

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Mame Maty Mbengue (SEN)

Oral History Interview Questions

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 (and was that a unique scenario)? Who were your early basketball influences and/or role models?

Basketball came in to my life thanks to a friend of my father who was the leader of our club. I didn't know anything about basketball because I didn't like it. I didn't know who was playing or how was it played. The only thing I cared of and wanted to do was to go to school and be with my mom. But since I was 6.2, a tall girl, my father friend asked me to start playing

My first memories with basketball is at school. It was very very very hot at three in the afternoon. I didn't want to play, I was lazy to go to practice and mad also because I knew they were going to make me run up and down despite being so hot and I wouldn't be able to go to school.

We practiced in a playground, I didn't like it but I had a good coach. He knew I didn't like it but he said: "Girl, you're here, we're going to teach you how to play. You can have a good career because you're tall. You don't have to be scared". I must say I was scared at that time because we didn't leave our house other than going to school. My father didn't want us to go out. We had to come back from school, stay at home and help my mom as a girl. So I was scared but everything went right and I liked it after.

I had a good coach, he taught me how to play... the first time I saw that orange ball I said to myself "What am I suppose to do know?", but he taught me how to do everything, bounce, move, he told me to do it slowly at first and practice. I recall that there were two playgrounds. The one where I practiced and another where people who knew how to play were having a great time and laughing and I said to myself I wanted to be good to be in that other playground and have fun and play like them. I knew I had to work hard and it was a good way to make new friends and leave my house.

2. (Environment) We're curious to learn what basketball was like at that time in Dakar, and whether you think it was representative of the larger environment in/around Senegal. 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 Senegal people played basketball in different clubs. But not in my house, we didn't watch basketball or knew anything about it. I only knew about soccer. It was thanks to my father friend that I started playing basketball, it was my first experience

3. (Society) Reflecting on basketball's place in society, can you describe the role it played when you were growing up in Dakar, and do you have a sense of whether it was the same or different in other regions of Senegal? Did it differ from one religion to another, or by class? To what extent was it part of the larger culture or media atmosphere, particularly given the dominance of the Senegalese national teams in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s at international FIBA competitions? How did this role of basketball, and women's basketball in Senegal, afford you different opportunities than earlier generations?

People love basketball in Senegal, they play every weekend and watch games. At that times the soccer team didn't win, it was only the women basketball team that was winning championships and cups. So people liked it.

4. (Identities and Basketball) With regard to how basketball creates identities in societies, what did the development of basketball mean to you and how did it play a role in creating identities or bonds between people in your community?

Sure it did. It mixed different people, different society, different culture, we have muslim, catholic, we speak different languages... We mixed, there was no problem. We had to understand everyone else in Senegal, there was no problem and basketball made it possible also.

People liked the players, they were role models, they were ambassadors because when they played

in another country they were representing Senegal, and did t well because they brought Cups. People were happy, everybody loved and respected them.

Diving Deeper

5. You served as a bridge between winning generations of Senegalese basketballers; could you describe what it was like playing as the youngest with the generation who were the first golden generation thanks to their AfroBasket wins (1974,1977, 1979,1981 et 1984)? What did you learn from them that you transmitted to later generations? Why is it important to have influencers like these dominant players/teams in a young player's life?

I wanted to be part of that good sport when I saw all the joy women brought to the country after winning titles. They were role models for me, When I saw them bringing joy to our country I wanted to be part of them, that's why I worked so hard to be there.

In the national team we have different categories, cadet, junior and senior. When I started to play, after two or three months they pushed me up to another category directly to junior... I played this category one year with the club competition in Senegal. We had games once a week and I played really hard so everyone could see I was practicing very hard... If we practiced three times a week, I did 5 by myself to continue developing and be part of the best. In 1985 I played my first junior Afrobasket in Ghana and we won the gold... and then the senior national basketball coach said he wanted me to play, so I started to practice with my older sisters because in Senegal the team gets together in holidays and vacations for 10 or 20 days together. They were my role models, I wanted to be one of them, everybody loved them and I wanted to be part of them and bring joy. I gave my best all the time and even played the 1984 championship and people loved me, when they saw me, the youngest of the team.... Sometimes I didn't play all the game, but the coach gave me 10 or 15 minutes, even when I played 5 minutes I gave my best and people saw it, people started to like me. I was very proud to be the youngest of the national senior team.

