



CURE FOR THE BLUES

*A league beset by scandal needs a transcendent star—and the WNBA has one in **Elena Delle Donne**, who puts up historic numbers as easily as she shuts up trolls and haters*

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Photograph by
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For Sports Illustrated

CHICAGO'S HOPE

When she's not hanging at the Lincoln Park Zoo this season, Delle Donne is averaging a career high 34.2 minutes and has missed only one game because of Lyme disease.

ELENA DELLE DONNE walked right into the double team. Had such a trap been set during a WNBA game or even a practice, she might have seen it coming. She is, after all, a surpassingly poised and fundamentally sound 6' 5" forward (6' 8" with bun) who is as comfortable spotting up for a three, facing up a traditional center in the paint or throwing down a dunk. But before Delle Donne could reach the comfort of the locker room at the Sky's practice gym, she was ambushed by the Chicago's social media manager, Lauren Niemiera, and videographer Amy Koeller, collectively armed with a laptop, a camera and an idea for a quick video shoot. The concept they had in mind, Mean Tweets, was familiar to Delle Donne from watching the bit on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* in which celebrities read and react to unkind things said about them on Twitter.

She had already filmed one Mean Tweets episode, in which the most caustic comments suggested that she marry a certain Cavaliers guard so that the name on her jersey would read DELLE DONNE-DELLAVEDOVA. Then on June 24, the night before this practice, Delle Donne scored a career-high 45 points in a 100–96 overtime defeat of the Atlanta Dream. "It was one of those games that's a blur," she says. "I just remember feeling very confident, whatever I put up was going to go in." *SportsCenter* quickly tweeted out the key stats from her epic performance, in which she shot 60.0%, drained 19 straight free throws, grabbed 11 rebounds and blocked six shots—even if the tweeter spelled her name Della Donne.



DAVID DOWNBAE/GETTY IMAGES

ELENA DELLE DONNE

Niemiera tracked the reactions to ESPN's tweet deep into the night. Men make up 70% of the WNBA's viewing audience on ESPN but close to 100% of the social media trolls. "Any time a major network posts something about women's sports, it's like there's a total divide," Niemiera says. "If you're not pro, you're totally against."

Once Niemiera and Kohler handed over a laptop loaded with a selection of sexist material, the 25-year-old Delle Donne didn't need much coaxing to participate. One user wrote, "I'd rather watch professional lawn mowing." Another piled on, "Better be men's professional lawn mowing though. The women's game is fundamentally solid, but there's no pizzaz [sic]." When Delle Donne read, "that doesn't look like a kitchen to me," her eyes widened. "Oh, my goodness!" she said with a mix of shock and sarcasm. "People are absurd! My God, welcome to 2015. How does he even have a computer?"

Released on June 25, the 2½-minute video made Delle Donne a trending topic all over again. Publicity has often been a challenge for the WNBA, but in this, its 19th season, news hooks have not been hard to find.

"She's every bit as good posting up as she is a jump shooter and shotmaker and playmaker," says an opposing coach.

ONE MARK of a league's maturity is an ability to generate headlines, then consider the W all grown up. The first bombshell dropped last February, when superstar guard Diana Taurasi—who led the Phoenix Mercury to the 2014 title—announced that she was sitting out the '15 season. UMMC Ekaterinburg, the Russian Premier League team that she plays for during the winter, offered her close to 15 times her WNBA salary, or about \$1.5 million, to take her first summer vacation since turning pro in 2004.

On April 22, 6' 8" Mercury center Brittney Griner, the 2014 defensive player of the year, made headlines when she and her fiancée, Glory Johnson (a forward for the Tulsa Shock) were arrested on misdemeanor charges of assault and disorderly conduct. (Each player was suspended for seven games by the league. Griner agreed to undergo 26 weeks of



domestic violence counseling in exchange for a full dismissal of the charges. Johnson pleaded not guilty, and the charges against her were dropped in June.) Three weeks after the arrests they were married. A month after that, Johnson announced she was pregnant and would miss the '15 season. The next day Griner filed for an annulment. Johnson subsequently revealed she was carrying twins.

