Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

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About FIBA Foundation

Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball is a project of the FIBA Foundation, the social and legacy arm of FIBA that addresses the role of sports, particularly basketball, in society, preserving and promoting basketball's values and its cultural heritage.

The FIBA Foundation believes that basketball has the power to inspire, educate and empower youth and facilitates this by implementing Basketball for Good projects around the world.

FIBA's cultural heritage is the heart of the FIBA Foundation's cultural and historical activities. It is a driving force behind the promotion and dissemination of FIBA's values.

Background Note

Thirteen-time national champion Eliane Girod began a new journey on the rainy night of February 27, 1953, when the train carrying members of the Swiss national team departed Geneva's Cornavin station. En route for Chile and the first-ever FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup, Girod and her teammates stopped in Paris, Lisbon, Dakar, Natal, El Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and finally, Santiago, where for two weeks they competed against nine other countries to become the first ever Women's World Champion.

The Swiss team's transatlantic trek symbolizes more than a travel itinerary. Eliane's journey was an adventure undertaken by a group of women who, thanks to their role as basketball representatives for their countries – *de facto* basketball ambassadors – were exposed to new experiences and new ways of thinking in basketball and life.

Today, more than 70 years after this historic first-ever global women's basketball championship and 50 years since the introduction of women's basketball at the Olympics, *Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball* is a direct portal into women's basketball in a globalized society. This

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project seeks to enhance the appreciation of women's basketball against the broader historical record, particularly the perspectives of players and coaches, and add new knowledge and understanding about the role of women in society and sports. It provides a framework through which to better understand how women's basketball, and women in basketball, have evolved since 1953 both in specific regions and globally. In doing so, it celebrates and confirms how basketball can unite people and how much we have in common, no matter where we were born or what language we speak. Lastly, the project unpacks and informs the relationship of basketball and different types of sports diplomacy.

Sports Diplomacy: An Introduction

Sports diplomacy is when the practice of diplomacy, as communication, representation, and negotiation, intersect across the sporting world. Sports diplomacy is an explanatory tool that has emerged and evolved in the 21st century via discourse amongst scholars and practitioners, to comprehend long-established practices where sport and its communities operate.[1]

One approach to understanding sports diplomacy looks to 'formal' and 'informal' practices. Formal sports diplomacy, engaged in by officially credentialed state representatives such as diplomats and ambassadors, heads of state, or national team athletes at international competitions, all associated with symbols of diplomacy such as flags and anthems, and are most readily recognized. Importantly, there is also the informal sports diplomacy of non-state sporting actors such as professional, collegiate, and amateur players and coaches, as well as those within governing bodies. These "sports diplomats" can be uniquely powerful as authentic conduits of cultural, technical, and knowledge exchange at and across multiple levels of society, from the grassroots to regional and supranational levels, decentering the focus upon the nation state. These approaches to sports diplomacy allows an additional framing to *Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball.*

1. Sports diplomacy can be better understood through a number of approaches or frameworks. Sharing a brief insight allows readers to more fully comprehend how Eliane and the other subjects of this project operated as pioneering basketball ambassadors. One framework identifies sports diplomacy as a concept and practice operating relationally. It understands practice as 1. sports governance, law and ethics; 2. sustainability and accessibility; 3. diplomats in tracksuits; 4 the convening power of sport. The concepts of sports diplomacy are: A. 'The power to change the world'; B. it is dynamic, dramatic and emotional, and *négociation continuelle*; C. soft power potential for network of networks; and D. "Fundamentally, I believe sport is the best diplomat we have". In this framework, the 'Diplomats in Tracksuits' concept perhaps aligns most closely with protagonists in Eliane's Journey, but that is not to exclude other dimensions. As Eliane and others share, their experience of basketball's capacity to 'change the world' is manifest in narratives told time and again.

