

THE LEAD

'Crazy on the court': What the Liberty have in Marine Johannès, their French rookie who plays with flair

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Marine Johannès, one of the New York Liberty's newest rookies, is still getting her bearings. In many ways, this summer is a masterclass in adaptability.

The 24-year old, dubbed “the French Steph Curry” by the press back home, touched down in New York last month after a year of basketball that has taken her from the French championship and EuroLeague competition to the EuroBasket tournament to the WNBA. Through it all, she knew this was the goal.

“The WNBA is the absolute dream,” Johannès said.

Behind the high-slung blonde bun and soft-spoken demeanor is a creative competitor whose arrival adds yet another international face to the domestic basketball scene. As the WNBA draws the world's best talent, France has become one of the most consistent pipelines. Johannès is the 13th French player to enter the WNBA, while 27 have come through the NBA.

The U.S. league may be the dream, but those who knew Johannès during her fledgling years aren't surprised that *la petite* has earned her shot in the WNBA.

Johannès, like many in France, dabbled in different sports as a kid before finding her way to basketball. Born in Lisieux, a small town nestled in the eastern Calvados region of Normandy, an 8-year old Johannès was inspired by her sister to start playing the game. Her appetite whetted, she enrolled with the youth team in nearby Pont-l'Évêque, some 11 miles north, the same club where NBA veteran Nicolas Batum developed his skills.

Batum, six years her elder, recalled watching the raw Johannès learn the game.

“She was already crazy on the court,” said Batum, entering his fifth season with the Charlotte Hornets. “I didn’t think that she’d end up where she is (today). We were just two kids who were going to play in Pont-l'Évêque for the rest of our lives. But then we grew up.”

Johannès took to basketball as she grew into a young adult. At first, that meant practice with Pont l-Évêque every Wednesday and games every Sunday. Unlike the way sports development has trended in the U.S., French youth typically don’t specialize in one discipline until their early teens.

But Johannès knew what she liked best. She beefed up her game knowledge and voraciously consumed video of NBA games, internalizing by sight what she was learning on the court. She watched Michael Jordan. She watched Kobe Bryant. (“Now, it’s more Stephen Curry,” she said.)

In addition to studying American stars, Johannès took note of the first French player to make a significant mark in the United States, Tony Parker. While the WNBA was in its infancy, French kids like Johannès and Batum watched the future Hall of Famer, who was just then making a name for himself — and European players — in the world’s elite hoops league.

“When I started basketball, there was really just the NBA,” Johannès said. “It was something really cool to see Tony Parker.”

More followed in Parker’s and his French predecessors’ footsteps, including Batum who was drafted in 2008 by the Portland Trailblazers. As a young teenager, Johannès attended one of his summer camps at the Normandy Sports Center in Houlgate.

“She was really young but already super talented,” Batum recalled. “She already had something different from the other players. I don’t think she knew what she was capable of doing at that age. I don’t think she understood how good she was.”



Johannès recorded 20 points, five assists, five steals, four rebounds and two blocks in France's Eurobasket semifinal win last month. (Srdjan Stevanovic / Getty Images)

Johannès began to display the traits that are her hallmark today — fearless and creative on the court, working hard to create for her teammates.

Johannès took her game to the next level in US Mondeville's youth academy in Caen, where she could more easily finish school and pursue basketball at the same time. She played her first minutes with the team's professional side during the 2011-12 season at the age of 16. Since then, her career has taken off. She played several years with Mondeville, then three with Bourges where she won the 2018 French title, all while suiting up regularly for *Les Bleues*.

Those that have watched her grow see that Johannès has the *je ne sais quoi* that sets her apart. That she has a certain feel for the game that transposes well across different leagues.

“I think the most important thing for Marine is that she takes such pleasure playing on the court,” *Les Bleues* coach Valérie Garnier said. “She needs to take pleasure to express herself.”

Johannès plays with creative flair, opening up opportunities for her teammates to drive to the net while posing an offensive threat of her own. In France’s semifinal EuroBasket win over Great Britain on July 7, Johannès packed the stat line with 20 points, five assists, five steals, four rebounds and two blocks.

“She’s a permanent danger and can help free up other players,” Garnier noted. “She’s someone who can make a lot of decisive passes, and that’s important.”

The game in France and EuroLeague is played at a slower pace than in the WNBA. And faster should work in Johannès’ favor, Garnier believes.

