

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Claudine Clot-Ducommun (SUI)

A Journey Through Time, Swiss Basketball, and the Historic 1953 World Cup from the inside with pioneer Claudine Clot-Ducommun

Few athletes have witnessed the transformation of Swiss basketball quite like Claudine Clot-Ducommun. A true pioneer of the sport, she was part of a momentous chapter in history — the inaugural FIBA Women's World Championship in 1953, held in Santiago, Chile. But beyond the statistics and competition, her journey is one of resilience, adventure, and cultural discovery.

In this exclusive interview, Claudine transports us to a time when Swiss basketball was still in its infancy, and international tournaments were as much an exploration as they were a competition. She recalls the long and hazardous voyage to South America, an odyssey filled with both excitement and uncertainty. She shares the thrill of stepping onto the court against unfamiliar teams, the challenges of navigating a clash of cultures, and the electrifying atmosphere inside the packed Chilean arenas.

Through her vivid recollections, we experience the camaraderie of the Swiss squad as they took their first steps onto the world stage, facing the unknown with unbreakable spirit. Decades later, her passion for the game remains unwavering. In 2016, she returned to the heart of international basketball at FIBA's headquarters in Mies, where she donated a rare, original poster from that historic championship — preserving a tangible piece of the tournament that helped shape the future of women's basketball.

Now, for the first time, Claudine shares her extraordinary story in her own words — a firsthand account of an era that defined a generation of athletes, a championship that left an indelible mark on the sport, and a lifelong love for basketball that continues to inspire.

PART 1. Setting the scene (Environment).

You played on the Swiss National Team in the very first World Cup in Chile, but let us go to the start of that amazing journey. 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?

In the 1950s, I did a lot of gymnastics. I was part of a gymnastics club in Neuchâtel, and of course, we did a bit of every sport. After a while, it was just gymnastics, and then, well, not just that. Then some people showed us a glimpse of what basketball was, and I was always interested in it.

There was a big gymnastics event in Lausanne with a basketball tournament. Naturally, I got closer, and we tried to learn. But at that time, I think I was too young to say, "I want to do this!"

We are curious to learn what basketball was like at that time in Switzerland, and particularly in Neuchâtel where you started as a young girl.

After a year in Neuchâtel, since I was doing gymnastics, two gentlemen — I believe they were professors at the university in Neuchâtel or at the business school — who were involved in basketball suggested to the whole gymnastics team that if we were interested, we could learn and play basketball.

In the end, all the other girls got tired of learning the steps, the movements, the shooting techniques — they didn't like it. But I still enjoyed it. That's why I was able to continue.

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'?

Later, a man named Dousse, who was a coach in the canton of Fribourg and was very passionate about basketball, came along. His wife also played basketball, and that's how the Neuchâtel club was created. We recruited people and gradually formed a team. I never played anywhere else. In the canton of Neuchâtel, there were clubs in Chaux-de-Fonds, but in Neuchâtel, it was just us.

What made you fall in love with basketball?

I don't know. I think I've always been active, and gymnastics was fun for a while, but I preferred to play, run, and compete. That's it. Maybe that played a role, but for me, it was about learning to play. I really wanted to master the steps, because they're important, and to know how to shoot at the basket.

We practiced endlessly. We trained in a very small gym, not even half the size of a modern court. But that's how I learned.

You were selected to the Swiss National team very soon after joining Neuchâtel. How was that process and was it a big change for you?

Well, since the club was founded in Neuchâtel, all the players from Neuchâtel were invited, if I remember correctly, to try out in Lausanne or Geneva to see if we could be selected. Two of us from Neuchâtel were chosen, including the coach's wife.

After that, I went to Lausanne and Geneva for training, knowing I had been selected. And the training wasn't easy. It was tough for me, as I'd only been playing basketball for about three years, compared to the experience others from Geneva had. I really had to push myself to keep up with them, but I think that's why they were happy with me.

(Society) Reflecting on basketball's place in society, you played in the first ever Women Basketball World Cup in Chile, but your career with the National Team ended soon after. Why?

I was selected to play for the trip to Chile, and then we went to Yugoslavia for a tournament. After that, I didn't continue because I had children. That made a difference.

