AP source: Breanna Stewart to be WNBA ambassador this season

By DOUG FEINBERG
AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK — Breanna Stewart will be a paid ambassador for the WNBA this season.

The reigning league MVP tore her right Achilles tendon while playing overseas this winter. Because the league has no injury list for teams, the Seattle Storm suspended Stewart without pay to free up a roster spot.

The WNBA will pay Stewart in excess of the roughly $65,000 base salary she would have made with the Storm, according to a person familiar with the details. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity on Thursday night because no official announcement has been made.

Seattle potentially could have kept Stewart on the active roster, but the Storm also lost Sue Bird indefinitely to a knee injury this week, meaning they would have started the season with only 10 healthy players. There is a clause in the current CBA if a team gets below 10 healthy players, it can sign a replacement player until the team gets back above 10.

The union, which was informed of the Stewart decision, is interested in some kind of change, whether it's in the form of an injured reserve list or a roster expansion.

"We thought it was a great idea and encouraged the league to think of other players that would make great ambassadors," said Terri Jackson, executive director of the WNBPA. "We wanted to see how it develops as the concept and plan rolls out. This league is represented by many great players."

It will be a big topic of discussion around the CBA, which expires after this season because the players opted out at the end of 2018 season.

"That's definitely something that would help the league grow," Los Angeles Sparks star Nneka Ogwumike, president of the players' union, said in 2017. "It's all about resources and talking about the logistics of everything. Looking forward, we'd like to spark that type of change."

The league had an injury list from 1997-2005. Players had to sit out a minimum of three games from the date they were placed on the list. Then the WNBA had a two-person inactive list from 2006-08 before rosters were reduced to 11 in 2009. Rosters are back up to 12 now.

Chiney Ogwumike missed 2015 and 2017 because of two separate injuries. In 2015, she had microfracture surgery on her knee and the Connecticut Sun kept her on the roster all year, costing them a spot. Although Ogwumike couldn't play, she was still the face of the franchise while making appearances.

Two years later when she hurt her Achilles tendon, the Sun suspended her, freeing up the roster spot and not having to pay her.

AP photo

Seattle Storm's Breanna Stewart in action against the Phoenix Mercury in a WNBA basketball playoff semifinal in Seattle. A person familiar with the decision says that Stewart will act as an ambassador for the WNBA this season and be paid by the league after the reigning MVP tore her Achilles over the winter and is out for the year. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity on Thursday night, May 23, 2019, because no official announcement has been made.

DONALD

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"Go out there and play and let the game come to you, and good things come from that. It's worked for me so far."

All he's done is become a nightmare assignment in the middle since the Rams drafted him with a first-round pick in 2014 out of the University of Pittsburgh. Donald, who turned 28 on Thursday, is listed at 6-foot-1, 280 pounds — not the usual measurements for a dominating inside presence.

And yet dominating is what he's been against the run and chasing QBs. With his speed, strength and athleticism, he's become the NFL prototype.

"You open up doors for the next guy, who opens up doors for the next," Donald explained. "You do your job and do it at a high level and keep working and do what you're supposed to do, everybody has an opportunity to do great things. Just got to have that mindset and that will to want to do it."

Over the offseason, he again used the fake knives to help him improve his agility. His trainer would lunge at him with a blade in each hand and Donald knocked it away — just like he would the arms of an opposing offensive lineman.

"Trying to work on my hand speed and reaction," Donald said. "I go through different things in my training to think outside the box. Think of things that can help me. Just trying to outwork myself every year to be better."

Next up, distance running. Well, maybe.

Although his training is built around short distances, he's contemplating a 5-kilometer (3.1 mile) race down the road, especially after meeting a group of kids as part of Girls on the Run, an organization that teaches young girls life skills through running activities. Donald surprised them at a DICK'S Sporting Goods store in the Los Angeles area and helped them line up new running gear.

Donald even went for a little jog with the kids.

"Just trying to keep up with the girls," said Donald, who recently made a seven-figure donation to the University of Pittsburgh's Football Championship Fund. "I have 10-yard bursts in me. That (5K race) would be tough. Got to have a lot of stamina and training. I'll probably get it done."

An endeavor for later.

These days, it's all about leading the Rams back to the Super Bowl. They lost a defensive showdown with the Patriots in a game in which Donald had five tackles and one quarterback hit. He showed up at the offseason workouts, relishing the chance to develop even more cohesion with teammates.

"Being there and working with these guys, pushing these guys and getting these guys ready, it's only going to make us better," Donald said. "We're pushing each other, because we want to do something special this year."

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