

WOMEN ARE IN THE HOUSE!

**WNBA's Marie Ferdinand talks about role models,
what gets fans to the game and what makes her play hard**

Marie Ferdinand's first time on the court at the SBC Center is a far cry from regulation play. Ferdinand is out there with a few of her Utah Starzz teammates, running drills with players from a San Antonio high school. The kids are getting worn out, but there's no way they're going to slow down. How many chances do you get to run through the paces with the pros? Ferdinand and her teammates call out the next set of instructions. The kids, still catching their breath, smile nervously, then start moving again.

By the end of the session, the kids are jogging in place and stretching to the sky. A few are walking slowly, bent slightly, hands on thighs. They're worn out, but they're glowing. Every one of them has a smile that you could see from courtside. It's a good kind of tired.

By now, most South Texas basketball fans know that San Antonio is the new home for the WNBA's Utah Starzz. The team will play at the SBC Center under a new name starting in the 2003 season. Within hours of arriving in San Antonio for the first time, Ferdinand was busy checking out her new surroundings and meeting young athletes.

Ferdinand grew up wrapped around basketball. She loved everything about the game. Her heroes were the same as any other fan's: NBA players.

She didn't know about any female basketball role models. Like millions of others, she wanted to "be

like Mike;" she followed and imitated every move Michael Jordan made. He made basketball exciting and that drew Ferdinand even closer into the game.

Growing up in Miami, Ferdinand got hooked on the NBA's Heat, going to every home game she could get tickets to. She realized that she wanted to be on the court more than anything else she could think of. She scored more than 2,000 points during her high school career and was Florida's 1997 Player of the Year.

When Ferdinand entered Louisiana State University in 1997, she was already set on playing basketball as a career. At the time, her only pro option was to play overseas. American women were playing in countries like Hungary and Poland, because there was nowhere to play here on a post-collegiate team.

Then the WNBA hit the court. Everything changed.

“It became my focus,” says the 24-year old guard. “There was never any question in my mind — I would play for the WNBA when I finished school.”

The late 1990’s were a head spin for women athletes, as they slammed and jammed their way into the American sports consciousness. Almost overnight, players like Sheryl Swoopes and Rebecca Lobo were getting athletic shoes named after them and they were doing sports drink commercials. They were guests on late night talk shows. They got prime time on ESPN.

She shoots, she scores!

Meanwhile, Ferdinand was on fire at LSU. Her shooting, steal and assist stats were always at the top of the pile. She was one of only three players in LSU history to log 1,500 points, 500 rebounds, 300 assists and 200 steals during her collegiate career.

She was named to Southeastern Conference, Kodak All-American and Associated Press All-American teams. She was nominated for the 2001 Naismith Award and was a finalist for the 2001 Shooting Guard of the year by ESPN Magazine. She made the 2000 USA Basketball Women’s Select Team.

With all her accomplishments, it’s no surprise that Ferdinand was a 2001

first round draft pick by the Utah Starzz. Like every team she’s been on, she made her mark quickly. After 10 games her rookie season, she waved goodbye to the bench and started racking up leading scorer, season-high and personal-best statistics. She hasn’t stopped yet.

With so much good going on for Ferdinand, disappointment is tough to bear, but failure seems to make her stronger, more determined. After getting swept by

the Sacramento Monarchs in the first round of post-season play in 2001, Ferdinand hoped her team would come back stronger in post-season play next year. They made it to the 2002 Western Conference finals against the Los Angeles Sparks. LA dominated Utah, winning five straight games, including the 103-77 rout that sent Ferdinand and her teammates to the locker room. LA would go on to play the New York Liberty and win the 2002 WNBA championship. The memory of the loss still stings Ferdinand.

“To be that close to a championship...” Ferdinand is excited at the thought but her disappointment at losing is clear. She comes back to center: “We have the team. We have what it takes.” Her tone makes you realize that if she’s with a team that ever gets that close again, she’s not walking off the court without the title.

Ferdinand’s game philosophy seems to be made of equal parts individual responsibility and team success. “If one player plays well, the team plays well,” she says. “Through individual accomplishments, the team will come along.”

Like many of her WNBA sisters, Ferdinand went to Poland to play in the

STATS: Marie Ferdinand

Position: Guard

Born: 10/13/1978

Height/Weight: 5’9”/153

College: LSU, 2001

WNBA Notes

- ▶ 27 points vs. Indiana 6/18/2002
- ▶ Finished first pro season 7th in league field goal percentages

Career Notes

- ▶ Named to the 2001 Kodak All-American Team, All-SEC First Team and the AP All-America Second Team
- ▶ Started in 93 consecutive games at LSU
- ▶ Averaged 13.7 points, 4.4 rebounds and 3.2 assists at LSU
- ▶ As a high school senior, averaged 24 points, seven rebounds, 5.4 assists and two steals per game.

Personal Notes

Hometown: Miami Fla.

Speaks Creole

Plans to teach Physical Education when her WNBA career is over

off-season. The Creole-speaking, South Florida sunshine girl was in for a surprise when she stepped off the plane. “It wasn’t just culture shock, although there was that too. I was not ready for the cold and snow.” She’s not laughing, even at the memory. She was also not ready for the small differences in the way the game is played in Eastern Europe. “They use a men’s ball. Their playing style is less aggressive. There is no focus on strength training.”

Bright lights, slam dunks

Ferdinand loves the excitement of big crowds, exuberant fans and, well, the show. That’s what got her hooked on basketball as a young girl and that’s what keeps her motivated, even now. “When you come into the arena for an NBA game, that arena is always packed,” she says. “I want to see that for WNBA games.” On her wish list is “a lower basket, so we can make the dunks like the guys do. The show of the game brings in the crowd.”

As much as she loves basketball, Ferdinand’s greatest accomplishment is her degree in Kinesiology from LSU. In a world where high-profile male athletes make headlines exchanging their college education for a fat paycheck to go pro early, there’s not a chance Ferdinand would recommend skipping school, especially to aspiring women athletes: “You learn so much in college,” she says. “Not just book knowledge, but people knowledge, emotional knowledge, game knowledge. You need that time.”

With firm footing in the league, Ferdinand knows what she wants

to accomplish as a pro athlete. Scores, steals, assists and championships aside, she shoulders considerable responsibility for bringing up the next wave of WNBA hopefuls. Her efforts with high school kids are part of her strategy to keep women’s basketball alive. “I’m blessed to be able to play professionally,” she says. “I have a chance to be a role model now. I want to do everything I can to give the younger generation of women the chance to play. I’m working hard so that there is a WNBA for them.”