6a) 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?

The older players in the national team were my sisters. When you come for the first time, they have a

system: they assign you a big sister and if you have a problem or you need anything you go directly to talk and see your sister. And I had mine: Aminata Diagne Poulain. It was not easy for me because it was hard work, the young one is the one who is going to wash the uniforms, buy bread or something, all the stuff, and then practice hard. They gave me hard times, but I didn't care. The only thing I wanted was to be the best of them. And I did it.

6b) Did you admire any player in particular

I admired one player, Marieme Ba. She was part of the team, a good person, respectable, kind and very intelligent. She was going to school. When I saw how she moved and behaved, I said: "I want to be like her". She was my reference. When I had any problem I talked to her and receive advice. I liked her. And she was playing so good. Anytime I played she was telling me kindly and patiently how to play, she gave me advices, she was very kind.

6c) Did you behave with the young ones later the same way or you changed the culture?

We managed to change the culture, now we have people that take care of that stuff, they're part of the team. Now you just go to practice. But when I was at my top, I had my younger sisters who came to me, talk to me... At my time I wanted all my teammates to be a family, focus on practice and play. Practice, practice, practice and rest. Things changed for good, with trainers, medical staff.

6b) (min 18:05) i admired one player : Marieme Ba

7. 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?

Yes! The 1990 World Championship. I had the chance to allow my team to have the chance to win the tournament when I scored the last basket that gave us the victory. I was so proud, I came directly from the University to the semifinal. I was so tired and in that trip I had the biggest problem in my life. It was at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, France. The immigration department kept me there because I didn't have my visa, we needed to change from airport to Orly and I needed it. So they kept me there from 6 in the morning to 20h. I cried a lot. When I arrived to Tunisia finally... and played that final and God helped me to make that last basket to give us the victory, I was so proud... I didn't want to disappoint them, and after that basket, all that I had gone through I forgot it.

7b) What type of advice you will give the younger generations

Only hard work pays. I've worked hard to be here today, and that's what allowed me to be one of the most successful players and one reference player in Africa. Work hard, listen to the coach, respect yourself. If you want to be respected, you have to respect others. If you play for your country you can't be selfish, this is a team and you represent your country. It's good for you and for your country.

8. In what ways do you think your role as a player impacted the development of basketball in Dakar, Senegal, and Africa?

I think our team is a role model for Africa. I personally won 6 championships and I was a role model around Africa. We played the championship, the world championship... The government chose me to be the image of the Federation, of the national team. It's a good work to help others, now the young kids in school if you ask them, they know me, some want to be like me so I share my experience.

9. 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?

a. 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?

Basketball has allowed me to be a better person and the person I am today. If people respect me everywhere and doors are opened it's because of basketball. I'm a sports diplomat. I have the respect and people listen to me when I talk. Basketball allowed me to go to the University with a scholarship, it gave me a job... I have everything thanks to basketball. I didn't want to play basketball at the beginning, but now I love basketball.

Going Global

10. Throughout your career, you traveled widely thanks to basketball, you represented a number of different teams, played in the United States' NCAA, and won with the Senegalese national team, as well as numerous individual accolades. To what extent do you consider yourself to be a sports diplomat? And were there any instances when that made things more difficult for you personally?

I suffered racism when I went to the University. In Central State many didn't know where Senegal was. Or even Africa. Sometimes they asked me if the house was in a tree. I said "no, we live in a

house like you, we eat like you, we take showers like you, we have everything you have. The only difference is we speak french and you speak english. I'm here to play basketball with you. Some games I'll score 20 and you 0, but we're in a team and it's not important". I must say it's true I had some issues and difficulties at the beginning.