“It’s a basketball (style) that has all her qualities: athletic, really intense physically, and a *basket de course* — running basketball,” she said. “The WNBA is very, very fast.”

As Johannès transitions into the WNBA, it helps that she is becoming more of a scorer. She impressed off the bench in her Liberty debut on July 12 with 10 points against the Chicago Sky. She was even better two games later, going 6 for 6 with 17 points in a win over the Los Angeles Sparks, and again August 7 against the Sky, racking up 16 points within 16 minutes of playing time.

But there are also games where something is missing. Liberty coach Katie Smith has watched as her French rookie gets to know her teammates and the playbook. While she’s impressed by how smooth Johannès’ transition has been, she wants her to be more aggressive on the court.

“Her defense is solid,” Smith said following the Liberty’s 94-79 loss to the Connecticut Sun last week. “But she can go for her shot more, rather than always being a facilitator.”

At the same time, Smith knows she has something special in Johannès.

“She is just a really good basketball player who has some things you can’t really teach, like vision and the ability to score,” she said.

Some performances are less stellar. But Johannès uses such performances as case studies. “You learn from the little errors,” she said.

She's still playing catch-up, having joined the Liberty in July after helping France win silver at EuroBasket.

"It was a little complicated to begin mid-season," Johannès said. Now, her focus is on creating on-court opportunities and aiding her new teammates as much as possible, a similar role that she plays with Team France.

It's been a nonstop schedule for the Frenchwoman since last summer, and it'll only continue. After the Liberty's season finishes, Johannès will return to France to play with Lyon ASVEL Féminin, the club owned by Parker and Batum, who is director of basketball operations.

"New York is a great level," Batum said. "Playing at that level in the WNBA will build her confidence."

The year-round basketball can be head-spinning, but for now, Johannès is concentrating on learning and improving with the Liberty and adjusting off the court to a new country.

Her English is getting better and she's a big fan of New York City. In the rare moments when not at practices or games, Johannès enjoys walking around the city, seeing sights like the Statue of Liberty and sampling its many restaurants. Japanese food is a favorite.

There's a little bit of homesickness, missing family, friends and the food back home. Johannès is also noticing other nuances about the United States, like the differences between French and American basketball culture.



(Mike Lawrence)

Games in France are becoming more animated in ways familiar to U.S. audiences. They now feature announcers who get the crowd amped up, though Johannès noted that French games still don't have the same on-court entertainment during pauses, like dance and cheer squads or youth teams, that WNBA games do.

Then, there are the less tangible differences she notices.

“(Americans) have a culture of winning that’s perhaps not as strong in France,” she said.

Johannès is quick to point out, though, that the French basketball mentality has changed in recent years thanks to the Parker-Boris Diaw generation that won in the NBA and with the French national team.

“Now,” Johannès said, “there’s lots of results in France in basketball that shows that anything is possible.”

It's been helpful to have friendly faces around, a factor that weighed into Johannès' decision to sign with the Liberty. There is Nayo Raincock-Ekunwe who played with her at Bourges, and Bria Hartley, her *Les Bleues* teammate. Hartley and Johannès forged a close bond during national team duty earlier this summer.

"I got to spend some time with her, giving her advice," Hartley said of their month-long EuroBasket campaign during which she pumped Johannès full of Liberty knowledge.

"I knew it would be a smooth transition for her," Hartley said, "but I knew it would help her to have me and Nayo."

Surprisingly, one person Johannès did not ask for advice before moving to the United States was Batum. Ever since that camp at Houlgate, the two have remained in contact in what both describe as a big brother-little sister hoops relationship forged through their shared hometown. Batum has offered advice when solicited over the years, but the move to the WNBA was different.

"I think that's the first time she didn't ask me questions about the transition," he laughed, proud that Johannès attained her goal. "She was really excited. When I called her to say congrats, she's like 'I can't wait to go!'"

Johannès' WNBA arrival fulfills more than just her dream. She's also inspiring kids back home in France that they, too, can follow in her footsteps. Last summer, Johannès and Batum ran a basketball camp together, eight years after Johannès herself was a teenager on the court at Houlgate.

"You never know what you can become," Batum told those kids, and nodded to his fellow Lisieux-native. "Maybe in a couple of years, one of you will do the camp with Marine."

(Top photo courtesy of Mike Lawrence)

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