Part 2. Society, women, values, tradition.

Reflecting on basketball's impact in the region, can you describe the role of women's basketball in Switzerland in the 1950's? Was it part of the larger culture or media atmosphere, and if not, how did basketball carve out its special niche?

I couldn't say for sure, but from what I heard and saw, people weren't at all interested in women's basketball. Gymnastics, yes, but not basketball. Gymnastics was more important, but basketball wasn't taken seriously.

Why?

Not at all. Maybe reporters weren't interested in that kind of sport, or it just wasn't as developed as it is now.

What about your parents? How did they react when you were selected for the national team?

My father worked at the train station in Neuchâtel, and I promise you, the entire station knew I was going to Chile with the Swiss team. He told everyone.

When I left by train, my mother didn't come because she would've been too emotional, but my father was there. A few friends from the club came to see me off too. My father was so proud, especially since he used to be an athlete, and my grandfather was a Swiss wrestling champion. Sports ran in the family.

So, there was a lot of pride?

Oh, absolutely! Having a grandfather who was a Swiss wrestling champion — that meant something. I think I still have a photo of him.

Part 3. The first World Cup (Knowledge).

Let us talk about the first World Cup... You were selected and participated in the first World Cup in 1953 with the Swiss team. Did you know it was the first World Cup?

Not at all! I didn't realize it was the first World Cup until we were there. It was the first amateur World Cup.

And when you heard it was in Chile, in South America, what was your reaction? Had you ever traveled that far? Could you imagine going so far?

Going to Chile felt like going to the ends of the earth. When I mentioned Chile, people would first ask where it was because geography wasn't commonly talked about.

I even looked it up in a geography book to see exactly where it was. It was extraordinary — unbelievable — to think we could go that far just to play basketball.

Did it make sense to travel so far just to play basketball?

Back then, no. I don't remember seeing much about basketball in the newspapers, especially not like now. And even less so for women's sports. If the first World Championships had been held in Switzerland, I doubt many people would've come, because it wasn't popular. Whereas in Chile, basketball was already known.

You said Chile felt like the ends of the earth... What was your first reaction? Excitement, fear, joy?

When I found out I was selected, I shouted and jumped for joy. I remember celebrating with a friend on the train. We went to the dining car to have a drink and toasted to our success.

It was an incredible feeling, hard to believe at that age.

And what did your parents think?

My mother was very anxious because she didn't know what to expect. My father was supportive and proud, but my mother worried a lot, wondering where exactly I was going.

Part 4. The first World Cup (The Odissey).

Claudine, could you tell us about the journey to Santiago? How was the experience of flying such a long distance in the 1950s?

Well, we left Geneva by sleeper train from Geneva to Paris. And in Paris, they showed us around the city because several of us had never been there before. Then they took us directly to Orly airport by taxi so that we wouldn't miss the flight. But the plane... We never imagined it would be such a small plane because back then, there were only small planes, and this one was a four-engine plane with a narrow fuselage.

So when we saw the plane, we thought, "Do we really have to get in there?" And we weren't alone; the French team was with us. So, we boarded, but we were really cramped inside. It's true, we have to admit, the seats were nothing like the ones we have nowadays.

Then, after that, we flew to Lisbon. From Lisbon, I mostly remember the large squares that were very bright and white, which we weren't used to seeing back home. After staying there for a few hours, we left for Dakar. We had to cross a stretch of sea, which was quite impressive for me, as I had never flown before.

We arrived in Dakar in the middle of the night, so the offices were lit up. I remember seeing men with their feet on their desks — that's how they were working. But as soon as they noticed us peeking through the windows, they quickly sat up straight and pretended to be working.

They offered us drinks, and then we left again the next morning. We flew to Natal. I remember from Natal to Buenos Aires... well, apart from me, because I was always a bit separate from the group... what I saw were the vast Amazon forests.

It was very impressive because I kept thinking, "If our plane crashes, how would they find us in there?" That thought stayed with me, and I kept repeating it. But anyway, we managed to get through.

And still the most amazing experience was yet to come.

