

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Jacky Chazalon (FRA)

Oral History Interview Jacky Chazalon

Setting the Scene:

1. (Circumstances) Help us set the scene and describe how you first came to the sport of basketball: how and why did you first pick up a ball, and what was it like? Who did you play with in those early years? Who were your early basketball influences and/or role models?

I started to practice many different sports at school in Alès, we had an awesome physical education teacher who made us participate in many different sports scholar events involving handball, basketball, athletics, volley... There wasn't a girls basketball team in my Club, la JSA in Alès so I mainly played basketball at school... but must admit that I really liked cycling and my dream was to become a pro cyclist. But in those days, around 1960, there wasn't either cycling for women.

So, why did started playing basketball? I played mainly with boys, particularly with my brother. Maybe the coaches saw me and thought probably that I had certain talent and skills for basketball. So, when they tell you this, it encourages you to keep going.

My role model, the mirror where I looked to, was Jaques Anquetil... I loved cycling, I dreamed of winning and lifting the bouquet of flowers... Besides cycling, I watched a lot of men basketball, particularly the American players that arrived to play in France, there wasn't anything very much appealing to me in women basketball.

2. So, do you see yourself somehow as a woman that paved the way for other young girls?

Maybe. In those days when someone said "you play like a boy" it was a huge compliment and recognition. I played like a boy regarding technique, shooting skills... I worked hard.

3. (Environment) We're curious to learn what basketball was like at that time in France, specifically in Alès as each region has its own sporting culture. What was the basketball structure that you first encountered? Was there a club structure you could engage with? When did you first get involved with a 'club'? What did that mean to you at the time?

When I was around 10-12, I wanted to become a high-level professional player and play at the highest level possible and become the best player... Those were my thoughts at that very young age.

For me, basketball was a way to express myself, a way to flourish... And I was selected to play with the national junior team when I was 17 and later on, I played for the best teams in France.

Basketball was quite popular; we even had a senior girls basketball team which I didn't know about back then. Must admit the level around in Alès wasn't huge and when I was 17 years old, I went to play to Valence and later on to Clermont Ferrand which was playing at National level. There were like 12 or 14 teams.

At that time, our coach, Joe Jaunay, convinced us to practice hard. There was too much of leisure basketball training one or two times per week, but he convinced us to practice four hours per day and everything changed. We reached the eastern countries level. It was very demanding.

- 4. The World War II ended the same year you were born. How difficult were those days if you have any kind of memories? How was growing up in the post War years for someone like you who has described yourself as someone who saw basketball as a way of expression?**

My parents talked about the War; my dad went to war... From the social point of view, it was a time to resist. The social rules stated that the woman had to get married, have kids, etc. And I dreamed of having a totally different life. I wanted to express myself and basketball was the way I found despite I was told to do something totally opposite: marry, have kids... It was a time where the husband didn't participate in caring and developing the kids. I recall our coach Joë Jaunay said: "If you marry, you're out of the team." It was fine with me, I thought that in order to live the life you wanted you had to resist the social pressure. I really loved basketball, it meant so much to me and I consecrated my life to basketball until I was 30. Afterwards, I wanted to share my basketball experience and give something back to the game. I thus created my first basketball camps together with an American: Carmine Calzonetti. Since I liked so much the camps, I consecrated another 30 years to the kids at the camp. And I don't regret. It was an amazing adventure.

- 5. You thought back then basketball could be a way of living?**

No, absolutely not. We were amateurs, in the 1970's we never thought about the money... it was an amateur sport and we weren't allowed to play the Olympics if we earned money and I think it was later on that professionals were allowed. So, I never played for the money.

One curious fact is that Joe Jaunay, the coach that created our team at Clermont and was the national coach that led the team to the silver medal at Rotterdam in the European Championship, he

decided to implant the Communist system from the eastern countries. So, he asked the Sports Minister to award us a working spot and relieve us from working and have a very modest salary in order to concentrate and play the Europe Cup, international games. Playing basketball, all the daily practices, travelling... it was incompatible with daily working life.

At that time, I was studying to become a physical education teacher... job I was able to perform for five years and then I decided to create the basketball camps

Diving Deeper

6. Early in your career you worked with legendary Coach Edith Taver; what was it like playing for her, and why is it important to have influencers like her in a young player's life? *I.e. what is the importance of having either a role model or someone who has played at the highest level serve as an influence?*

Edith Taver... I cannot say that she was the coach that had a hugest impact in me but for sure, she was the most important person in the history of Clermont Ferrand. To begin with, she was, at her time, one of the best players of the moment. I didn't see her as a player, but I recognized her as a brilliant coach, and she gave us the privilege of coaching youth players. She started a program where the players could coach younger teams from 12 to 14 years old, and I am sure somehow this sparked me to later start my camps and working with younger generations. From the technique point of view, she didn't have any influence in me since my mirror were the boys who I looked up, but from the point of you of solidarity, team, effort, and a pedagogic way, in order to transmit all the values to the younger generations, yes.

