

Front court kicks into gear

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we're just beginning to set ourselves in our ways and play together," Bullett said.

Mapp overcame an inconsistent early-season start to become a force in the middle, averaging 18.6 points per game through Sunday's 77-70 win over Los Angeles. The Asheville native and former N.C. State standout is too quick for big defenders and too powerful for smaller ones, a combination she's used to become Charlotte's second-leading scorer.

"There's nobody in the league who can stop Mapp," Meadors said. "The only one who is going to stop Mapp is Rhonda herself. I don't think there's anybody who's going to stop Rhonda. I just don't see it."

For all of Mapp's work inside, Bullett, the power forward, is as capable of scoring from the perimeter as the post.

"To complement Rhonda, you've got Vicky moving around in the high-low setting," Meadors said. "Bullett is capable of shooting shots from the free throw line and three-pointers, which brings the opponent's post player from the rebounding area. They do a good job in the high-low setting, and it's pretty tough to stop that."

"Vicky is the best post player because she has a lot of quickness," Mapp said. "She can shoot

from the outside. She's like a guard, but she's a post player."

The partnership between Bullett, who was averaging 15.8 points a game over the last five contests, and Mapp has eased the scoring burden on Charlotte's best player, guard Andrea Stinson. The frontcourt's emergence gives the Sting more scoring options, which forces defenses into difficult assignments.

"That's why we have to be the way we are," Bullett said. "We can't have just two people in double-figures. We have to have three. That shows they can't key on two people. They've got to key on all of us and that's why our post players have to come in and put up big numbers."

Congreaves, the small forward, does the little things - rebound, set picks and play defense. After providing a spark off the bench early in the season, Meadors moved her into the starting lineup to get her more minutes.

"What we've been doing with Andrea is make sure she got enough playing time," Meadors said. "Right now we've got Andrea playing really good defense and she's going to the board exceptionally well for us."

Defense has never been a problem for Charlotte, but it helps when the big people clog the middle. Mapp said the front court's plan is to dominate the opponent



FILE PHOTO

Charlotte Sting forward Vicky Bullett has become a as much a scoring threat from the perimeter as the paint. Charlotte has won five of its last six games in its battle for the WNBA playoffs.

on both ends of the floor. It's worked against some of the league's big-name stars like Lisa Leslie of Los Angeles and Rebecca Lobo of New York.

"It's a goal of ours to shut down the inside," Mapp said. "Inside's not getting anything, and I think we do a pretty good job every night shutting down the inside."

With three weeks left in the regular season, Charlotte is in a good

position to drive to the playoffs. As a team, the Sting is playing its best basketball, and the frontcourt finally has an identity. Bullett says it's as simple as everyone understanding their strengths.

"It's chemistry," she said. "We're getting to know our offense a lot better and a team that plays together and constantly does the same things every day, you can't help but get better. Having that chemistry really helps the team." Does it ever.

Sting is real thing for basketball

Continued from 1B

female, filling the stands. They took great pride in the Sting, something that isn't always obvious when the NBA Hornets play here. The Hornets' typical crowd is bankers. The Sting play before Jane and Joe Sixpack. Wing-tips vs. earth shoes. Porsche vs. minivans. Hornets fans have fun. Sting fans have fun.

The Sting are positive role models for girls who dream of a place in the sport. Players work with

youngsters and even allowed teams in the AAU Junior Olympics to dazzle the crowd.

The Sting take women's basketball seriously. Substitutes support the starters and group high fives can be seen on a regular basis. Everyone works together, not for themselves, something you don't see often in the men's game. Vicky Bullett fights for loose balls and position on the floor with the best of them. Nicole Levesque may be the shortest player on the floor at

5-foot-2, but she pushes the ball all over the court, leaving opponents breathless in her wake. Sharon Manning is proving to be a great asset off the bench when she pumps up teammates and gets the crowd on its feet. Not only is the Sting doing their job, but they're also having fun. They've got next, the WNBA slogan says, and we're lucky to have it.

JASMINE CORBETT is a UNC Greensboro junior and Charlotte Post summer intern.

Undoing a grand game

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PITTSBURGH - Heavens to Honus Wagner! Could baseball's hierarchy really be thinking about moving the Pittsburgh Pirates and six other NL teams to ... the American League?

A preliminary vote on that very proposal, one so revolutionary that it would have been deemed unthinkable even weeks ago, could come as early as next week.

In what might be interim commissioner Bud Selig's biggest blow yet to the very tradition that some believe is the root of the sport's popularity, a radical plan currently before baseball's realignment committee would shift the Pirates to the American League.

The committee will meet again next week by conference call and could vote to recommend the plan to baseball's Executive Council. The council then could decide to ask all 30 club owners to vote on it.

Of course, the Pirates wouldn't be the only team to switch leagues - the Expos, Mets, Phillies, Braves, Reds and Marlins would make the move, too, to the AL. Under a realignment that would sweep away all of baseball's historical perspective, all 14 teams east of Cincinnati would belong to the AL; the NL would be composed of the remaining teams, including all of those on the West Coast.

The Pirates' proposed AL Midwest Division would also include the Braves, Reds, Indians, Tigers, Marlins and the expansion Tampa Bay Devil Rays. The AL East would be composed of the Orioles, Red Sox, Expos, Mets, Yankees, Phillies and Blue Jays.

The NL Central, the Pirates' current division, would include the Cubs, White Sox, Astros, Royals, Brewers, Twins, Cardinals and Rangers. The NL West would be the Dodgers, Angels, Padres, Mariners, Giants, Athletics, Rockies and the expansion Arizona Diamondbacks.

Accustomed to ambling along at its own pace - after all, it is the only major pro sport without a clock - baseball now seems intent

on sweeping away every last bastion of historical relevance as rapidly as Deion Sanders can circle the bases.

First, came the designated hitter, an invention still viewed by NL partisans as a blight on the game akin to the Black Sox scandal. Then came division play, wild cards (yes, a second-place team really could reach the postseason) and interleague play.

And fans in the early 1970s thought replacing flannel uniforms with stretch knit polyester was radical.

The proposed realignment would significantly reduce in-season travel as the number of intradivision teams would likely be increased. It would also mean backyard rivals such as the Yankees and Mets, Cubs and White Sox and Indians and Pirates would compete not to oppose each other in the World Series, but rather to win their division.

As Pirates manager Gene Lamont said, "You couldn't have a crosstown World Series."

Pirates owner Kevin McClatchy and general manager Cam Bonifay declined to comment on the plan until it is presented to ownership. But it is known the Pirates are fundamentally opposed to leaving the NL after 110 years, no matter the format, and, under current rules, a team cannot be forced to change leagues without its permission.

"I'm an NL guy. I like the NL," Pirates outfielder Al Martin said. "I don't want to move. I want to keep it the way it is. We just got interleague play this year; let's wait awhile and watch it develop."

The players union also has the power to block any realignment that proposes to scrap the designated hitter rule. It has not yet been decided if the DH would continue only in the AL, or if there might be a grace period for AL teams that have built their rosters around designated hitters, only to suddenly find themselves shuffled off to a different league.

"I don't think it would be fair to do it (move a franchise into a different league) in one year," Lamont said. "It's just a different game with the DH."

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