Then we reached Rio, of course. We changed planes and continued to Buenos Aires. In Buenos Aires, we had some problems because while we were in the air, we had to turn back because the plane's door wasn't closing properly. We left again, maybe 12 hours later — I can't remember exactly — to cross the Andes.

The highest peak of the Andes is about 6900 meters high, if my memory serves me right. And our little plane... I promise you, it struggled to climb. That's when we encountered turbulence that left a mark on all of us. We hit an air pocket and dropped 600 meters. The steward was plastered against the ceiling, screaming at us to sing, to sing to ease our fear.

To make matters worse, the toilets overflowed inside the plane. So, with the smells and the fear, we had everything.

When the plane finally stabilized, we had to use oxygen masks because we were short of breath. I couldn't stand it. I think I was the only one who didn't wear a mask. Even now, I still have issues with that. I think that if I had worn the mask, I might have been less scared that day. Luckily, we were strapped in — even back then, we had seatbelts.

After that, we arrived in Santiago with fanfare and everything that goes with it. They took us to the Ritz Hotel, which I'll never forget because of its splendor.

What an adventure... you couldn't cross the Andes and had to go back to Buenos Aires and try again.

Well, what you're saying might not be wrong, but I remember we had to turn back because the door of the plane wasn't closing properly. We even had to go back to the hotel for a night. Sometimes, I get confused with Buenos Aires too, but I think that's how it was.

The plane definitely struggled to climb over the mountain range that rises to above 6,000 meters. And for a small plane like that, it wasn't easy for the pilots. Yes, yes. And we were even allowed to go to the cockpit. I forgot to mention that. Anyone who wanted to take the controls could do so...

And I promise you, you could tell when someone was piloting the plane because it would sway to the left and then to the right. Eventually, they said, "Okay, that's enough, or people are going to get even more sick now."

It's quite a story. Yes, try asking for that nowadays!

Part 5. The first World Cup (Clash of culture and basketball popularity).

So, you arrived in Santiago. Since you mentioned that basketball wasn't very popular in Switzerland... but in Santiago, it was completely different. How was the atmosphere during this World Cup?

I can tell you one thing: the atmosphere was magnificent because there were 20,000 people at almost every game, whether it was us or the other teams, and they were cheering loudly. I think people were also using the opportunity to let off steam because, don't forget, there was a war going on too.

There were lots of strange things happening. For example, in Valparaíso, the military presence was heavy, so we couldn't go there.

The stadium was full of people who either knew a lot about basketball or knew nothing at all. But yes, they were mostly there to enjoy themselves and express their joy: 20,000 people... I think it's rare to see that nowadays, unless it's for the Americans.

And that's the South American atmosphere...

Oh yes, exactly. I remember it being very crowded, very crowded indeed.

As for the training sessions, to be honest, I don't remember much. I just know they were intense. You really had to be on your A-game. But other than that, my memory is a bit fuzzy.

But you remember the general atmosphere. And do you remember how it was organized? It was quite unique. It was held in a stadium...

Ah, it was an enclosed stadium. And the court — because we were playing on a wooden floor — was at the same level as the current football goals, I mean, it was within the round perimeter of the stadium, and they had put the wooden floor there.

It was much simpler for them to lay down a piece of flooring there than to cover the entire football field because it was, in fact, a football field. I remember it was made of wood, just like they do now. Yes, definitely. It was all wooden flooring for practice.

Yes, but for playing as well...

Oh yes, for playing too. Yes, yes, absolutely. But I was always surprised because I found the court to be quite small. The crowd was actually behind us, as they were seated around the curved perimeter, and the court was placed lengthwise. So, from my perspective, the playing area felt quite small.

Of course, if the ball went far, it would end up on the football field's grass, right? Yes. But honestly, I don't remember much more about that.

The games were played at night, around 22:30.

I vaguely recall seeing some photos that seemed quite dark, so maybe they were played at night. Ah, because it was too hot, the games certainly took place in the evening from 22:00 on. But then, there was still a certain coolness because we were not used to such intense heat, we just weren't.

How was the welcoming?

I think we were received at the residence of the president of Chile, in his palace. But I don't remember that. I remember much more when we came back from Buenos Aires because it was Mr. Peron, and everyone knew Mr. Peron, and his wife, Eva Peron, had passed away a year before. So, everyone was only talking about that.