She was a very important person to my prior generation, and she got the recognition at Clermont Ferrand having a space with her name after she passed away recently.

7. What coach, overall, was the most important one for you on court and off the court?

I think, for my generation the coach that had the most impact was Joë Jaunay. He convinced all the girls to start training four hours per day. He was the coach that convinced the girls to come to Clermont Ferrand and we end up having all the national team there, so it was very easy to play the national team and the European cup. We played all together all the year.

For sure he was the one that made the biggest change in the biggest impact in the French women basketball.

- 8. What do you consider to be the most significant chapter/phase of your career, and in your mind, what makes it important? What were the global events that most influenced it?**

I would probably go with the silver medal we won at the European championship in Rotterdam in 1970. At that time becoming the champion with Semenova in Russia was impossible and all the eastern european countries were already strong squads... So, we were coming really from behind; in the previous championship France ended last in the group... So, Joë Jaunay did a bet with me during the preparation, he said to me: "If we reach the final, I will give you as a present a dalmatian dog". We managed it and he was my first dog! And I called her Russia.

- 9. What was the key for that success? Many times, you're not the best team, but players get together and everything goes along. A small spark can light a big fire...**

This coach gave us confidence, he trusted us. Sure, we also had some luck. At that time, if you read the newspapers and articles back then, I was quite an important piece for the team. I gave the team the extra gear to propel it to the final. I have to admit that we as a team overall, we were on an excellent level guided by a true desire of progressing and, especially, winning!

- 10. Did you get the recognition deserved as a team in the media? Or not much compared if the men team would have won the medal.**

I must admit, we weren't happy, because the men's team got much recognition than us. And even from the national Federation there was a big difference, also when choosing the hotel or the facilities. We are talking about an era where we had a very small additional staff: doctor and sometimes kinesiologist. That was all. There were not additional members, no further physiotherapists, so it was not the best situation. So, the biggest success in women's French national team history came thanks to Clermont Ferrand. I played four of the five European cups played by Clermont Ferrand the games where aired on national television for free, so everybody in France knew us, we were way more on the media than today is women basketball. Today it is aired in private TV, so you have to pay to be able to watch it, and therefore the players are not that well known. Were much more recognized and we average 6000 fans per game at Clermont Ferrand.

- 11. Now things have changed compared to your time: more staff, more coaches, trainers, fisios, best conditions etc. Was it thanks to your era and the ones that paved the way?**

I think different eras bring different things to the table and all are positive, I just think that the past doesn't have to be forgotten. I think this is like going up a staircase, you go step-by-step, but not forgetting the previous steps. We are all part of a big family, and it would be great that today's generation could learn more about the previous generation and have some meetings so they could learn more from their roots.

- 12. So you must feel proud of yourself, because with all these recognitions, somehow sure you were the mirror to many young girls that wanted to become the next Jacky Chazalon**

I must say in relation to this is that the big problem today is that we don't speak more about our time, the young players today they don't know the history of the women basketball in France, they don't know who Alain Gilles is... yes we have the Academie, our Hall of Fame, and the Foundation but for many years now the proper job hasn't been done... It's necessary to not forget Edith Taver, Anne Marie Colchen, Ginette Mazel, Yannick Stéphan, us...

- 13. Do you have currently the chance to speak with the younger generations in order to exchange your experience and if it's not the case, if you had the opportunity to meet with them, what would you tell them thanks to your experience and your wisdom?**

Things have changed so much in many different areas that I really don't know what advice I would be able to give. I could tell them for sure about my story, my life, my experience like I am doing right now, and I think it would be positive, so they know the history and what we achieved. But giving advice it's a totally different story.

- 14. What do you know now that you wish you had known then? (i.e. what would your 2023 self-have advised your player-self or your younger-coach self?)**

I really did what I wanted to do and what I had to do. I just regret the fact that I didn't earn any money. I would have loved to be a professional basketball player, but I didn't get the chance. But my popularity thanks to basketball allowed me to do other things that I wanted. So it was a formidable experience for me.

7. [If not answered through the above questions]: In what ways do you think your role as a player (particularly with CUC and the national team) and coach at the Jacky Chazalon camps impacted the development of basketball in Alès, Clermont, France, and more globally?

