But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Do you have to be tall to play basketball? Questions for the Washington Mystics

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Jane 00:22
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. And that is not our theme music! That's music and sound from a special event I went to a few weeks ago to report this episode. That's the guy who does the arena announcements for one of the very top sports teams in the country. Maybe you could make out what he was saying and you've already guessed what team it is. The Washington Mystics, a basketball team that plays in a league called the WNBA. Only the very best basketball players in the whole country and sometimes the world play in this league. And today, those sports superstars are going to answer the questions you've sent us about basketball, and what it's like to be a professional athlete. Have you ever been to a basketball game? The game I got to watch was between the Washington Mystics, who won the whole championship in 2019, and the Chicago Sky, who won the championship last year. Because we'd been invited by the Mystics and I was in their home arena with their hometown crowd, I was rooting for Washington. But Chicago dominated the game. Not only were more of their shots going in, but they did a really good job on defense, shutting down the mystics and winning the game decisively.

Jane 01:55
Watching a big professional game like that is exciting both on and off the court. Sometimes it's even hard to concentrate on the game because all the fans around you are cheering. When there's a break between periods, there was a kids dance troupe that came out and performed for the crowd. At one point, there were people hurling T-shirts up into the crowd. Music played almost constantly. There were flashing lights and videos up on a big screen. And there was plenty of food and drinks to eat during the game. It's a whole scene. But I was there for the basketball. So the next day, I went back to the arena where the Mystics play, but headed to a different court, the one where they practice. That's right, even professionals have to practice. When I got there, Assistant Coach Eric Thibault and other members of the coaching staff were running drills with the team. They had already spent some time watching the video of the previous day's game to see where they made mistakes, where they played really well, and how they could do things differently to be better in the next game. Teams also watch videos of the other teams they're about to play, so they can start to get a sense of how they can target their next opponents. After they were done practicing some of the players were nice enough to come talk to me and answer the questions you sent us. So should we get to them?

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 03:13

My name is Shatori Walker-Kimbrough. I play for the Washington Mystics. I'm a shooting guard. I like to bring aggression on defense; I like to score; I like to facilitate meaning make players around me better, and be a team player. I like to bring energy as well. And I like to have fun.

Jane 03:30
Shatori Walker-Kimbrough is going to help us out with a little overview of the game, in case you've never played before.

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 03:35
The game of basketball: there's two baskets, and there's a ball. And then there's two teams, five players on each team. And the object is to score as many baskets in the opponent's basket as you can. And try not to let the other team score in your basket. So you have to defend your basket and you have to score oother teams basket.

Sadhbh 03:54
Hi, I'm Sadhbh. I'm 11 years old. I'm from Bray, Ireland. And my question is: Who invented basketball? Thank you.

Sadhbh 04:02
How is basketball invented?

Jane 04:05
Thanks for those questions. Sadhbh and Gabriel. The person who gets credit for inventing basketball is a man named James Naismith. He was a gym teacher at a YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1891. That's more than 130 years ago. Historians say he made up the game and wrote the original rulebook. The Basketball Hall of Fame is now located in Springfield where the game was invented.

Nicholas 04:28
My name is Kieran and I'm five years old, and I live in North Bethesda, Maryland. And my question is, why is there a hoop instead of a basket?

Jane 04:39
l. Back when Naismith invented the game, apparently he asked a janitor to get him two boxes that he could hoist up high to use as the targets players would aim for when they wanted to score a point. But instead of boxes, he was given two baskets, and voila, basketball. In the early days people had to climb up on a ladder to get the balls out of the baskets after someone scored, or use a pole or some other tool to get the ball out. But then they wisely started cutting the bottoms off to let the balls fall through. These days, the baskets are made of a metal rim or hoop with a woven cloth net (still open at the bottom) attached to it. So that's why basketball is sometimes referred to as hoops. Now, if you've ever played basketball, you already know another key part of the game. If you have the basketball in your possession, you can't just run down the court holding the ball, you can pass it, of course, but if you want to walk or run with the ball, you have to bounce it up and down as you go. That's called dribbling. And once you stop dribbling, you can't move your feet anymore. So you have to either shoot or pass

the ball. So it's really important in basketball to know how to dribble well. It's also pretty hard, especially when you're just getting started.

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 05:54
Right now I'm just dribbling a basketball, my hand stays on top of the ball. And I kind of just push it down and it comes back up. Yes, bouncing it and keep your hand on top of the ball. Yeah, that's how you dribble a basketball.

