

Griner relishes new life as pro

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10-year WNBA veteran Diana Taurasi says. "She's not trying to be anyone she's not. She's not trying to be an actress. She's not trying to be a rapper. She's Brittney Griner, who plays basketball at the highest level.

"She's really re-energized the WNBA and revived the whole city (of Phoenix) with women's basketball."

CHANGING THE LEAGUE

On the court, Griner is a shot-blocking, dunking, emotional superstar. Off it, she's an active longboarder, listens to Jimi Hendrix before games and Trace Adkins after, will soon be wearing clothes branded for men as part of a multiyear endorsement deal with Nike and has two pet snakes, Audi and Sage.

Griner's formula of openness gives the league, in many ways still seeking an identity with the American public, a star who's highly unpredictable yet uniquely marketable.

"I think you're seeing more guys who are basketball fans purchasing tickets and watching WNBA games because of Brittney," says Mercury owner Robert Sarver, who also owns the NBA's Phoenix Suns.

Val Ackerman, the WNBA's founding president and a former president of USA Basketball, says, "She's certainly a once-in-a-generation type of player, and she has the opportunity to elevate the visibility of the WNBA in a completely new way. Fans of today are more interested in the story behind an athlete.

"The fact that Brittney embraces who she is can only help the game. ... We're seeing a star player making a stand, and we haven't always seen that in the league."

Griner offers a brand of athleticism never before seen in the WNBA. In the Mercury's season-opening game against the Chicago Sky — Griner's first WNBA game — she threw down two power dunks in what was the most-viewed WNBA game on ESPN2 in nine years.

"Before games, I'll have fans wearing the opponents' attire and they'll be like, 'I came to watch you dunk.' And I'm like, 'So you came to see me dunk on your team, basically?' That's cool," says Griner, who considers defense and shot-blocking her biggest strengths.

"There's a lot of expectations; I get that. There's a lot of, 'She has to change the league.' But I just feel like if I play ball the way I know how, I can help make the league more exciting."

The Mercury started the season 0-3 despite being picked as the favorite to win the WNBA title in 2013, showing that Griner's impact on the game won't simply happen overnight.

"As far as changing the game, how the game is played, I don't see that," New York Liberty coach and former NBA big man Bill Laimbeer says. "No one player can completely change the league. ... Guards dictate it. Even Wilt (Chamberlain) only won (two championships)."

Griner's two effortless slams set a record for dunks in a WNBA game and tied a league record for dunks in a career. And that came after she made 18 dunks at Baylor.



Brittney Griner, showing off tattoos at a Phoenix shop, says there are more to come: "I want to get the full sleeve like DeCarlo (her brother)."

Still, dunking is only part of Griner's game.

"She gives so much more than dunks to the game," Mercury coach Corey Gaines says. "She runs like a deer in transition. Her shot-blocking ability is so huge. But it's going to take time for her to adjust and

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Bill Laimbeer, Liberty coach

dominate. ... In time, she'll change the game. She already has. There's a three-second rule on defense this season that I don't think is a coincidence."

Taurasi has taken a mentoring role, teaching Griner the intricacies of the pick-and-roll, which she had never run before.

"I think it's incredible for her to come in as the most popular and marketed player, and she walks into the locker room ready to work like everybody else," Taurasi says.

After the season, like most WNBA players, Griner plans to continue playing overseas. She signed a multi-year deal with Zhejiang Chouzhou of China.

She also plans to suit up for the U.S. national team, something she didn't do in college. Griner told USA TODAY Sports it was definitely a goal to play in the 2016 Olympics after passing on the 2012 team for family reasons.

As the WNBA pushes its new star further into the spotlight, Griner has slowly been answering the question: Who is Brittney Griner?

"Most athletes act all unhuman and you can't relate to them. I'm the exact opposite," Griner says.

Over the course of a two-day interview with USA TODAY Sports, Griner recalled a time when there were



PHOTOS BY THE (PHOENIX) ARIZONA REPUBLIC
Griner clowns around with Mercury teammate Diana Taurasi.

more tears than smiles. Growing up, she was the victim of bullying. The name calling still resonates, and she still endures online jabs questioning

her femininity, among other things.