- 15. What are the most important things that you've achieved, learned, or observed thanks to basketball? In other words, in what ways was basketball a tool for you throughout your career—and since? How has your relationship with the game (what it facilitates/enables, what it can give back, how you interact with it and/or give back to it) changed over time?**

I loved basketball also because it wasn't a sports contact, you required skills, technique, it was an elegant sport... Now you need a good physical condition, not in my days. Basketball was away to express myself, like an artist, a dancer. For sure the final result was important, you always like to win and in team sports you develop a sense of camaraderie, solidarity. I loved the elegance of basketball and the good things it brought. I loved Julius Erving.

- 16. If you have to pick one moment or one thing you were allowed to do thanks for basketball what would it be?**

To me, basketball was a tool and a chance to express myself. It also allowed me to travel around the world: Brazil, Russia, Romania, Czech Republic, former Yugoslavia... and I develop at great friendships like Uljana Sémenova, Ludmilla Bazarevich, Vera Stéchrova, Katarina Savu, Milica Radovanovic/Tojagic (a Serbian player that became the first foreign player in Clermont Ferrand) Americans like Carmine Calzonetti who played at St Johns for Carnesecca and helped me with the first US camp in France, ... it was great.

Going Global

- 17. Throughout your career, you traveled widely thanks to basketball, you represented a number of different teams, and you helped introduce some of the U.S. basketball styles and camps to France. To what extent do you consider yourself to be a sports diplomat?**

Traveling was amazing for me, I am a big fan of Prague, of Venice, I have great friends around that are happy to see me, going to Peru where we also played a championship, South America... when you have the chance to play at the maximum pro level, you are blessed for leaving many experiences.

The only bad thing is when you lose.

I discovered that I am not a big or a good spectator. I liked to play, and I loved competing... so when I had to retire at the age of 30 my desire was to play with young kids and share my experience and love for basketball. I really love to play and teach the young kids at my camp. For sure basketball leaves a big mark in you, but I must admit that the years after my retirement, I didn't want to have any relationship with this sport mainly because I had a big discussion with the Federation... It was the moment of the reconversion, and you had to get a job, and the Federation didn't want me to celebrate my camps. So for 30 years I dedicated myself to my sport camps. I have to admit that I was able to develop them mainly thanks to the big repercussion I had in the media, where they talked about my camps. With that success, we then created football, rugby, tennis, gymnastics and sport and language camps. In addition to this, we formed school support and sport and many more...

18. **Uljana Semenova was one of your epic rivals, whether at the continental club level (with Daugava Riga) or the FIBA international level (with the Soviet Union). What makes for a good basketball rival/rivalry, and how did this one in particular help make you and your teammates better? Do you think it made Semenova and her teammates better too, and if so, how?**

You had to admit the Russians were the best, they were at another level... unbeatable. We always wanted to win and tried to do it always respecting the game rules. But once the game ended, and specially in National Team competitions, we spent time together. We were like friends who loved basketball. Sure, we became friends. With many other players you wrote cards in French, English or anyway we could. With Semenova I talked via Aija Erta, the director of her Riga museum, and during the championships we talked frequently... avoiding sometimes the political commissioners... the Russians and other eastern countries were very monitored.

- 19. There is an iconic picture where your diving to the basket facing a colossal Semenova... It seems like you didn't fear anyone or anything.**

Correct, I didn't fear anyone. She was so big and intimidating that even if you passed her defense, she was still a menace... Growing up I never played a man as big and dominating.

- 20. How would you describe the basketball culture around this rivalry at the time, and in what ways do you think it helped build/advance women's basketball? How did it help build/advance interest for women in basketball?**

You had the Czechs, Yugoslavs, Bulgarians... and the Italians were good! But the world of basketball has changed so much since then... Belgium is European champion, and we never lost against them. Things have changed.

Change Over Time: basketball, gender and society

- 21. Speaking about changes, what are the most significant ways the game has changed/how the game is played changed in France, more globally, and what do you attribute those changes to?**

Today, sport, and basketball in particular, is much more physical. Men are bigger and stronger, much more muscled. I prefer basketball based in skills, more technical... the former Yugoslav school compared to the American. Now, the physical condition and strength is key. In women basketball is the same despite admitting that there has been a technical evolution, it has grown in the skills area also... but physical is still a very important issue.