I used to travel with the national team but college was my first time out. I believed in myself and told them I was a good person. I represent Senegal and Africa. I knew I had to make them understand things and educate in important things for me. Many didn't have travelled before so they didn't knew where Africa was, or France... They knew about their University, their country. So I had to teach them and let them know how Africa was so maybe one time they would even would like to come to Africa. One of my coaches came to Senegal! What I did was to comeback with some souvenirs, necklaces as gifts... and they started to like Senegal, and learned some words! I think I did a good job.

11. In your experience, how did you learn from international colleagues through basketball or sport more broadly—and what do you think you might have relayed to them in turn? Here it can be with regards to your NCAA or Team Senegal experiences.

a. *In other words:* How does sport and basketball facilitate knowledge exchange/transfer? E.g. when you've been on a team with colleagues from different cultures/countries.

We have different cultures in the locker rooms, but in sport you have to work to bring all together and erase barriers.

12. You are often referred to as the "queen of queens" for your decorated career and achievements including being the first African female player to enter the FIBA Hall of Fame; in what ways do you think of yourself (whether during your career or today) as a role model for the next generation of basketballers from Senegal? And from Africa more broadly?

Being part of the legend of FIBA entering the Hall of Fame was something amazing. It was a privilege, everybody congratulated me. The president received me. I have a great respect thanks to basketball.

I would like to thank FIBA for allowing me to be part of the Hall of Fame. I've been able to represent many times Africa and Senegal in different tournaments, where I was even the MVP. I think I'm a good person, a good athlete, not fighting on court. I think FIBA saw these values and being a good reference, hardworker, respect others, their cultures, behave, try to understand others, be a good role model... that's why they chose me and made me very happy.

Change Over Time: basketball, gender and society

- 13. Thinking of the larger FIBA family today, what do you think constitutes progress in women's basketball? And for women in basketball? What do you think constitutes success in both of these realms? More specifically, what have been the biggest shifts over the arc of your career – and what changes can you see in the reactions to you from your male counterparts?**

Basketball can do everything, can help everybody, the clubs, the academies, that's why its important african basketball tournaments... It will help the young generations. The woman brought many championships, they were reference in sport in Senegal. Now, men in soccer. Now basketball isn't that good and girls aren't winning so we have to work hard to be part of the best o Africa. But people love women basketball, they're proud of them. They're the reference.

- 14. There's much discussion of basketball as a tool to work across various issues. From your perspective, what can basketball do for women and girls in society?**
- a. To what extent do you see basketball playing a role in addressing gender inequality and do you have any examples to share that illustrate your perspective/point?
 - b. Where do you see good examples of basketball contributing to society and what characterizes success in this respect?

In Senegal now there are many basketball academies, basketball is a reference in Senegal, they're trying to continue what was built back in time, prepare the relay, but we have to teach them and it's very important that this professors know what they are doing.

Basketball, through educating women can help to reduce gender gap in society. Everywhere. Sport can help young people to not go in the wrong way. If you go to school and practice sports, they teach you how to behave, be a good person and you don't have time to do wrong things, you have to be a good person, practice, be a reference, be a good person who respects yourself and others. Sport is good for helping younger people to be healthy also and teach how life is. You meet different people, cultures... you have to work to be with them and they can teach you many things you don't know about life and cultures. Here in Senegal we have many different cultures. Union makes the force, like we say here. If you respect all, you know how to behave and maybe in the future you can become a good player, the president of Senegal, the Federation or even FIBA.

15. 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?

I thank God for giving me the chance to practice basketball despite I didn't like it at first. If I am the person I am today it's thanks to basketball. They gave me the chance to travel, to study outside because my parents weren't that rich to afford it but basketball gave the chance, in Senegal they respect me, they know me everywhere, you mention my name and they know me. I'm so proud to play this sport. It gave me respect. I learned a lot, I lived many experiences