

## **Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball**

### **Oral History Interview transcript: Tom Maher (Aus)**

#### Oral History Interview Questions

##### *Setting the Scene from the Baseline*

1. Tom, thank you for your time today as a member of the FIBA Family as we undertake this interview as part of our project to celebrate the relationship between Women and basketball. If we may 'start at the beginning' and ask how you first came to the sport of basketball? What was your gateway experience? Can you recall when you first decided to coach? Who were your peers and role models at this stage?

I was never a basketball guy until I was 15, I had never seen a real game before. Just some locals playing basketball at the church hall, they were mainly from the football team, around 22 or 23 years old and I was just 15. When I asked them if I could play, they were very gracious because they said "yes, sure". So, Sunday mornings we trained, we did not have a coach. Sunday evenings someone would give me a lift to Albert Park Basketball Stadium. There was no basketball courts around where I lived, no hoops in someone's backyard. Basketball wasn't on the radar because Melbourne was all football and cricket.

When the 70's progressed, basketball blossomed. I played for one and a half years and after high school, when I was 17, I travelled with a friend who was 19 around Australia and we arrived to a place in the Northern Territory called Gove. It was a workcamp, no women, no TV, no radio, no roads... There wasn't a lot to do. There was an outdoor basketball court, very hot up there because it doesn't rain. Because I played for the Blackrock basketball team in a competition they asked me to play. It was a social thing to do.

The second year they asked me if I wanted to be a coach. By this time Women had arrived in Gove and came along to play, there were so many women who turned up to play that we even had a B team and a C team in a town of a couple of thousand people. At the same time the men's football

team decided to put a B grade team in the basketball competition and asked me to coach... So in my first year of coaching I was coaching three teams! The men's team won the league, the women B team won the league and the C grade lost the final. The following year, kids came into the town.. At that time I had a contract to clean the local Hotel so I finished around 11 in the morning, and they asked me to coach a junior team under 14 team. There was also a good team of indigenous kids playing. So in my second year I coached four teams!

2. **Probing a little further here about the environment in which you engaged with Basketball. What was the basketball structure that you first encountered? Was there a hoop in your neighborhood? Was basketball played at your school? 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?**

In the camp in Gove we got together to lay concrete so we could have two courts, I just coached teams and played. There was no TV, no radio... we had to fill the days somehow. It wasn't an arduous routine; I was 16 when I started playing and 18 when I started to coach. When I worked with the kids, I realized I wanted to be a teacher, didn't aspire to be a coach because there weren't any pro coaches, it was just volunteers. I had finished year 12 and wrote a letter to a teacher and she wrote me back saying I could be a Physical Education teacher in Melbourne where they had opened a degree. There was one defining moment for me, we were in a biomechanics class and we got a paper called 'The 84 Principles of Human Movement' and it was mind blowing, that was the basis of my ability to coach.

3. **So you were a self made coach... did you have any role model?**

There were no basketball coaches, I didn't see an actual pro game on tape until I was 20 and it was a game from the US in Super8 format.. I played football. It was the 60's, early 70's, the coaching was about aggression, getting in someone's face... I didn't have a role model, you can't be what you can't see. There was a coach, he was someone from administration, not a big time basketball coach, but he said: "There's a right way to do things so find it".

4. **In this pursuit of paving your own way as a coach, how was the experience and what do you remember of that first basketball book you read?**

It was John Woodens book, Practical Modern Basketball. I was boxing at that time. It was very technical; it was the first time I picked up on pressure defense. When I came back to Melbourne after 4 years, I was playing football and basketball and boxing... I was thinking about what to do and then watching a boxing fight in a gym, they were ferociously good and I said to myself: "maybe choose basketball". I joined a club, I wanted to learn, I looked to the coaches and read Hints on Defense by Bobby Knight. I didn't understand a few things so I asked several persons to explain... and no one could. So I thought it could be my way in: "I can be an expert". That book was a big launch in my career.

5. **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? Put another way, how do you contemplate the relationship between basketball, identity? Following on, who from society plays basketball and why?**

In the 70's basketball just surged. A huge flux of women started to play. Women didn't play back then cricket, rugby, football.... Basketball had a tremendous opportunity to recruit talent, it was quite egalitarian. Women and men played the same sport on the same court with same rules. Men respected them for wanting to do the same things. Also the men and women championship was played the same night so people would go and socialize in the bar of the stadium. It was quite an inclusive society.

A big thing for Australian basketball, they explained this to me, is that after World war II, lot of European refugees from the Balkans and baltic area, they were taller race than we were, so we got a lot of offspring from the big and strong refugees, that really helped. Now we have lot of refugees from places like Sudan, they're athletic, long and lean, classic basketball bodies... I firmly believe they're going to make a big name in a world stage. Basketball coaches don't mind if you're green as long as you can help to win.