"The bullying I dealt with as a child was very tough. It kind of shaped who I am now," Griner says. "Those people would say their mean things, ignorant things, and go about their business and have a great day while I'd be sitting there crying, hating everything, not wanting to be around. You've got to brush it off. Now, I can relate to a younger crowd or anyone who's gone through bullying."

"You've got to smile in everyone's face, even if you're crying on the inside."

COMING OUT

Part of Griner's transition into being herself came with being open about her sexuality.

In April, Griner revealed she is gay, an announcement Griner says was an easy decision when she considered the large number of people her message could reach.

"I've heard people say, 'Why do you need to say you're gay? Keep your personal life to yourself.' I say to them, 'What about the kids who need someone to look up to?'"

"Just knowing that you can help somebody out, that's a feeling you can't express."

In a story in *ESPN The Magazine*, Griner said she kept her sexuality a secret at Baylor, claiming coach Kim Mulkey insinuated it would hinder recruiting and the program's image.

"Look, Brittney wasn't able to be Brittney at Baylor," Taurasi says. "That happens all over America. We all feel that way, like your program is more important when you're at that age. But in reality, without her, who gives a (expletive) about Baylor?"

Mulkey issued a statement to USA TODAY Sports about the ESPN report and Taurasi's comments saying she couldn't comment on Griner's personal matters.

Griner has received positive and negative feedback for her choice to be open with her sexuality, a choice that coincided with Jason Collins becoming the first openly gay NBA player.

"He was very brave to step out like

that," Griner says of Collins. "By him coming out, hopefully others will come out as well. ... I hope it gets to the point where the reaction to being gay is, 'Oh, that's cool,' where it's just another thing."

Griner said it was "kind of obvious" when she came out to family members and started dating in high school.

In her freshman year at Baylor, she described having "the worst breakup" of her life.

Griner's current girlfriend was present during her USA TODAY Sports interview. For privacy concerns, Griner asked that her name be kept out of the story.

"She's different than anyone I've ever dated," Griner says. "I'm a rebel. I buck the system a little bit. She's like the complete opposite — good girl with no confrontation. It's everything that we need to help balance each other out."

CELEBRITY LIFESTYLE

Driving to a walk-through practice in the truck she bought after being drafted, Griner is complaining about the traffic and apologizes to her passengers. "I have road rage," she says, tapping her size-18 shoe on the gas once there's an open road.

Walking up to US Airways Center, home of the Suns and Mercury, she is easily identifiable — not necessarily for her tall and slender frame, but because a 75-foot banner of Griner drapes down the side of Hotel Palomar.

"Just going to Walmart, it's like autograph land," Griner says. "There's no running to get a gallon of milk anymore."

Griner says she's never turned down an autograph, knowing how much those five seconds mean to fans.

"I want my daughter looking up to her," says Terri Thomas, a longtime Mercury season ticketholder.

A least one person knows the answer to "Who is Brittney Griner?"

"She's my hero," 8-year-old Sarah Thomas said, "because she's confident with who she is."

IN BRIEF



MATTHEW OHAREN, USA TODAY SPORTS
Jason Leffler, above, had funds for his son, girlfriend Julianna Patterson says.

CASE AGAINST THREE NAVY FOOTBALL PLAYERS TO PROCEED

The case of three Naval Academy football players accused of sexually assaulting a female midshipman while she was unconscious will proceed to an Article 32 hearing. Vice Adm. Michael Miller, superintendent of the Naval Academy, has reviewed the investigation and referred the case to an Article 32 hearing, but charges have not been brought against the players. As a result, specific charges and the names of the players have not been released. An Article 32 hearing is the military equivalent of a preliminary hearing or grand jury proceeding. The hearing will determine if there is enough evidence to proceed to a court-martial. The female alleges she went to an off-campus party at the football

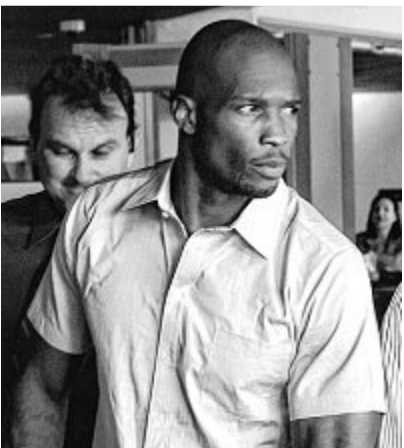
house in April 2012 and became so intoxicated that she blacked out, said her attorney, Susan Burke. After reporting it to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, she was disciplined for drinking, but the football players faced no consequences and the investigation was closed, Burke said. — Jacqueline Klimas, Military Times

