



SILENCE SAVED THE STORM

Storm fans once felt the same helpless feeling currently haunting Sonics fans. But unknown to them, four local women were working behind the scenes to save their team. Here's how they did it.

How did four area women wrest the Seattle Storm away from Clay Bennett? He who seems intent on uprooting our teams and taking them to the prairie? The answer is simple: They respected Bennett and they took him at his word.

"We had a lengthy discussion with Clay in July of 2007," Storm ownership group chair Anne Levinson says. "Our group's goal was to keep the team in Seattle and if the way to do that was to buy the team we'd step up and do that."

Bennett initially rejected the idea. He told the women he wanted to keep both teams in Seattle.

"If that is your intent," Levinson

continues as she recalls their meeting with Bennett, "let us show you how the Storm can work in Seattle. We take you at your word. We just want to find a solution to keep the Storm here."

At this point in the story, based on how much of the Sonics drama has played out over the past three years, the script would seem to have called for a press conference attacking Bennett. Announce your desire to buy the team. Attack Clay and his group for not selling. To paraphrase David Stern, scorch the Earth.

Maybe it was Levinson's public sector experience (she was once deputy mayor of Seattle, she chaired the Washington State Utilities and Transportation Committee,

and she was a judge) that led her and her group to stay quiet. They re-emphasized to Bennett how serious they were about keeping the team in Seattle. But they did so privately.

"We were not trying to get our names in the paper. We had no desire to create acrimony," says Levinson.

That turned out to be the key to building a relationship of trust that led to the sale. Bennett had been belted from all sides on his Sonics deal. The last thing Levinson and her fellow owners wanted to do was add to his list of headaches.

"We knew that if at any point in our discussions it came out that we were making an offer it would be perceived

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L to R: Storm owners
Dawn Trudeau, Lisa
Brummel, Ginny Gilder,
and Anne Levinson

"We were not trying to get our names in the paper. We wanted to act in a respectful, confidential way." —Anne Levinson

While the boys bicker about the Sonics mess, the girls are the ones who've found a solution to keep their Storm.

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that he (Bennett) had another opportunity. We wanted to act in a respectful, confidential way."

The group, known as Force 10 Hoops, quietly pressed on. They were worried that the Storm might end up as collateral damage in the Sonics saga. They knew that the University of Oklahoma was a women's basketball powerhouse with a loyal fan base. They knew the WNBA would work in Oklahoma City.

But they also knew it was already working in Seattle. And they believed it could work even if the franchise was split away from the Sonics upon whom the Storm had relied for everything since coming into the WNBA in 2000. (This situation is not unique. NBA teams originally owned all WNBA teams. Little by little that has changed and in 2008 exactly half of the league's 14 teams are owned separate of NBA teams.)

Levinson was able to talk business with Bennett in terms they both understood. As

Seattle's deputy mayor she'd worked closely with the Ackerley family on the KeyArena remodel project. She was then approached by the now defunct American Basketball League and ultimately helped launch the Seattle Reign. She'd been a fan of the Storm from the start and understood their business.

"I had a unique vantage point from which to understand what the dynamics were all about. What the pros and cons are ... the differences between the NBA, the ABL and the WNBA business models."

Despite Bennett's initial reluctance, the two sides stayed in touch. Timing was crucial. They knew that the Storm lease deal had an opt-out clause at the end of each season. If they couldn't sign a deal with Bennett's group by the end of September 2007, he could have exercised that option and been legally clear to move the Storm to Oklahoma City for the 2008 season.

"We continued our discussions over the summer. He and his fellow owners recog-

nized the fan base (for the Storm) was passionate and supportive. They saw first hand how the community supported the Storm and it became clear to them that we wanted to do this for our community. That along with the fact that we had established a good relationship allowed them to see first hand why it would work. They respected our motivation and our offer."

Negotiations began in the fall of '07 and the deal was announced shortly after the new year. Four fans had stepped up and ensured that women's pro basketball would stay in Seattle.

To be sure, Levinson is a fan of the women's game.

"It is basketball the way it was meant to be played. It's teamwork and hard work. You know these women aren't doing it for the money, but to be the best in the world at what they do. They appreciate the fact that the generation before them didn't have these opportunities."

Levinson calls the purchase of the Storm "personally meaningful" to her and her group. She and her co-owners (Dawn Trudeau, Lisa Brummel and Ginny Gilder) are all children of Title IX, the 1972 federal anti-discrimination law that helped launch the women's athletics revolution. They remember the bad old days when boys were the athletes and girls sat on the sidelines and watched.

Thirty-six years later, while the boys sit on the sidelines and bicker about how to fix the Sonics mess, the girls are the ones who've found a solution to keep their Storm in Seattle. Levinson chuckles at that, but also notes the differences in the two situations.

"We do recognize it's less complex. The WNBA business model is less expensive. We're talking \$10 million, not \$350 million. We're talking about changing the lease versus building a new arena."

The important thing is that this is being talked about in the context of the "Seattle" Storm.

Levinson remembers the Storm's 2004 championship win over Connecticut. She sat in the stands afterwards beaming.

"It was incredible. Everyone should have the chance to experience that."

Thanks to these four women, everyone in Seattle will. **SNW**

Seven WNBA teams are now owned separately from NBA teams

WNBA Team	Owner(s)	Owens NBA Team?
Atlanta Thrashers	J. Ronald Terwilliger, real estate developer	
Chicago Sky	Michael Alter, real estate developer	
Connecticut Sun	Mohegan Sun Resort	
Detroit Shock	William Davidson, businessman	✓
Indiana Fever	Herbert and Melvin Simon, real estate developers	✓
New York Liberty	Cablevision	✓
Washington Mystics	Ted Leonsis, AOL executive	
Houston Comets	Hilton Koch, furniture store owner	
Los Angeles Sparks	Carla Christofferson (lawyer), Kathy Goodman (business executive)	
Minnesota Lynx	Glen Taylor, printing executive	✓
Phoenix Mercury	Robert Sarver, bank executive	✓
Sacramento Monarchs	Maloof family, casino owners	✓
San Antonio Silver Stars	Peter Holt, machinery salesman	✓
Seattle Storm	Force 10 Hoops	