- 22. And what about media coverage?**

If I talk about what I see in France, women basketball is still way behind. There is a big problem in France. We don't talk much about basketball because its aired in private tv, and this is a big problem. And also, there are so many signings and player transfers that you practically don't recognize any player. For example, this past season, I met Victor Wembanyama thanks to Vincent Collet and the president of the club and he is a magnificent kid, but I hardly knew anyone else in the league. Every year there is an overhaul in the teams. So it's difficult to get attached to a team. And in women basketball it's the same. For 10 years I was president of international players club and we promoted meetings with many different players and other greats like Tony Parker or Boris Diaw, and it was

really blessing. We encouraged these meetings so ancient players and today players could talk, get to know each other and enlarge the French basketball family.

23. What do we need to do in order to promote basketball?

There is a media coverage problem for sure, women don't get exposure. But one critical thing to promote women basketball is to develop a project where women basketball is as spectacular as men basketball. This is an idea for FIBA, maybe they don't like it, but it would work: smaller courts and lower the rim so women could dunk, I would love it. There was a ball change years ago so women could handle it better, shoot from outside... but lowering the rim would give the chance of dunking. I'm really looking forward for this to happen.

24. But we must highlight the record attendance we saw in the last women World Cup...

Yes, sure there is a growing interest in women sports, but we need to work on this. It's a fact that younger girls are much more interested in basketball and this is very positive.

25. Do you think that thanks to basketball and the values this sport promotes the young generation are much more educated, and these values help them in their life?

I think sport is education, and it brings great values. They can learn much things in team sports and get education values: say good morning, respect your rivals, the referee, the rules... today everybody disputes everything and everyone, all the social establishment. Sport forces you to respect everyone. That's why I really loved the young kids coming to my camp, they all wanted to progress with Alain Gilles, with me, with the American players invited...

26. Do you think basketball can be an ideal vehicle to transmit appropriate values that can be useful in daily life? From your perspective, what can basketball do for women and girls in society? Where do you see good examples of basketball contributing to society and what characterizes success in this respect?

Absolutely, no doubt about it. I truly believe it. When I did my camps, first thing kids should do every single morning was to say "Good morning", we couldn't argue with the refs. I think basketball, and other sports also, can help to set solid foundations.

Maybe I wasn't even aware myself back then, but the reason why I started my camps was to attend a certain need of transmitting values to other younger generations, I loved pedagogy... and I realized really soon I couldn't coach adults, they have other mentality. I had feeling with kids and it's easier to teach. You tell them how to shoot, they do it, meanwhile adults will enter a debate about it.

- 27. Thinking more broadly on the role of Basketball in society: how would you reflect on the role that Basketball can play in creating identities in communities/regions? Over the *long durée* of your career, how have you seen different 'basketball' identities manifest themselves? What did it mean to you to see different basketball cultures and identities?**

When we started with the camp back in 1978-80, we were the only camp in France, maybe in Europe. We tried to work with the kids, educate them, bring values... and I also think this was an important tool for all the young monitors who would become coaches later. An example, when I met Wembanyama, I had already heard he was going to be a great player, and I met him thanks to Collet and the president... its funny because nearly all the presidents of the clubs and the coaches came to my camp back in the days. Collet came when he was 15, and stayed for 30 years... Also, many sports journalists.

And thanks to my relationship with Calzonetti we could show highlights of American basketball because it wasn't aired on tv. The young kids could watch the NBA players, even NBA coaches came to the camp. We saw different styles, different 'schools' of basketball and techniques

- 28. Reflecting on your awesome career. What does it mean to be a FIBA Hall of Fame member?**

Fifteen years ago, I was chosen to be part of the NBA Hall of Fame and it was an honor, but I must admit, and I realized that being part of the FIBA Hall of Fame is something amazing, it's the most important one in the world. I'm very proud of it. When I was elected back in 2009, I was thrilled to be part of that edition. FIBA invited me to Madrid to the enshrinement, I was delighted, happy. I'm really proud to be part of the FIBA Hall of Fame and I would love to have the chance to meet other promotions every now and then and work for the benefit of basketball.

- 29. After so many years, what's the story you will always remember and the one you always end up telling in meetings**

Choosing only one it's impossible... But must say that every time we get together the girls of Clermont Ferrand every single one of us has one different story and it's great to listen, remember and learn.

30. Last one. Any regrets? Maybe not achieving the Olympics?

If I would have managed to play the Olympics in Montreal It would have been an amazing souvenir, but not participating in the Olympics it's not something I regret or miss. I don't have great regrets... Maybe only not having played 10 or 20 years later so I would have earned some money. But overall, I'm happy with the results I achieved, the retour I had, it also helped to develop a carrier with the kids in the camps... and I'm FIBA Hall of Fame! I can't ask for more