LEFFLER'S GIRLFRIEND SAYS DRIVER HAD INSURANCE

NASCAR driver Jason Leffler's girlfriend, brother and representatives at Spire Sports discussed his financial situation Monday to clear up misconceptions about the estate he left behind for 5-year-old son Charlie. Leffler, 37, died in a crash Wednesday at a dirt track in New Jersey. They said Leffler had disability insurance and other policies as well as funds established for Charlie. His former sister-in-law told *Sporting News* on Friday that Leffler did not have life insurance when he died. "It's insane that someone would bring this up, would bring up life insurance, within a day of this happening. We haven't even had the funeral yet," girlfriend Julianna Patterson said. Leffler and Patterson had planned to move into a new apartment with Charlie this weekend. "He absolutely bent over backward to do whatever was best for Charlie," said brother Chris Leffler, executor of the driver's will.

EX-NFL STAR JOHNSON RELEASED FROM JAIL

Chad Johnson apologized Monday



J PAT CARTER, AP
Chad Johnson apologized to a judge for slapping his attorney on the rear.

for disrespecting a judge when the former NFL wide receiver slapped his attorney on the backside in court last week, and he was released from jail after a week instead of 30 days. Broward County (Fla.) Circuit Judge Kathleen McHugh accepted Johnson's apology and reduced his jail term for a probation violation to the seven days he had served. Johnson, formerly known as Chad Ochocinco, said he'd had time to think about why his flippant attitude was wrong — especially in a domestic violence case.

BILLIONAIRE PREP COACH SUED BY BUSINESS OWNERS

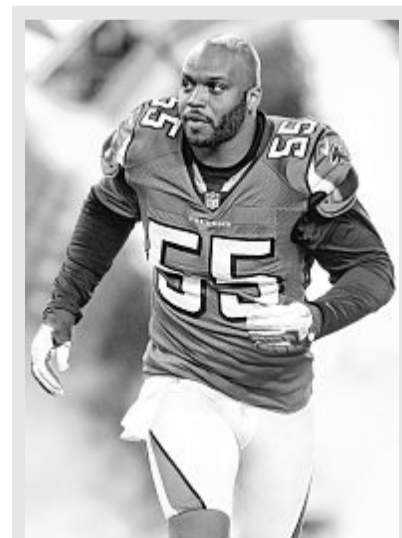
West Virginia billionaire Jim Justice, the head coach of the girls and boys basketball teams at Greenbrier East High in his hometown of Lewis-

burg, has faced at least nine lawsuits since 2011 from business owners claiming they were not being paid for work at his coal mines. Worth an estimated \$1.7 billion, Justice ranks No. 292 on a list of wealthiest Americans by *Forbes* magazine, which estimates that his personal wealth has grown by \$500 million in the last year. Justice acknowledged his companies had debts but said they were emblematic of the coal industry's wider struggles. Justice also owns the Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., and the Greenbrier Classic on the PGA Tour.

ATLANTA RADIO HOSTS FIRED FOR MOCKING EX-SAINT'S ALS

A station official says the cast of an Atlanta sports radio show has been fired after mocking a former NFL player who has Lou Gehrig's disease. The show, *Mayhem in the AM*, was broadcast Monday morning on 790 The Zone. In a statement, general manager Rick Mack said the station regretted comments made about ex-New Orleans Saints safety Steve Gleason. Gleason, 36, suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. ALS patients lose the ability to speak and move, which has happened to Gleason. The station lists the hosts at Nick Cellini, Steak Shapiro and Chris Dimino. But Mack didn't give the names of those fired. Cellini apologized, calling it a stupid attempt at humor. Gleason played for the Saints from 2000 through 2006.

Compiled by John Tkach from staff, wires



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Defender John Abraham is available.

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TOP NFL FREE AGENTS LEFT

Some accomplished players will likely be waiting until at least late July before finding work again.

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