Jane 06:07
When you start to do it and you're running, that's a lot harder. And when somebody's chasing you or in front of you and trying to get the ball away, how do you protect the ball?

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 06:14
I kind of keep my body in between the ball and the person to protect it using my body, but also keeping my head up so that I can see my defender. Like I see my other teammates that are open.

Graham 06:25
Hello, my name is Graham. I am from Lake City. I am six years old. And my question is why do basketballs bounce?

Jane 06:33
Basketballs bounce because when you push them toward the ground, and then they hit the ground, the ground actually puts an equal force back into the ball. And that energy has to go somewhere. If the ball was made out of silly putty or Jello, would just ooze out and jiggle on the floor to spread that energy out. But because the ball is made of an elastic material, it springs back into place and bounces up from the ground.

Sadhbh 06:59
Hi, my name is Katie. I am nine years old. And I live in Calico, New York. And my question is, why do balls spin when you bounce them. balls don't

Jane 07:11
Balls don't always spin when you bounce them. Some are designed for spinning, like a football. But making the ball spin or not spin depends on what you're doing with your hand, or a racket or a bat or whatever it is you're using to move the ball. Sometimes you want a lot of spin, and sometimes you don't. So if the ball is spinning in a way you don't want it to, Katie, you have to keep practicing and get a good coach to help you see how to change what you're doing with your hands.

Ala 07:39
My name is Ala and I'm six years old. And I live in Vancouver, BC. And my question is, how many basketballs does the team have?

Alycen McAuley 07:50
We have a lot of basketballs.

Jane 07:52
That's Alison McCauley. She's not a player or a coach. She helps run the business side of things. For the Washington mystics.

Alycen McAuley 07:59
There's probably about 50 basketballs that are available to the players who are practicing. And we have WNBA basketballs, but we also have NBA basketballs, and we have weighted basketballs which are extra heavy, but help you as you're trying to practice more. There's probably a basketball in every office. So we sign basketballs, and we save them as mementos. So in addition, the ones we're playing, there's they're kind of everywhere. So I would hazard to guess that we probably have like 100 to 200 basketballs just right, right here in this facility.

Molly 08:35
Hi, my name is Molly. And I'm four years old, and I live in Detroit. And my question is how color.

Jane 08:44
Most basketballs are orange. And the NBA basketball is kind of all orange. And the WNBA basketball is orange, and white. What's going on with all the colors?

Alycen McAuley 08:54
It's actually a really interesting story. So when the WNBA was first started, it was an outgrowth from the NBA, which is the men's league. And it was really important at the time that we made sure that women were seen as athletes. And so their uniforms needed to be the same as the men's, and the court needed to be the same as the men's, and the basket. But what we did want to do was kind of create some differentiation between the game and the commissioner of the NBA at the time, David Stern, said maybe we could do something with the basketball. And so they had the idea to turn the basketball two colors. So it's orange and oatmeal, we call the white color oatmeal. And it's really distinctive. So when you see that orange, and oatmeal ball, you know that you're watching a WNBA game.

Jane 09:37
but all of the basketballs no matter what size they are, or what their colors are, have these black lines on them. And I can't quote totally describe it, but the lines kind of go around the basketball. And we do have a couple of questions from kids who want to know, why do basketballs have lines?

Wyatt 09:54
Hi, my name is Wyatt and I'm five years old. I'm from Essex Junction, Vermont and I am wondering why basketballs have those little black lines.

Erin 10:08
Hi, my name is Erin. I live in Huntsville, Alabama. Why do basketballs have lines on them?

10:17

I don't know why that started off. But today we think about the basketball in segments. And there are actually eight different segments that are differentiated by those lines. And the shape of the ball and the material of the ball and those segments are all designed to help players get a better grip on the ball, and to control the ball as they're passing or as they're shooting. And so, people smarter than me who work on creating sports equipment, realized that creating that segmentation on the ball created a better opportunity for players to control the ball.

Brooke 10:52
My name is Brooke. I'm 10 years old. I live in Tennessee. My question is if you want to play basketball, do you have to be a certain height?

Gus 11:01
My name is Gus. I'm five years old. I live in Medford, Massachusetts. And do I say my question? (Yeah) And my question is, do basketball players have to be tall?