While that saga was playing out, Seattle Storm center Lauren Jackson and Los Angeles Sparks forward Candace Parker, who have won a combined five MVP trophies, took their own sabbaticals from the WNBA—Jackson to recover from a series of knee surgeries and Parker to rebound from a long season abroad with UMMC Ekaterinburg. (She returned to action on July 29, and was averaging 16.4 points and 9.8 rebounds through week's end.)

Then on May 6, Isiah Thomas was named president of the New York Liberty. The hiring came eight years after a jury awarded \$11.6 million to former Knicks executive Anucha Browne Sanders in a sexual harassment suit brought against Madison Square Garden, parent company of the Liberty and the Knicks. As president of basketball operations

MAKING IT COUNT

Delle Donne is one of the league's most effective shooters (33.5 PER) for the WNBA's most efficient offense.

for the Knicks, Thomas had created a hostile work environment for Sanders. Protesters surrounded the Garden for the Liberty's first home game, and the WNBA players' union is trying to prevent Thomas from taking an ownership stake in the team. (On June 22 the league and the Liberty agreed to table the ownership discussion indefinitely.)

And just when the WNBA seemed poised to return to its usual place on the agate page, Shock majority owner Bill Cameron announced plans on July 20 to relocate the team to Dallas-Fort Worth. "It's unfortunate that the problems get us top of mind," says Sky coach Pokey Chatman, "but at least it has some different people tuning in."

Delle Donne, the WNBA's best—and most popular—player, has provided plenty of reasons for people to tune in. Through Sunday she ranked fourth in rebounds (8.8) and third in blocks (2.08), and her scoring average (24.2) was three points

WHO WILL CHALLENGE DELLE DONNE FOR MVP?



MAYA MOORE

The 6-foot forward and 2014 MVP has led the Lynx to the top of the Western Conference with 21.2 points and 7.0 rebounds per game.



TINA CHARLES

As the Liberty's offensive focal point, the 6' 4" center is averaging 17.6 points, 9.1 boards and a career-high 2.4 assists.



BRITTNEY GRINER

No player has a greater impact on D than the 6' 8" Mercury center, who averages 4.35 blocks (plus 15.4 points and 8.5 rebounds).

higher than that of the next most prodigious player, Minnesota Lynx forward Maya Moore. Delle Donne maintains that advantage despite taking the majority of her shots from midrange and beyond the arc; her success rate, 47.1%, is tied for sixth among players who average at least 10 attempts. "And she's not just a perimeter player," says Minnesota assistant Jim Petersen. "She's every bit as good posting up as she is a jump shooter and shotmaker and playmaker. She's like our Kevin Durant."

Delle Donne topped the All-Star balloting with 18,034 votes. It was her third straight selection but the first time she was healthy enough to participate. She missed the 2013 game with a concussion. Last year she was suffering from a flare-up of Lyme disease, a chronic ailment she contracted in 2008 on her family's 35-acre property near Wilmington, Del. Her illness also sidelined her for 17 regular-season games. Delle Donne bounced back, though, to lead the Sky to their first WNBA Finals, only to be shut down again with back spasms. (Her absence paved the way for a three-game sweep by Taurasi, Griner & Co.)

EMALE ATHLETES are having a moment in 2015. As triumphs pile up for performers such as the U.S. women's soccer team, Serena Williams and Ronda Rousey, more and more skeptics are becoming fans. Women's pro basketball, however, is still not feeling the love. There remains a vocal population that won't settle for simply not watching the women play. These particular fans feel, more or less, that women have no business being on a basketball court.

Much of the criticism of the women's game stems from the fact that it is—most of the time—played below the rim. A June op-ed in *The New York Times* suggested that the WNBA lower the baskets to increase interest. "Currently," wrote Asher Price, a reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*, "the women's game relies on jump shots, which translates to lower shooting percentages and a more workaday style." A study done by the WNBA, however, compared the flow of the women's game with the NBA's and found nearly identical numbers: The women scored 87.1% of their points in the half-court (compared with the men's 86.3%) and 12.9% of their points in transition (versus 13.7%).

Lowering the rims is not a new argument; former WNBA president Val Ackerman and UConn coach Gene Auriemma have supported such a measure. What's more, Delle Donne says she "is not completely opposed" to one of the central points made in the *Times* op-ed, that dunking would give women "the opportunity to fully express their raw athleticism."

