (the Fever have averaged about 6,000 fans through the first five home games), Krauskopf is confident the city will embrace the team if it keeps winning and the league keeps growing.

Indiana features arguably the WNBA's best player, Tamika Catchings, and finished 21-13 the past two seasons.

The Fever advanced to the conference finals in 2005 and are regarded as frontrunners for this year's championship.

In an exclusive interview with the Daily Journal, Krauskopf shares her thoughts on topics ranging from the Fever's hot start (they were 8-1 at the time of the interview) to the state of the franchise and the WNBA, and to the greatness of Catchings.

Krauskopf, a 1983 Texas A&M graduate and former basketball player for the Aggies, is the only CEO the Fever have ever had.

She also serves on the USA Basketball's Women's Senior National Team Committee, which selects WNBA players for U.S. national teams.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: You were very active in the offseason with regard to trades and signing free agents. I know it's still early, but does it appear that the offseason activity is paying off?

A: I think so. We're off to an 8-1 start, and that's the first time in franchise history we've come out of the gates that strong and still don't feel like we're playing great basketball. I think you want to still be getting better as a team this time of year, anyway, and really start hitting your stride after the All-Star (Game).

But, certainly, the early indications are good. We've put a lot of points on the board and are still working defensively as a team. The offseason activity has definitely helped make us a stronger team.

Q: What's been the difference with the new players? Is it chemistry? Is it talent? Is it a combination of both?

A: It's definitely a combination, and mixed in with that is just some experience. The players that we added are also very experienced, in Tammy Sutton-Brown and Sheri Sam, specifically. They're just experienced players. They've been in the trenches. They've played a lot of basketball in this league. And Tammy shores up a position and solidifies a position that we felt opens things up on the floor.

Anytime you have a solid center in the middle that can open up the outside, it just makes everything else flow better. So I think that directly impacts how we're able to score and how we're able to play offensively and defensively.

And then Alison Bales, she's improving every day. But 6-7, if you notice when she goes in the game, she changes the game defensively. Players don't turn around automatically and put up a shot when they get an offensive rebound because she's standing right there. She's a terrific shot-blocker.

So I think it's a combination of the talent and also the experience, and we're still learning how to play together as a group of players. But when we really start putting it together and hitting our stride, hopefully, it's going to be at the right time."

Q: You've made two straight trips to the playoffs. You've been to the conference finals. When you sat down and looked at the roster at the end of last season, what did you identify as the biggest needs?

A: The center. The post position. The first order of business was definitely adding a center, and Tammy Sutton-Brown, we were fortunate because she was a free agent. She could have signed with any team in the league, and it was a long recruiting process.

But she has had a taste of being close to the finals and is getting into (a point) in her career where she told me she wants to win, and she wanted to go to a team that she felt like had a chance to win a championship. And so I think that's ultimately why we were able to sign her."

Q: You haven't reached your ultimate goal yet, which is to win a championship, but are you pleased with the job Brian Winters has done?

A: I am. I think he's done a tremendous job. Every year I've tried to bring in more players to help us compete at a higher level. He's

been dealt a new crop of players or a new influx of players about every year, and I would say he and the coaching staff have done a good job of putting the pieces together.

We added eight new players last year in a combination of free agents and draft picks and still came out 21-13. We lost in the first round, but to win 21 games with a whole new group of players, it's tough. ... So I think he's done a tremendous job of putting the pieces together and continues to look for ways to make us better as a team.

Q: Building and retaining your fan base is always something that you're working on. The city has rallied around the Pacers and the Colts during the good times and kind of abandoned them during the lean times. How much does winning and making the playoffs help you in that area?

A: I think it's a tremendous help. We've had a good team and have represented Indianapolis very well the last three years. My hope and dream is to look up there and see every seat filled, and I know that can happen.

What we see in our league is what I call an incremental growth. You might see five or 10 new fans, and now they're hooked because they came out and tried a game one night and liked it and saw just how good these players really are. And there are a lot of what I call casual fans in the marketplace who follow our team and maybe see us when we're on television, but they haven't made it to a game yet. ... They haven't really invested themselves in it yet, and our goal through winning and putting Indy on the map is to turn those casual fans into Indiana Fever fans.

Q: For a while there it looked like you might beat the Colts and the Pacers to a championship.

A: Well, we've got long ways to go. We'd like to be the second team that does that for the city. But we're still a work in progress, and we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves, but so far we like the progress we're making. This team's really playing well together.

We're going to see some tough times. It's not going to be perfect, but the point is, it's not how you start, it's how you finish. If you start 8-1 but you finish 1-8, that's not what we want. It's all great that we're starting well, but for me, my analysis of this team and this season will be how we finish.

Q: How would you characterize the support in Indiana right now, as far as fans coming to the games?

A: I wish more folks would see us, would see this group of women. I just think this is the best in women's basketball, the highest level. They're very proud to wear the Indiana jersey. I wish for them that we had more people in the stands, and I think that will happen, because these players will do anything for this community.

They will stand and sign autographs for five hours after a game, if it means something. So for me, I wish for them that when they step out on the floor that they feel that this city's behind them. And obviously from a business standpoint, that's just going to help make us a more viable franchise. And we're working on it. We're working that direction.

They always say if you win, people will come. Well, we're winning. So we're trying to continue to make noise. And we've

won. It's not like we've had a bad team. We've been good.

Q: You've been a part of the league since the beginning, either as an administrator or in your current position. What are the biggest changes you've observed from the inception to where the league is today? Where have you seen it grow, and what challenges are still out there?