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 11:17
You do not have to be tall, you do not have to be tall. You can be tall, you can be syou can be skinny, you can be a little thicker. And that's that's the beauty of it. There's so many different ways to play the game of basketball. So anybody can play.

Elizabeth Williams 11:31
You don't have to be tall to play basketball, but I am pretty tall. I'm 6'3.

Jane 11:36
That was Shatori Walker-Kimbrough followed by another player, Elizabeth Williams. And here's Assistant Coach Eric Thiba.

Eric Thibault 11:43
There's enough examples of people that are not big that can make it in basketball. And you know we've, on our team, have a five-foot-four Japanese point guard who doesn't speak English and because she loves the game and has worked really hard, she can make it just like somebody who's a foot taller.

Jane 12:01
That five-foot-four player? Her name is Rui Machida, and I bet you can guess what she's going to say about whether or not you have to be tall.

Rui Machida 12:08
No.

Jane 12:08
Rui just moved to the United States from Japan to play for the mystics and she doesn't speak a lot of English yet. Rui has a person called a translator to help her out. He speaks Japanese and English and he's also been a basketball coach. His name is Miki Takeda, and he makes sure Rui understands what

her coaches and teammates and reporters like me are saying and that they understand what she wants to say to them. Here's how Rui with help from Miki answered the question about why you don't need to be tall.

Miki Takeda 12:10
Good answer.

Jane 12:13
[Speaking Japanese]

Miki Takeda 12:35
She said no. And obviously, even if you're short, you can play really well in the WNBA and you can play better on basketball. So don't give out your dream and just keep up your what you do in basketball.

Rui Machida 13:02
[Speaking Japanese]

Jane 13:05
But you know, you can't just call up a team like the Washington mystics and say, "Hey, I'd like to play for you. Save me a spot." and get put on the team.

Max 13:13
I'm Ella and I live in North Carolina. Do basketball players just sign up? Or do they earn their job and why?

Elizabeth Williams 13:31
No, you definitely have to earn your job. Whether you played in college or overseas, there are coaches that that look for you. And then you also have like a training camp or tryout, sort of, where coaches can decide if you make the team. My name is Elizabeth Williams, I play center for the Washington Mystics of the WNBA.

Jane 13:52
The players on the Mystics and the other WNBA teams in the league are some of the very best basketball players in the whole world. And it's a big deal to get picked to play for one of these teams. Coming up, we'll find out what it's like to be a professional athlete.

Jane 14:11
This is But Why: A Pod. I'm Jane Lindholm and today we're talking basketball with some of the best players in the world. They're all members of the Washington mystics WNBA team in Washington, DC. WNBA stands for the Women's National Basketball Association. All the players in this league are women. And a lot of you had questions about why the women play in a different league.

Max 14:36

Hi, my name is Max. I am eight years old, and I live in Brookline, Massachusetts. And my question is, why is there an all men's team or an all woman's team and professional sports?

Max 14:53
Hi, my name is Anisa and I'm nine years old and I live in Atlanta, Georgia. I want to know why woman's basketball why it's called WNBA. And why isn't men's basketball called MNBA?

Elizabeth Williams 15:09
It should be called the men's NBA. But I think just because the NBA came first, that's the only reason it's like that. I think if they came at the same time, we would have the mens NBA and the women's NBA.

Jane 15:23
That's Elizabeth Williams. She's been playing basketball since she was nine years old. I asked Elizabeth to help us understand a kind of deeper question about girls in sports that a lot of you are thinking about.

Sophie 15:35
My name is Sophie. And I'm nine years old. And I'm from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. And my question is, why do people think that sports are for boys and not girls? Thank you, bye.

Elizabeth Williams 15:47
I think people think sports are for boys and for girls because most of the sports they see on TV or with boys. And so as we start seeing more and more girls and women on TV, people understand that girls and women can play sports too.

Natasha Cloud 16:01
Natasha Cloud, point guard for the Washington Mystics. And I'm a big goofy kid from Broomall, Pennsylvania. I think that people think sports are for boys and not for girls because of how it's always been. Years and years ago, only men were allowed to play, or boys were allowed to play. Girls weren't expected to do that. But we have a lot of really cool women have changed that perspective and that image, and we have fought for where we are now. And we have so much further to fight to progress us forward and move us forward. But my hope is that young girls can look at us, they can look at all these professional leagues around not only our country, but around the world and see themselves and understand that we are fighting for them. We are fighting for them to be that that this can be their future, and that they can you know, be the best versions of themselves as athletes.