### *Women, Basketball and Australia*

6. **With a particular focus on Women and Girls; what place did basketball have for women and girls in Australia? Against a (mis?)perception of overt Australian masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s, were**

**women and girls visible in Australian basketball structures and cultures? To what extent was basketball a reflection of Australian society - and vice versa?**

I think it was equal. What really propelled women basketball was the clubs and the volunteer system working hard to help sport. An American pointed one thing out to me: at the Sydney Olympics, all the helpers were knowledgeable of the sport whereas in 96 it wasn't like that. They weren't professionals.

- 7. If I may focus more particularly on Australian indigenous peoples and female athletes from that part of Australian society; how do you reflect on their engagement in basketball?**

The skin color doesn't tell, you might play with some and you don't know. It's like 2% of Australian population but they are more of the 2% of the basketball population

- 8. As your coaching career developed and you enjoyed success at a national level firstly with Nunawading, and then across Australia in WNBL what did you take with you from squad to squad? From club to club? What 'knowledge transfer' did you undertake? How conscious of it were you at the time?**

There are culture differences for sure. When I was a younger coach in a women league, an American imported coach, who was a pretty fine coach, but he was always saying "in the US we do it this way, that way...". They let him go. To me it was a life lesson so wherever I went I didn't say "we do it this way in Australia and therefore it's better". When you don't understand something, instead of imposing, say "this can't be right because I don't understand it", if you wait a while, you see the reasons, why it's like that... It's like driving in Beijing when you come from Australia. I never tried to be an expert on their culture, I wanted to bring to the team that there was a certain way of how to play: press defensively, fastbreak, win the possession game...

It's also important that I've never been an I person, I've always been a team person. When I recruited players I never said "if you come to play you'll win a championship", "I said I will try to make you the best possible player you can be and that will hopefully lead us to win a championship. I always tried to develop players and be fair to them

9. You travelled and coached in many places, different teams, different categories, different national teams like Australia, New Zealand, China, Great Britain... Was there any cultural shock you experienced and did you learn from this experiences for different chapters of your coaching life? In other words, what did you take from the exposure to different basketball identities and cultures?

One that shocked me, I went crazy because I didn't know but then learned why, it was my first season in China, we had several baskets and the girls where playing one-on-one doing easy things, no intensity, no contested shots form 3pt line, the ball was dribbling outside and they were just watching... they had no zip, they were like marathon runners, there was no joy coming to practice. So after three months they said me: "Tom, when you say we practice in the morning from 9 to 11. We always start at 9 and finish at eleven. Then in the afternoon you say from 3 to 5 and it's from 3 to 5". And I said "yes it's obvious". Then the interpreter said that the previous coach wouldn't tell them when they would start and finish. And my French assistant, who was a hell of a coach, told me they had once a 6 hour practice before the Olympics. And that's why the players didn't have any kind of zip.

10. Your coaching approach is perhaps best encapsulated in the Opal's "Themes of Success": how did these emerge? What did they mean to you as you developed them? And how do you look back on them?

Firstly, when I was a child I had attention deficit, always rough and ready, always was told I was doing the wrong thing "don't do this..." but no one told me what was the right thing was. So, as a coach, I thought players needed to know what I think, the good and the bad and what should we do. I think it was at the Munich Oilympics when something profound occurred., The three American 100 metre sprinters were expected to come 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the final. They all dominated the semifinal and the manager said he would take two of the men to the final and the 3<sup>rd</sup> just said he would get there on his own. The 3<sup>rd</sup> athlete won the gold medal. I read about the two other men who went with the manager had got the time wrong and one of them said "he's not a bad guy, he can work hard, do good things and get another chance to go to the Olympics. But I'm done". And I thought "it's a lot of pressure for a coach, I don't want to be the guy that ruins the athletes chances".

My wife was already the captain before I was appointed and I remembered the story of the sprinters, I didn't want to ruin their chances so I thought of doing something extra, I read books about success and worked out what I thought it was, I wrote it down and explained it. I didn't want it to be an mission statement on the back of the door of the toilet.

It was a very successful thing, useful for the team. I did it in 94, I've changed it a little bit over the years but basically it's the same.. I think these successful things are universal and its intelligent to try to understand cultures, people are more alike than unlike.

One of the first days in china we went for dinner, it was fantastic, and realized it was like in Australia. I didn't invent anything; I just formalized a document with universal truths.

