

MIKE THIBAUT – INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY

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The successful head coach of the Connecticut Sun swapped hats during the offseason to be an assistant for Team USA as it qualified to play in the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

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As he prepares to enter his sixth season as the head coach of the Connecticut Sun, Mike Thibault continues to burnish his reputation as one of the WNBA's best coaches. He has led the Sun into the playoffs each year since the franchise relocated from Orlando before the 2003 season.

Thibault entered the NBA ranks in 1978 as a scout for the Los Angeles Lakers, and was promoted to director of scouting and assistant coach in 1980. The Lakers won two World Championships (1980, 1982) during his tenure. From 1982-1986, he was an assistant coach and director of scouting for the Chicago Bulls during a period when the franchise drafted Michael Jordan and Charles Oakley, while also acquiring John Paxson.

From 1987-88 Thibault was the general manager and head coach of the Calgary 88's of the World Basketball League (WBL), earning WBL Coach of the Year honors in 1988.

In 1989, Thibault began a remarkable eight-year run as general manager and head coach of CBA's Omaha Racers. The Racers made the playoffs each season (1989-97) under his watch, bringing home a CBA title in 1993, and a return to the finals in 1994. Thibault was named 1993 Sportsman of the Year by the Omaha sportscasters, and ranks sixth on the CBA all-time coaching victory list (236).

In March of 1995, he coached the silver medal winning USA National Team at the Pan American Games, and in August of 1993, he served as head coach of the gold medal-winning USA National Team at the World Championship Qualifying Tournament in Puerto Rico.

He spent the 1997-98 season as a scout for the Seattle Sonics.

In his rookie season as a WNBA head coach – following a four-year stint with the Milwaukee Bucks – Thibault led the Connecticut Sun to the first playoff series victory in franchise history, a 2-0 sweep of the second-seeded Charlotte Sting in August of 2003. Although Connecticut would succumb to the eventual WNBA champion Detroit Shock in the Eastern Conference Finals, Thibault guided the team to what was then the best season in the history of the franchise.

Between 2005 and 2006, he led the team to consecutive 28-6 records, the best two-year record (.764) ever by an Eastern Conference team. Under Thibault's guidance, the Sun have won three Eastern Conference regular season titles, four trips to the Eastern Conference Finals, and two trips to the WNBA Finals.

All in all, Thibault has compiled a 106-64 regular season in his five years at the Connecticut helm and was named the 2006 WNBA Coach of the Year. But to this point, a WNBA championship has eluded this well respected leader. Can he and the Sun change that fact next year?

Under Thibault, Connecticut has been one of the most aggressive teams in the league in the offseason, not hesitating to make deals that improve the roster. Seven of the nine trades in franchise history have occurred since the team relocated from Orlando to Connecticut. Among the players acquired by Thibault as a result of these trades are Lindsay Whalen, Asjha Jones, Margo Dydek and Tamika Whitmore.

In September of 2006, Thibault served as an assistant coach, along with Duke coach Gail Goestenkors and Temple coach Dawn Staley on the staff of head coach Anne Donovan, on the 2006 USA Women's Basketball Team that won the bronze medal at the 2006 World Championships in Sao Paolo, Brazil.

At the conclusion of the 2007 WNBA season, Thibault was back on the international circuit again, once more serving as an assistant for the U.S. National Team that qualified for the 2008 Summer Olympics by winning the 2007 FIBA Americas Championship for Women in Valdivia, Chile.

Upon his return to the U.S., Thibault took some time to share his thoughts on the international game, the United States team, and our chances for gold in Beijing with Inside Connecticut Sports.

Inside Connecticut Sports: There must have been a real sense of accomplishment winning the Gold Medal, especially given the stakes.

Mike Thibault: Although it's a great accomplishment, I feel a sense of relief more than anything else that now we can concentrate on training for the Olympics themselves instead of worrying about getting there. Now we have to do the

things necessary to be a good team once we get there. Up until now we've been worried about doing what we need to do to get there, so it's a much better mindset at the moment.

ICS: As is the case with men's basketball, it seems clear the rest of the world is catching up with the United States in women's basketball.

Thibault: Well it certainly has caught up in a couple of countries in our zone. I think that Cuba and Brazil for sure and Canada, who is improving, have proven to be top-notch teams. Cuba has put themselves in the ranks of maybe the top eight teams in the world right now, so playing them was a challenge. You could probably easily say that there are seven or eight players on the Cuban team who could play in the WNBA, and many of them could start for their teams right now. Brazil already has some of those kinds of players. We've seen what Australia and Russia have done over the last eight years, and teams in Europe are catching up. It's getting much more competitive every year.