Jane 17:06
"Some of you are already basketball players striving for that kind of respect. 11 year old Nava lives in Chicago. She sent us a bunch of questions by email, including this one. "Do you ever get hated on because you're a girl playing basketball?" Natasha cloud says she does.

Natasha Cloud 17:24
All the time. A*/ll the time. So for me, it's just, you know, continuing to break that mold and continuing to do what I do and continue to voice respect him and women's sports, not only for us and basketball, but

across the board. So there's always going to be haters, regardless of if it's in basketball, if it's in life, it's in friendships, whatever, there's always going to be some hate. You can't make everyone happy, but just remaining confident in who you are. valuing yourself understanding your worth.

Jane 17:58
Elizabeth Williams says she faces some negativity, too.

Elizabeth Williams 18:01
Yes, I do get hated on for being a girl playing basketball. I try not to think about it too much. Because at the end of the day, I'm still an athlete, I still have fun and it's a game for everybody.

Jane 18:13
Nava is also wondering if the Mystics players have any advice for overcoming challenges, and continuing to play even when you're tired. Here's Elizabeth Williams.

Elizabeth Williams 18:23
My motivation is almost always my teammates. I want to push myself for them. I want our team to be successful, and I can push through anything I'm going through for them.

August 18:32
Hi, my name is August. I'm 10 years old, and I live in New Orleans, Louisiana. My question is, how much can an injury affect your career as a professional sports player?

Jane 18:44
Here's Shatori Walker-Kimbrough on that

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 18:46
It can affect it a lot, or cannot affect it at all. You know, sometimes it depends on the injury. But I know for me, knock on wood, I never had any I never had any serious injuries but I know it's really big on a mindset. Two people may have the same injury, but one may come back and be better and the other person may not be able to play basketball ever again. So it depends on the injury and it depends on the person as well.

Zoe 19:07
My name is Zoe. I come from Menlo Park, California, and I'm six years old. My question is, are you nervous before a basketball game?

Jane 19:16
Elizabeth Williams took a crack at that one.

Elizabeth Williams 19:18
I am usually nervous before every game, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. Because it means that you care.

Jane 19:24
So many of you just wanted to know what it's like to be a professional athlete. And I don't blame you. I want to know, too!

Avery 19:31
Hi, my name is Avery and I live in New York, and I'm seven years old. And my question is, how does it feel to travel all those different places? Is it fun?

Elizabeth Williams 19:44
Yes, I played all over the world. And I love it. I love learning about new cultures. Playing with teammates who also come from different cultures is really a cool thing about basketball brings people together from all over.

Jane 19:56
That was Elizabeth Williams and here's Shatori Walker-Kimbrough

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 20:00
So blessing, I love it. Just learning different styles of basketball because there's so many different ways to play, like how we play in America isn't how people play in Europe or how people play in Australia. And so for me, I like to go and I like to travel and learn different ways to play like in Europe or Russia, and then bring it back and add it to my game here in America. And like people, some people say, "Oh, where'd you get that from?" Or "Where'd you learn that from?" And that's how you know basketball keeps growing, when you can add things to it.

Micah 20:26
My name is Micah. I live in Seattle, Washington. I'm nine years old. My question is, what is it like to play professional sportsbig busy city?

Holiday 20:37
My name is Holiday, I'm eight years old. I live in Washington State. And my question is, what is it like to be competing in a professional league?

Jane 20:47
Natasha cloud says it's been amazing.

Natasha Cloud 20:50
Basketball has been a true blessing to my life. I've been able to receive a college degree from it, I've been able to travel around the world, create really strong friendships and bonds. And to be able to provide for my family at the end of the day through this game of basketball is a blessing in itself. So, but to play in DC, I've been in DC my entire career, I was drafted here, I've won a championship here, I've been here eight years. And to be in the most powerful city in the entire world, and be able to play and put on Washington across my chest, it means the world to me. Understanding the impact that we can have, we're much more than basketball players. And understanding the platform that we have, the platform that we have to create change, create hard dialogues that need to be had in this city of DC.

And then our fans, our fans are amazing. From the time that I came in in 2015 til now. In 2015, I would walk around the street, no one would know who I was. Now, in 2022, everyone is, "That's Cloud Nine, that's the Mystics, go Mystics!" And I think that's a beautiful thing of not only being appreciated and respected for what you do for the city, but also that progressing women in sports forward and being respected for what we bring to the table.

