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D.C.'s Homecoming Queen

By Michael Wilbon
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It couldn't be much better, as homecomings go. [Kara Lawson](#) returns to Washington this weekend as not only a [WNBA](#) all-star but as a league champion and a bicoastal, career-juggling woman who, while certainly not a household name, should nonetheless be Exhibit A of what women's basketball at its very best can produce.

Lawson plays professionally for the Sacramento Monarchs, lives most of the year in Northern California but is every inch a child of Washington, not all that far removed from cheering for the Capitals in Landover one night, then accompanying her father to a Clinton inauguration the next. She didn't grow up watching women play professional basketball because the WNBA is so new to the sports landscape.

As a child growing up in [Alexandria](#), Lawson thought any chance to play professionally would come overseas. But here she is, playing professionally in the United States, playing in an all-star game before a full house at [Verizon Center](#) this afternoon in front of 25 or so relatives and friends, very much the hometown girl who made good -- actually very good.

Only 26, she's as adept with a microphone as a crossover dribble. You can flip on the TV late, late at night if you have a dish and watch Kara Lawson dissect an [NBA](#) game from [Sacramento](#), or catch her in the dead of winter analyzing women's college basketball. "The opportunities you have as a professional athlete," she said the other day, "open doors to you while playing that present paths you have to explore."

It seems she tries to open every door and take at least a few steps down every path. She says she still wants to play overseas, live in another country for a while and become fluent in a language besides English. It's been like this since she can remember.

You'd have to be [Tiger Woods](#) to have a better early résumé. When Lawson was only 8 she played boys' tackle football, 60-pound division, in [Fairfax County](#)'s Lee Franconia football league. She was the running back, linebacker, second-string quarterback, punter and punt returner, place kicker and kickoff returner. Channel 4 was impressed enough to send Barbara Harrison out to do a piece on this little terror in pigtails, a piece that turned into an Emmy Award winner. [NBC](#) got wind of the story and flew Lawson to [New York](#) for an interview with Deborah Norville for the "Today" show.

Friends and family members would ask her parents, Bill and Kathleen Lawson, "What's Kara supposed to do for an encore?"

Their daughter didn't make them struggle for an answer. She led West Springfield High's girls' basketball team to a 30-0 record and a [Virginia AAA](#) state title as a sophomore, a second perfect 30-0 record and another state title as a senior. She didn't win a title at [Tennessee](#), but went to the Final Four three times in four years, losing all three times to [Connecticut](#).

In four full WNBA seasons, Lawson's Sacramento Monarchs have reached the conference finals twice, won a WNBA

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championship and come within one Game 5 loss last year of a repeat. Now, she's an all-star, "which is pretty shocking to be honest because I didn't think I could be an all-star coming off the bench," she said. "To have won a championship, which is always the ultimate team goal, and to have made an all-star game in my fifth year . . . it's pretty stunning."

And it represents only half her life.

She dreamed of playing in the NBA because there was no WNBA when she was a kid. But Lawson never dreamed of being on TV. "I was terrible at public speaking," she said. "I'm shy . . . still. I took a public speaking course at Tennessee my sophomore year, and my voice shook the entire time. I was terrified."

She thought it was a joke when [ESPN](#) invited her to audition for a job as analyst for women's college basketball games, but went anyway, got the gig, and was told to start the next week.

She had planned to play overseas and go to law school, and even took the LSAT. But TV work wasn't so terrifying after her initial nervousness, and she began to like calling college games and working in the studio after the WNBA season ended around Labor Day.

Lawson was smart and authoritative without bombast or shtick. The [Comcast](#) people in Sacramento wondered why she couldn't be a studio analyst for Kings NBA games when she wasn't working for ESPN. So she said yes to that, too, and will start her fourth season as a Kings studio analyst in the fall.

Asked whether people recognize her more from basketball or television, Lawson said, "Television, easily."

She's too well-rounded to be a workaholic but has little regard for rest. In 2006 she worked the Final Four on television in [Boston](#) for ESPN while training for Team USA at [Boston College](#). The day after the Final Four, she flew to [San Francisco](#) to [Sydney](#) to [Cannes, France](#), and played six games in seven days -- but didn't make the 2006 U.S. world championship team.

What in the world did she tell her boyfriend, Damien Barling, when he proposed marriage on Tuesday? "I told him, 'Well, we'll squeeze it in somewhere.' "

What she has found is that each career complements the other, "that I'm expanding my knowledge of the game, which helps both," she said. "If I'm doing a college game on a Sunday afternoon, I'll get to the site on a Friday night, then spend Saturday watching both teams practice.

"It was amazing to me that [former [Texas](#) women's coach] Jody Conradt would let me watch a shoot-around. The access is for TV, yes. But I also use it for selfish reasons. I can learn and incorporate things from a coach's drills or defensive principles . . . use it to analyze games and improve my game."

It has become increasingly clear to Lawson that she might have to make a professional choice, basketball or broadcasting, earlier than she'd like.

Outside of golf and tennis, women don't have the financial incentive to keep playing. No doubt, talking will lead her to much bigger paydays than playing. "I love to play," she said, "so if and when that day comes it will be difficult. But to not have to face that decision would be to embrace mediocrity. I want that choice."


It's probably coming sooner rather than later, and to that end Lawson has had a couple of dinners with Robin Roberts, the college basketball player turned sportscaster turned major network star. Tennessee Coach [Pat Summitt](#), still looking out for her players, set up the first meeting between Lawson and Roberts.

"Robin is the easiest for me to identify with . . . ," Lawson said. "She's a woman and a minority and there are not a lot of people out there that I share those characteristics with."

The transition from sports to television was rather seamless. There might come a day when she'll be asked to cross over from sports to news or entertainment or politics -- or all of it. Probably, somebody will lean over to Bill and Kathleen Lawson this afternoon at Verizon Center and ask what their daughter, still just 26, will do for her next encore.

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