ICS: Was there any country that particularly impressed or surprised you?

Thibault: I don't think anybody surprised me, other than how much Cuba had gotten more disciplined as a team over the last year. We played them in the world championships and you could see that they were getting better, but they weren't as cohesive as they are now. I think the surprise might be in how Brazil was able to maintain a high level of excellence despite the youth movement in their program. Their young core of players will serve them well over the next year or so.

ICS: With an abundance of young players on the United States team, how do you think that has impacted the program?

Thibault: Well, our national team program is in a serious transition from a veteran-laden team to a much younger team, and so we need the veterans that are still there to be great leaders. I thought Tina Thompson in particular was great down there. She took on some defensive challenges that maybe had not been asked of her before. We hope to have Lisa Leslie be part of the group still, so she would be another experienced veteran. It's a tough transition when you go through what we're going through and handing over the team to a group of talented but, on the international stage, an inexperienced group. Diana [Taurasi] and Sue [Bird] and all those players are really, really good players, but they haven't had the pressure of the US National Team on their shoulders right now. I think this was a good experience for them to start taking on those leadership roles.

ICS: The final roster for the Olympic team still seems to be unsettled.

Thibault: We're still pretty unsure what our final roster will look like next summer. We've got a lot of players that are in the pool of players being considered for this that were not [in Chile], mainly due to injuries. Between Lisa Leslie, Sheryl Swoops, Tamika Catchings, Asjha Jones, Taj McWilliams-Franklin, Katie Douglas, Alana Beard – all those people were injured and unavailable. We have a lot of work to do and that's why the next few training sessions coming up are so important to try to see how different players fit in, who plays together well and who fits certain roles that we'll need against the teams we will play against in Beijing.

ICS: You've been an assistant coach before, of course, but what's it been like to go back to handling the duties of an assistant after five years as a WNBA head coach?

Thibault: It was fine. I enjoyed it. You go back to doing more of the daily scouting and preparation, game film, those kinds of things. There are a couple of advantages, I think. It makes me appreciate my own assistants more, because sometimes you forget as a head coach what that involves. I've done so many years on the NBA, you know, but going back to doing it is still different. I find it much easier to stay calm in game situations. There's a different mindset. I tend to be a lot more analytical sometimes. It's great. We have a great staff. Everybody gets along great, there aren't any egos involved. It's been good.

ICS: Did it help to have this tournament come up so quickly after such an abrupt end to the Connecticut Sun season?

Thibault: It probably was good for my mind to get into something right away without having to dwell on some things for a while. It's a long enough off-season as it is. You get plenty of time to rehash, rethink, plan. I think it also helps you think about things that you can or should do in the future when you jump into a different system, different players, you get reminded sometimes of things that are important to you that you need to put back in play for your own team. I could have used a little bit more of a break, mainly for the sake of my family more than anything else. There are some advantages, though. I get to go and see a lot of players from other countries; to evaluate them, see how they compare.

ICS: Did you think it gave you any kind of competitive advantage for the 2008 WNBA season?

Thibault: One benefit of being with the USA Team is that I got a chance to see some of the lesser known European players up close. Also, with the college tour, though any WNBA coach can come watch those games, I got to see up close how some of the top NCAA talent fares against WNBA players. [The National Team easily defeated UConn, 90-74,

in the Huskies's first exhibition game of the season at Gampel Pavilion. Interestingly, freshman superstar Maya Moore still managed to score in double digits.] So what I might lose in time away from home and from my own office, I gain in the access I'm getting to some other players. The only thing I don't get is a break! That's the one thing I have to really figure out: how I'm going to take some time off away from the game."

ICS: One final request … gaze into your crystal ball and give us a prediction for the upcoming season. A WNBA Championship, perhaps?

Thibault: Well, that's kind of the way we approach every year. If you don't have a title as your goal, I think you tend to fall shorter than you should. Maybe we got what we deserved this year… I don't know. But our talent level and our experience say that we should be a contender again, especially bringing a healthy Erin Phillips back [Phillips, a fiery guard, missed the entire 2007 season with an injury, but played in her native Australia this past winter] and adding Sandrine Gruda. [Gruda, a 20-year-old, 6-foot-2-inch center, was selected in the first round of last year's draft, but opted to play in her native France. She is said to be ready to play in the WNBA this year since France did not qualify for the Olympics.] We should be in the mix. Now we just have to prove it.

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