



# birmingham power

## Women's Professional Basketball Team

BY LOYD McINTOSH  
PHOTO BY NIK LAYMAN

University of Maryland before being drafted by the WNBA's Chicago Sting in 1998. A free agent since 1991, Chase bounced around the WNBA and international leagues before arriving in Birmingham for training camp last December. With her first foray in the NWBL, Chase hopes to parlay this experience into another opportunity in the WNBA.

"I'm 28 right now, and I'm the oldest player on the team, so I'm kind of looked up to as a leader by the other girls on the team," says Chase. "I have to provide that veteran leadership for these younger players and lead by example."

Chase's story isn't unusual. Many players, male and female, travel from team to team and league to league, looking for the break that will get them back in the big leagues and, hopefully, a sizeable contract. Chase has played professionally in Greece, Turkey, and China as well as in several leagues in the United States. It's a

**B**IRMINGHAM'S RELATIONSHIP with professional basketball can be described as shaky at best. The Magic City has never been known as a round-ball haven, even though sports-minded businessmen have continued to bring teams here over the years in an effort to make Birmingham a basketball town.

The first professional basketball team to call Birmingham home was the Birmingham Skyhawks, from the short-lived Professional Basketball League of America way back in 1947. The team was 5-2 before the league folded, and soon the Skyhawks were history.

Since then the CBA brought the Birmingham Bandits to town for one dreadful season in 1992, and there is talk of a World Basketball League team tipping off this spring. Still another team—this one with the revived American Basketball Association—could begin action next year. But unbeknownst to many, there is a professional team that has quietly worked to establish itself as a part of the community for the past four years: the Birmingham Power.

The Power is one of eight teams in the National Women's Basketball League (NWBL), a small pro league with a season that runs from January through early May, ending just weeks before the NBA-backed WNBA tips off its season. The Birmingham Power first took to the court in 2001 and, while they have been a fairly successful team in terms of wins and losses, that success hasn't always translated to fans in the seats.

However, for the women who make up the team's roster—many of whom have played basketball overseas, in other semi-pro leagues, and even in the WNBA—the chance to come to the gym every day, earn a pay check, interact personally with fans, and, perhaps, make an impression on a scout or two is what it's all about.

Take the Power's starting point-guard Sonia Chase, for instance. Chase is a Baltimore native who played college basketball at the

cycle of basketball that can result in little time off during the year as players regularly start a new season with a brand-new team in a new league as soon as one season ends.

"Basketball is my profession, so playing year-round isn't a big deal. It's all about getting a chance to work on your skills and increasing your visibility and getting paid for it, too," Chase says.

According to Power head coach Martin Clapp, players' pay varies widely depending on experience and name recognition. Players who have WNBA experience command larger contracts with hopes they can attract fans. Less experienced players earn much less, but still get the chance to play professional basketball.

"Most of these girls earn \$1,000 for the season, so they have part-time jobs to supplement their incomes," Clapp says. "We have two players who teach high school and were allowed to miss these three months in order to play for us. But we also have some players in the league who are making \$20,000 during the season."

Clapp, who spent nine years as the head women's basketball coach at the University of Louisville, came to Birmingham last year as an assistant coach before taking over as head coach toward the end of the 2004 season. His college teams regularly played in front of crowds of 7,000 or more as compared to the Power, which draws anywhere from 150 to about 2,000 per home game at Boutwell Auditorium.

However, Clapp says fans are increasing and are knowledgeable about the game. He and his players enjoy interacting with fans on a more personal basis. He also likes the city's lifestyle and hospitality, which were eye openers to the former college coach who never spent more than a couple of days in Birmingham during his time with Louisville.

"I really like it here. I don't feel like I'm in a strange land here in Birmingham, and I love the sweet tea," he says with a smile. ☺

For tickets visit [www.nwbl.com/power](http://www.nwbl.com/power).