When we returned from Chile, we stopped in Buenos Aires, and there we played against France, and it was Mr. Peron who did the ceremonial jump ball by throwing the ball in the middle of the field, and we first visited him in his offices. And as I wrote, we went through at least ten or twelve offices before reaching him because, I promise you, the police were not very accommodating... We were searched and everything before getting to his office.

And that's one thing I regret. Because they gave us a lot of books, but they weren't in French, so I didn't keep them. Maybe now they would be of great interest.

Part 6. The first World Cup (The Tournament).

How were the media exposure and coverage in that World Cup?

Photographers, I remember, but filming, I don't recall. There were photographers everywhere. They followed us around like little puppies at some point. We found photographers everywhere, and I was photographed in several places, sometimes with one person, sometimes with another. When we arrived at the hotel the next day, we were told not to go out because the military was everywhere. We were allowed to walk around the neighborhood but no further.

And that's when, walking around the neighborhood with my friend Monique Belair, she took a bag for her wallet, and I said, "I'll put mine in there too." Unfortunately, her wallet was stolen during that walk. Mine stayed safe, but hers was gone.

That was a bad surprise! So, the whole Swiss team chipped in so she could still enjoy the rest of our stay in South America with some money. It was a bit disappointing.

Yes, because as you mentioned earlier, it was amateur basketball at that time. So, no one was paid.

No, no, no. I promise you, I lost my salary because I wasn't at work. But no one gave me a cent. But I don't regret it, believe me.

And from a purely sporting perspective, what memories do you have? Since you played in Switzerland and suddenly found yourself playing against Chile, Mexico...

Since I played very little and was more of a substitute, I observed a lot of what was happening around me. But how can I say this? I think we, the Swiss team, were just too weak. I don't want to underestimate my teammates, far from it. But compared to the other teams, they were much more advanced in basketball than we were. Yes, much, much more. And of course, I don't want to say we always lost, but it does show that the others were much stronger than us.

You did win one game, against Cuba, with a very strange score: 17 to 5.

Do you know why? It was in Osorno, in southern Chile. The Cuban team started the game because they had no choice. But suddenly, everyone felt sick, and one by one, they left the field. In the end, there were only two players left on the field, if I remember correctly. So, the game was stopped, but we never really knew why. I think they felt they were losing, and maybe they thought we were too strong for them, so they simply abandoned the game halfway through.

Part 7. The first World Cup (The Tournament from the inside).

And since we are reminiscing, since you watched quite a few games, which teams impressed you the most?

Oh, I think...The Americans, of course — the Americans.They were, I think, above all the other teams.The French were very strong too, but I don't remember the results. But I think the Americans...They were all tall too, which made a difference, yes.They won the tournament. That proves that they were indeed stronger than everyone else. And I think that among all the countries present —even though we were invited — I believe no team had the strength of the American basketball players of that time. Because I don't think our training was anywhere near what the Americans had to do. For them, maybe they would have thought our training was a joke, really. But I promise you, we weren't used to it. Still, we had to train.You couldn't just say, "Tomorrow I won't run anymore..."

Do you remember the Americans also had a very special uniform?

Yes, shiny, absolutely.Yes, I remember that. But exactly how it looked? I'm not sure. I just know it was shiny, with shiny numbers as well. Like silk. Whereas our shorts — our shorts were made of corduroy. And they were really short, too.The jerseys as well. It's a shame because they didn't let us keep them when we left. Otherwise, I think I would still have mine.

By the way, did you have any interactions with the players from the French team, for example, or not?

No, simply because... and this might sound mean, but it wasn't the same... How should I say this? It wasn't the same level, both in terms of basketball and their lifestyle and the way they spoke.We weren't used to hearing people speak like the French. It's true, they speak fast. And they joke around, they joke a lot.

We didn't have any real interactions with them. Not at all. Even though we were together...Yes, I think we talked, which would make sense given the number of hours we spent on the plane. But no, it wasn't familiar. Yes, that's the right word.

I stayed in touch for a long time with our interpreter, but I wouldn't have thought to ask a French player for her address.That's just how it was.