"I'd be able to throw down dunks a lot easier,"



ELENA DELLE DONNE

she says. If there is an element of dunking that troubles her, it's that it overshadows other, more nuanced aspects of the game. "People expect [dunks] all the time," she says. "It has gotten rid of the heart of what basketball is—the fundamentals, and that's what the women's game represents. I don't know. I love the fundamentals. I'm a fundamental player."

FINALS DESTINATION

MVP talk is nice, but Delle Donne wants nothing more than to lead the Sky to its first title.

THE ONLY VULNERABILITY in Delle Donne's game is something she can't fully control: Lyme disease. Chatman says the illness never dissuaded her from selecting Delle Donne, then a Delaware senior, with the No. 2 pick (after Griner) in the 2013 draft. "I used to watch Elena play when she played AAU ball as a teenager, knowing she wasn't coming to the South and I was coaching at LSU," Chatman recalls. "She was just so fun to watch. Now we're back together."

Delle Donne, though, didn't feel like a lock to end up in Chicago—a city she knew almost nothing about. ("Me being clueless," she says, "when we flew in and I saw Lake Michigan, I was like, There's an ocean in Chicago? I had no idea that lakes could be that big.") She worried that her protracted battles with Lyme, which had cost her 18 starts in college, might sour the Sky and others. "Teams worry about injuries," she says, "and that's something you can heal and never have to worry about again. But an illness that has shown in the past that I've relapsed over and over? That's scary."

Chatman, though, did her homework. She researched the disease extensively, to the point where she can "talk the Lyme lingo," Delle Donne says, "which is nice because a lot of people don't even believe it's a real thing." Even more frustrating than the flare-ups—which Delle Donne describes as like having the flu with a migraine thrown in for kicks—is the fact that there is no cure, much less a standard regimen for prevention and recovery. "There's a big rift between the holistic community and the medical community," says Chatman, "but Elena knows her body."

Managing that body is almost like a second job for Delle Donne, who takes more than 50 supplements a day. She also spends a lot of time on the massage table, and locked in furious internal debates about what to eat and

how much to rest. Another way she protects herself is by not playing during the off-season. "It would just be too much on my body," says Delle Donne, who hasn't lacked lucrative offers from foreign teams. "I told my agent, 'Don't even tell me the numbers. I don't want to know.'"

While she does make extra money through endorsements with Nike, DuPont and Bikini.com, as well as through speaking engagements, not going overseas gives Delle Donne months to work on her game, on her own turf and at her own pace. That enabled her to become even more versatile in Year 1 (when she finished as the league's top rookie), pack on 12 pounds of muscle in Year 2 (though her dedication to accomplish this may have contributed to that early Lyme-related flare-up) and take on added defensive responsibilities in Year 3 (in the absence of All-Star center Sylvia Fowles, who refused to play the first 17 games until she was traded to Minnesota).

While the Sky (15–11 at week's end) are still developing on defense (they allow 1.019 points per possession, which ranks seventh in the league), they lead the league in offensive efficiency (1.057 PPP, compared with 99.0 last season). The improved scoring is due to Delle Donne's ability to play off All-Star combo guard Cappie Pondexter (15.1 points and 2.0 assists) and point guard Courtney Vander-sloot (11.3 points, 5.8 assists), as well as guard Allie Quigley (10.0 points, 42.0% shooting).

Delle Donne is playing a career-high 34.2 minutes and says she's feeling good. Resting in the off-season has been the right decision for her, though she might make one exception to represent her country in the 2016 Rio Games. "She is legitimately a contender for [the national] team," says director Carol Callan, who is spoiled for choices to fill 12 roster spots. "And it wouldn't necessarily require someone to get injured for her either."

She would love nothing more than to end the season with a championship and then head to Colorado Springs to join the national team in training camp. She could team up with another coach—Auriemma, whose UConn program she famously joined for two days before leaving Storrs and ending up at Delaware.

Delle Donne knows she's bound to be criticized no matter what she does. But she welcomes the chance to stand up for the game she loves. If more Mean Tweets videos need to be filmed, so be it. She can give as good as she gets. "People can hide behind a computer screen and think they're all big and bad," she says. "It's fun to call 'em out." □