

The (Far) Away Game

The popularity of basketball overseas has allowed college players—men and women—to have professional playing careers where scant opportunity exists stateside. Three years of globe-trotting has allowed former Rutgers star Chelsea Newton to thrive as a player.

Piscataway has its charms, but no one will ever mistake it for the picturesque coast of northern Italy. That's why Chelsea Newton RC'05 jumped at the chance to play professional basketball in the city of La Spezia by joining the Carispe La Spezia team, part of the Lega Basket Femminile. "I didn't want to worry about where I was

playing after the WNBA season," says Newton, the 5-11 guard for the Sacramento Monarchs. "The WNBA season is only four months long. If you're a woman and want to play pro hoops, you have to go overseas."

The native of Monroe, Louisiana, is among the former stars of Rutgers' women's and men's basketball teams

who are fashioning careers as basketball missionaries. There are Scarlet Knights everywhere: Joel Salvi RC'01, SCILS'01 in Italy; Adrian Hill UCNB'07 in Spain; Jerome Coleman RC'03 in France; Tammy Sutton-Brown RC'01, Cappie Pondexter RC'06, and Ricky Shields in Turkey; Jeff Greer in France; and Herve Lamizana in China (the last three didn't graduate). Because of the growing numbers of professional leagues throughout Europe, South America, Asia, Australia, and Africa—63 nations alone host women's teams—former collegiate stars nationwide who, unlike Newton, can't make the cut in the WNBA or NBA have a second life feeding the demand worldwide.

Since graduating with a degree in sports management, the 24-year-old Newton has been a pro basketball nomad, bouncing from WNBA franchises in California and Chicago to professional teams in Israel, Poland, and now Italy. The Sacramento Monarchs drafted Newton,

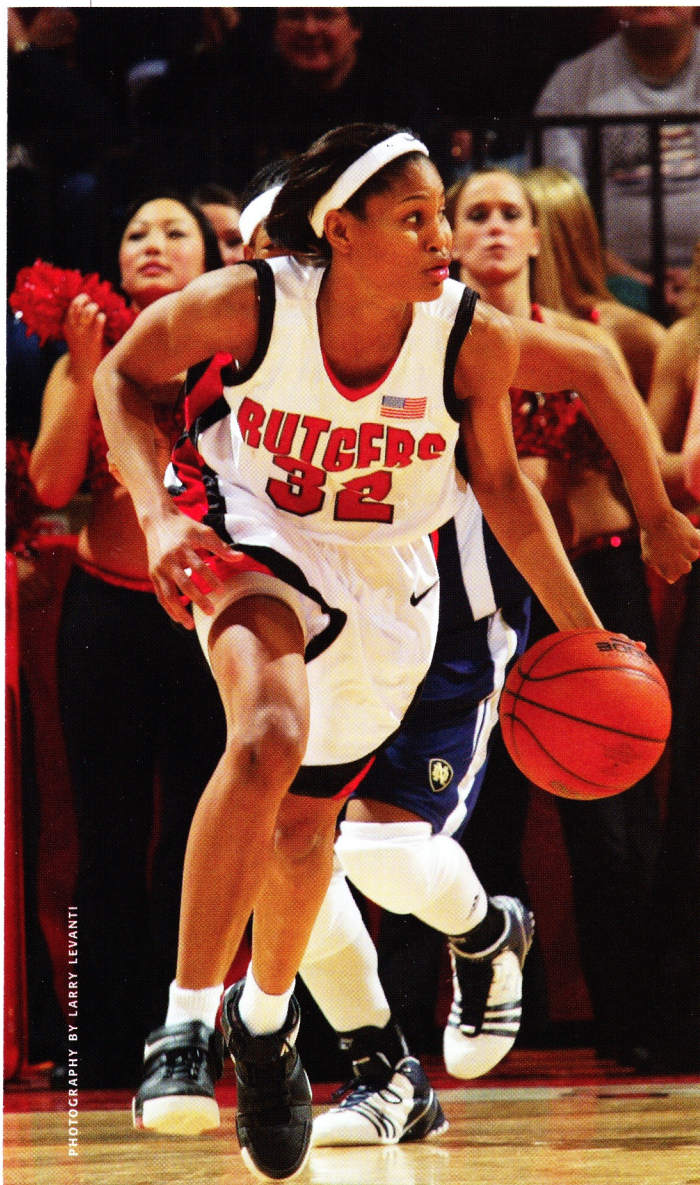
who, as a senior, was the Big East Defensive Player of the Year in 2005. A second-round pick, she started every game on a team that won its first WNBA championship in 2005. She made the league's All-Rookie Team and just missed making the All-Defensive Second Team. Picked in the expansion draft, she joined the Chicago Sky for the 2006 season and was traded back to the Monarchs for the 2007 season. But the WNBA season, which takes place during the summer months, is short, and the salaries are relatively modest. So, she and other players look further afield.

Her first stop was Israel, where she played during the three-month season for Raanana Hertzliya, one of nine women's teams in Israel's Division I Women's League. "The people, the culture, and the clubs—the atmosphere was great." International leagues limit the number of foreign players on a team. Newton, one of three Americans, competed before 700 fans each game, earned \$5,000 a month, shared a rent-free apartment, and had the use of a car.

Returning to Piscataway at season's end, she grew restless and eagerly joined the Lotos Gdynia, a team based in northern Poland and a member of the Polish Women's Basketball League. Playing for four months, she led her team to the championship game against Krakow. "It couldn't have been more different than Israel," she says. "Outside of basketball, there wasn't nearly as much to do or see."

In her current home in La Spezia, Newton has an apartment, earns \$10,000 a month, and plays one weekly game. She practices twice daily, in the morning and in the late afternoon. "I sleep between practices. I could make more money in Russia (host to the premier Russian Basketball Super League), but I hear playing there isn't much fun."

Wherever she does play, Newton, out of respect for her hosts, tries to learn the language and culture. One thing that Newton, formerly a defensive specialist, has learned is how to be an offensive threat. "Americans are expected to score here."



PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY LEVANTI