Part 8.The first World Cup (The Tournament: Swiss performance).

So, as you already mentioned, Switzerland didn't have a great record — four losses, one rather unusual win. Switzerland finished ninth. How did you feel about that? Was there disappointment? Did you hope for better results, or was the experience more important than the outcome?

No, I think we were all disappointed when we lost a game because that wasn't our goal, after all. If you go

through training and run all the time, I think it's to win, too. But we were up against stronger teams. That's just how it was, yes.

I have absolutely no regrets, of course. Just think about it — a trip like that, at my age back then, very few people can say they had such a chance... especially to do it with the Swiss team. Yes.

Did you know that was the only time the Swiss team made it to the final stage?

Exactly. And at the end of the world, as we used to say, for us, it was the end of the world. So, it's true that, even now, I don't think there are many teams that think, "I'm going to play with the Swiss team in this or that place." Now, it's so well-known, everyone knows how to get to all these places.

But back then, you had to open a map and even then, it was a challenge to find exactly where Chile was. At least, that's what I had to do... Plus taking five or six flights on the journey. And three days of travel. I promise you, we were exhausted when we arrived... Well, we were lucky because there weren't many showers back then; it was mostly bathtubs. The first thing we did was jump into the bathtub at the hotel. We were so happy to find something other than a small towel to wash ourselves with.

Part 9. The first World Cup (The impact, the legacy in Switzerland).

Did this World Cup change anything in Switzerland in terms of how people viewed women's basketball? Or not at all?

Not that I remember. But people mostly remembered that, at least in the canton of Neuchâtel, I was a player who went to Chile with the Swiss team. People remembered that, especially in men's basketball. And friends from other clubs in La Chaux-de-Fonds and elsewhere remembered that there was a girl from Neuchâtel who went all the way to Santiago for this tournament. That I do remember. Yes.

Do you still follow basketball today? Do you watch games on TV or live?

Uh, no, not anymore because I don't go out much. But when I watch basketball games on TV, sometimes I'm so disappointed. In my day... I hate to say it like this, but it's true. We had to maintain a distance of ninety centimeters between players. If you got too close, you'd get whistled for a foul. But now, they practically rip each other's jerseys off, trip each other...

I find that basketball is no longer graceful, pleasant, or gentle. Now, it's all about bothering the other player so they don't score. That's basketball now, and to me, at my age, it's just too fast. Yes, that's the right word.

Part 10. The first World Cup (The memories).

What's your best memory of that 1953 World Cup? If there is one that stands out more than the others?

What I really appreciated was how warmly we were welcomed throughout the trip. It was as if we were being received like princesses by these people. The way we were welcomed was incredible. They were really proud of having us, we felt honored. We sang and danced. I guarantee you that when we left, everyone was crying.

In the south, in Osorno, it was fabulous also how we were welcomed. I remember the name — Mr. Bonvin. He was from Valais. He cultivated apples, and I promise you, there were apples everywhere. We ate apples, we were welcomed, celebrated, and adored. There were marching bands. It was very Swiss. And there, we were also received by Nestlé. We visited the Nestlé factory in Osorno and the Bata factory in Santiago.

The whole team was invited. At the Bata factory in Santiago, there was a draw for a pair of basketball shoes. I kept saying I didn't want them because I worked at Bailly in Neuchâtel, and Bailly and Bata were competitors at that time.

Of course, I won the shoes. I was very embarrassed, so I looked for a teammate with the same shoe size and gave them to Mimi Damond. That's a little anecdote.

So, Bata was making basketball shoes at the time.

Yes, but honestly, even what we wore — I promise you, they were like basketball slippers, nothing more. Whereas now, when you see what they play with... Back then, they were just ordinary sneakers, really.

Is there anything you would like to add about this 1953 World Cup? Anything we may have forgotten or...

No, but I definitely want to thank you. And besides that, all my teammates have passed away. But I have wonderful memories with all the players. They were all amazing. Even though they were older than me, they always treated me very kindly, considering that I was just a youngster back then.

I want to thank the players and the coaches too. It was wonderful, truly. I have nothing to criticize. Not at all.