**11. Reflecting on your successful coaching career, why did you choose women basketball or did women basketball choose you? Being a man in a women's world, did you experience any issues?**

I never treated men or women different. When it comes to basketball I just tell the truth: its good or bad. I asked an assistant once if she thought I was too hard and she said "no, players get it". I appreciate the feedback. Why I chose women basketball... I come back from "Gove", we had basketball training at 4pm on a Saturday and I had a sister who was 12. We lived far away from the Albert Park Basketball Stadium, like a 40 minute drive, there was nothing close to play, there were not many kids in the suburb where we lived, I wanted them to be active, there wasn't many sporting activities to do. My sister trained at 9am as well as my brother.. I drove them and stayed around to watch.. The head lady of the club said: you're here all the time, I know you play in other districts but why don't you coach a team?". I said "ok"... In the first game, a girl on the other team scored 40 points against us... This Under 14 team won the championship the next year. I was now coaching, whilst still going to College the U12, U14, U16, U18 junior teams, the women's second first division team and assistant to the women's first division team, so I was there 6 days a week.

**12. On a personal note, was it a problem for you at some point the fact you were married to one of the biggest Australian superstars ever? How did you deal with this boyfriend-girlfriend, husband-wife relationship and did it bring you any trouble?**

No one ever complained to my knowledge. Robyn was already the captain and a superstar before I got there. She played from 17 to 38. When she was 19 she was the best player in Australia so it was

a great move by a young coach to marry her. Players always looked up to her. Robyn was a great player and a great leader, when younger players came in, they adopted her. I honestly must say I didn't show any favoritism.

When I got the Australian job, we had Robyn (Maher), Shelley Gorman and Michele Timms, they were the starting 1-2-3 for Australia and we won everything in the 80's. We had honest people. Those three women would pick up the stuff really well and we became a great pressure team. That style of basketball was good to watch and fun.

### *Basketball, gender and society*

13. Returning to the issue of gender: what have been the biggest shifts here over the arc of your career? What changes can you see in the reactions to you from your counterparts - including Players/Coaches - in the male game?
14. A 'big question' if we may: in your experience, what can basketball do for Women and Girls in society? To what extent do you see basketball playing a role in addressing gender inequality? May you share some examples? Beyond the issue of gender, and more broadly, where have you/do you see good examples of basketball contributing to society? And what characterizes success in this respect? Has basketball helped or helps now women in society?

I believe it's true that basketball has helped women in society in this evolution. I've seen tall girls coming to the court with their heads down and 12 months after they walk with head and chin up, they feel of great value and not a geek. Also the camaraderie of team sports helps. It works for a common goal.

When I worked back then with kids, or right now, it's all about self esteem. When you work with teams at this age, 8-13, you have a big responsibility to achieve where these teams should be, achieve the level they should have. When people say playing basketball is fun, I think joking around is disrespectful. Fun is the good feeling you have, the self-esteem, you work hard, you like it... you

achieve things. My whole thing is for kids to develop self-esteem. That's where I focus, helping them to become better.

**15. Reviewing your career, can you reflect about your legacy?**

I helped to make a huge difference in defense in this country, I studied it, I made it my thing... I worry for the fact that coaches don't have too much time to train with all players and work fundamentals because players jump from one league to another.... But about my legacy... I have a reputation, you might laugh, people say I'm honest, rather than "he can be an angry bastard", they say I'm honest. I don't know if that's a legacy.

When I coached Great Britain I was there 4 months, the other 8 I was in the WNBL and also coached U12 boys, not ferociously, I never cheated them saying it wasn't important and sit back. Never did that, I tried hard.

**16. You're a Hall of Famer with a very curious story... A self made coach who didn't watch a game until way far his teenager days and yet he managed to become a legend. How can you explain this to a non basketball fan?**

I was smart... If I get interested in something I become fanatic, if not, I don't have any idea. I used to analyze everything, every year a topic... like "offensive rebounding" and it was very profitable exercise. I'm an insightful person, knowing body movements helped me to teach the game. If you win the players, and you can't do this being fake... You got to sell that you can teach the game and this way they can be successful, good players are disciplined. If you make a great product that they can be part of they will speak well of you

17. Finally, and with due deference to the challenge we are posing you here; given the longevity of your career, if you were to pick just one highlight from the career of Tom Maher, what would it be? and why?

Its hard... I remember feeling something special when we won our first WNBL title in 1983, we had won a title and got married. It was a great year. Other than that, I haven thought about it, but winning the last pool with NZ against China in Athens Olympics that gave us 2 wins and propelled us to the top 8. There was a great controversy in NZ because some members of the federation said the team hadn't done sufficient preparation... We were 123 in the world and we finished 8th with chance of finishing 7<sup>th</sup> but Greece played us hard in the last game. I think it was a fantastic tour.