Lucy 22:05
Hello, my name's Lucy, and I'm eight years old from Portland, Oregon. And my question is, how is basketball fun? Thank you. Bye.

Jane 22:21
We asked Shatori Walker-Kimbrough Lucy's question.

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough 22:23
For me, basketball is super fun. When? Well, for me, I love it here in Washington, DC because I love my teammates. They're like my sisters. So I'm just having so much fun. It's like having my best friends out there. We're laughing and we're having fun because we all love it. We all love the game. We all love getting better. And we all love beatin gpeople too. So that's always fun as well.

Jane 22:45
And here's assistant coach, Eric Thibault.

Eric Thibault 22:47
Why is basketball fun? Well, you get to be on a team, that's the best part. If you're having a bad day, there's other people that can help you have a good day. And some days you need to help them out when they're struggling a little bit. And you get to be competitive and get exercise. We play in a great arena here with a big crowd on top of the court. But you can play basketball anywhere you can pick up a ball and you don't even need a hoop. You can work on your dribbling, or if you have a friend, you can play one-on-one or work on your passing. So you can play basketball anywhere.

Jane 23:17
One of the other things that I love about basketball is, first of all, there are a lot of different people who have the chance to score and in some sports, not everybody gets to score. And then not everybody scores a lot in basketball. But a lot of the players on the court at the same time have a chance to score and there's nothing that feels better than that swish when the ball goes in.

Eric Thibault 23:37
That's true. That is the best feeling the best sound in the world is the basketball swishing through the net. But not only can everybody score, but anybody can make an assist. And I used to say and assist is great because it makes two people happy the score and the passer and three counting the coach.

Jane 23:50
Well, I'm convinced! Basketball is super fun to play. And you really can play it anywhere you can find a net or make one. And you know what? You don't have to be the star player to be involved in

professional sports. There are many different ways you can be part of the bigger team that makes pro sports happen. For example, Alycen McCauley, who works on the business side of things. She's super important to making sure the Mystics are successful.

Alycen McAuley 24:17
Yeah, there's probably more jobs in sports that are not the players themselves. And so we think about it in two parts of our business. So one is the basketball side. And on the basketball side, in addition to the players, we have coaches, we have athletic trainers, we have doctors, physical therapists. We have people who work the games themselves; they're sitting at that really long table on the court called the Scores table. And they're doing everything from, you know, keeping the score for the game and running statistics and running the lights and all those kinds of things. Behind the scenes, there's a whole bunch of people who specialize in math and the analytics of basketball and they're using that to help our players get better. So they're sort of crunching all the numbers. And so we have people who are really into the math side and the data science side and technology. There's a lot of cameras, if you're around our practice facility, we have cameras everywhere. We're filming, well, how our players perform both in practice and on the court, and we're analyzing those kinds of things. On my side of the business, on the business side, we have a whole host of people who are working on it. So we have people who sell tickets and are responsible for bringing fans to the game. We have people who do all of the marketing. So anytime you see a poster or a logo, that's all coming out of our marketing team. We have a whole group of people who are responsible for content, and they're producing that content for social media and for websites. And for broadcast television. We have folks who run this facility itself, so everything that it takes to run a big building. So that whole team is called our facilities team. So what we call our front office, which is all the people who are not basketball players, that group is is quite large.

Jane 26:01
And those are just some of the jobs connected to the Mystics. Maybe one day you'll have a job in some aspect of professional sports. There are a ton of ways you can be involved in sports, even if playing isn't really your thing. But let's leave it there for now so we can go out and play. We want to thank Alycen McCauley, who you heard from last there, and her son Kieran. Kieran is a big fan of But Why and that's what gave Allison the idea to see if we'd be interested in having the mystics answer your questions. So Thanks, Kieran and Alycen, and thank you to the Washington Mystics players and staff for letting us come to a game and then pepper them with all of our questions.

Jane 26:40
Those of you listening now, what's your question? If you have a question about anything, or a suggestion for where we should travel next, send it to us. You can have an adult help you record your question using a smartphone. Tell us your first name, where you live and how old you are, and then send the file to questions@ButWhykids.org Our show is produced by Vermont Public Radio and distributed by PRX. It's made by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm. And we had help this week from Marlon Hyde. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds and we'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.