A: I've seen it grow from the basic standpoint of the game itself. Clearly, when I was at the very first game the WNBA ever played in Los Angeles in 1997 to where it is today, it's just a tremendous growth of talent and athleticism and speed and quickness.

This league is playing with a 24-second shot clock and averaging 70-something points a game. Just the individual talent that you see ... that we didn't see in '97. So that's the biggest change.

And then the passion of the fans, the fans that stuck with us and have seen this through for our 11th season. That's been phenomenal to watch. The challenge is the obvious, which is growing the fan base and continuing to reach out to mainstream America and going from people who just buy a ticket to really becoming a fan of your team or a fan of the league, where they're following you and they're buying the merchandise and doing everything it means to be a fan.

The new ownership structure is probably the third (change). When you're seeing individuals who want to buy a WNBA franchise ... we didn't see that 15 years ago. The fact that we interested investors and people that want to get in and own a piece of this league says a lot about our future and the growth of where we are as a business, and a growing business.

I can tell you this: Women and little girls are not going to stop wanting to play basketball and wanting to earn a living at this sport. Our society has changed ... In the 11 years I've been in this league, I've seen a big cultural shift in how people see girls and women in sports.

Q: In the past you've mentioned that attracting more male fans is an objective. Do you feel like you've made some strides in that area.

A: I do, yes, absolutely. Through television, through ESPN, and through the dad-daughter fan base. Across the league, my counterparts, we talk a lot about how the father-daughter connection continues to be the biggest growth area, dads bringing their daughters (to games). They don't have to be basketball players. They can be a soccer player or a volleyball player or just enjoy sports in general, to come see women professional athletes in a team sport, not in tennis or golf, but in a team sport (and see players) excel at the highest level and be tremendous role models off the floor and gracious and competitive but helping each other up off the floor and having fun.

I think that's where we'll get the growth of the male fan base, because we have a generation of fathers today who grew up with their sisters playing basketball, or their wives might have been college athletes. And now they have daughters, and they want to expose their daughters to this. That's taken 10 years. That's a generation of dads who are now in that age category who want to experience this with their daughters.

Q: How would you characterize your long-term outlook for the league as a whole? Do feel that it's on solid footing?

A: Yeah, I do. And I say that because of the cities out there that still want in. If we were sitting here today and teams were contracting and we weren't having interest from other cities and other investors, then I would be concerned.

But we continually have interest from national sponsors, and (WNBA commissioner) Donna Orender and the staff in New York does a great job, and we have people that want in, want to continue to buy franchises.

And women's professional team sports, OK, is still a relatively new phenomenon in our country. I probably will be gone when it gets to the level I want to see it be at. I might be wheeled out in a wheelchair or something for some 40-year anniversary. But I tell our players all the time, "We're building this for someone else." We're building this for someone's 4-year-old little daughter.

We're not going to reap the benefits of where we want to go. We're going to know that we built it, and I'm proud of that. I'll always want more, but I stay focused and conscious of what we're actually doing in the present moment, and that impacts me.

Q: Talk about Tamika Catchings for a moment. It's no secret she's one of the best players in the world. She seems to be taking her game right now even to another level. Maybe this is not a fair question for you, but is she the best player in your league right now?

A: I think she is. This year, I've seen her take her offensive game this offseason ... she's playing as good offensively as she's ever played, coming out of the gates this year, and I think she made a conscious effort to really work on her shooting, getting a little more consistent with her shooting percentage.

Tamika can fill a stat box with everything possible, which shows you how valuable she is to a team, from assists to steals to rebounds to shooting to blocks, to everything.

She is the most complete player and best player in the league. Refining and really working on her offensive game and her shooting percentage, to me, is what has turned the corner for her this year. She's shooting the ball as well as I've ever seen her.

Q: She's so good she often overshadows everyone on the floor, but clearly you're not a one-player team. Who would you say are some of your unsung heroes?

A: Oh, gosh, I hate to single them out. We had a meeting before the season started. I started it by saying every person in here is here for a reason. All 12 of you are here by design, whether it's for depth or experience. ... Every player is important for us to get there. To me, they're all unsung heroes.

Tamika, she knows she doesn't have to do it all every night. She did that the last two or three years. That doesn't mean she's going to stop playing that way. She's going to continue to play the way she plays because that's just her game, that's her.

And she inspires the other players. They'll often say, "I wish I could do what Catch does." But I think that we have 12 players that were put together by design.

Next year, we're set up a little bit like the NFL, where we have a hard salary cap and we have free agency, and we may lose a player or two. But this is a big year for us.

Q: Last question. What do you enjoy about your job, and how long do you see yourself doing it?

A: What I enjoy about? Definitely the players, the basketball side and knowing this is a dream for them, as much as it is a dream for me. When I was a young girl growing up in South Texas, I don't think I ever dreamed that I would be getting paid to do this. And sometimes I just have to stop and pinch myself that this is actually what I do for a living.

So I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I feel that from our players, too. It's just tremendous to work with them. And I guess I'll keep doing this as long as they'll have me. Because I was there in the beginning with the WNBA, I feel I was part of starting this league, it's hard for me to see myself doing something else. I'm not saying that I never would, but it's become part of me.

I have a passion for seeing it go and seeing it work. If I pass it off to somebody else, I know I've done the best I can and it'll be in good hands.

This league is going to keep growing, and this franchise here in Indy is going to keep growing.

HOW THEY'VE FARED

Season	Record	Playoffs
2007	9-2	Season in progress
2006	21-13	Lost in conference semis
2005	21-13	Lost in conference finals
2004	15-19	No playoffs
2003	16-18	No playoffs
2002	16-16	Lost in first round
2001	10-22	No playoffs
2000	9-23	No playoffs