Objectives

- Promote the legacy of women's basketball and increasing the number of fans consuming women's basketball
- Increase knowledge of and storytelling surrounding women's basketball within FIBA Foundation's Cultural Heritage activities
- Involve more FIBA Hall of Fame coaches and players from women's basketball in FIBA Foundation activities
- Celebrate the legacy of the first FIBA Women's World Cup (Chile 1953)

Goals

This project has two components:

1. An open-access oral history archive so that everyone can access player and coach interview transcripts for free, adding valuable new primary sources to public knowledge and understanding of basketball's evolution and development.

2. A socio-cultural vision, based on approved oral history interview transcripts, that will synthesize and analyze the role and experiences of project participants.

The twelve oral history interviews that comprise this project impart different perspectives, experiences, and observations. Interviewees were encouraged to share their experiences of the game; to include anecdotes to flesh out their testimony and provide insight into lives lived in the game. There was also an effort to understand the degree to which knowledge, technical, and cultural exchanges across national borders impacted the development and growth of women's basketball and women in basketball.

Methodology

To achieve those goals, the interviews were structured into four sections:

1. *Setting the Scene*

This set of questions explored the personal, cultural, and social contexts in which basketball was first experienced by these iconic women. They aimed to uncover how individuals were introduced to the sport, the environments and structures that shaped their early participation, and the broader societal influences that gave basketball meaning in their lives.

At the same time, these questions sought to highlight how basketball contributed to identity formation, community bonds, and opportunities for change, both on a personal level and within interviewees' own larger cultural landscape.

2. Diving Deeper

This next layer of questions was designed to consider different stimuli, events, and experiences that shaped their basketball lives, and how this in turn impacted the game's development. Interviewees were asked about the role of mentorship, influences, and opportunity throughout their basketball careers, while also reflecting on how they were shaped by global and historical contexts. These questions sought to examine how the absence or presence of role models affected personal growth, how knowledge and experience were passed between generations and across regions, and how mentorship practices varied worldwide.

They also identified pivotal career phases, the impact of major tournaments and global events, and the learning opportunities along the way.

At the same time, this set of questions explored the broader influence of a successful career on basketball's development locally and internationally, the evolving personal relationship with the sport, and the transformative role of the U.S. legislation known as Title IX in shaping both opportunities and life trajectories for women in the game.

3. Going Global

These questions aimed to explore basketball as a vehicle for diplomacy, cultural exchange, and global connection throughout a player's career. They focused on how international experiences shaped personal and professional growth and highlighted memorable moments of sports diplomacy both on the court and in leadership roles, such as serving as chef de mission.

This set of questions also examined how interactions with athletes, coaches, and officials from different countries fostered mutual learning and knowledge transfer, and how the globalization of basketball deepened these exchanges. Ultimately, these questions sought to capture how basketball transcends borders, bridges divides, and inspires future generations worldwide within the broader Basketball community.

4. *Change Over Time: Basketball, Gender and Society*

This last collection of questions was designed to reflect on the evolution of basketball and its broader cultural, social, and global impact, particularly in women's sports. They sought to shed greater light on how the game has changed in style, structure, and visibility, and what forces have driven those shifts. They also focused on defining progress and success for women's basketball by examining milestones across a career and the shifting perceptions of female athletes within the sport and society.

At the same time, the questions explored basketball's power as a tool for addressing gender inequality, fostering community, and shaping identities, while considering how recent growth in visibility and investment in women's basketball in the United States can influence the global game and drive broader societal change.

Selection of Project Participants

The twelve interviewees who participated in this project were selected to cover the timeline from the first FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup in 1953 through the present day.

Well-known players and coaches with extensive careers were profiled to ensure diversity across continents.

The final result is a multicultural all-star squad that demonstrates the strength and resilience of the bonds created around basketball.

Interviewees

Claudine Clot-Ducommun (Switzerland)

Born in the 1930s, Claudine Clot-Ducommun was a true pioneer of Swiss basketball whose career reached its zenith during the inaugural FIBA Women's World Cup 1953 in Santiago, Chile. Originally a gymnast in Neuchâtel, she transitioned to basketball in the early 1950s and was selected for the national team after only three years of training.

Her international career was brief but historic, spanning from the early 1950s until she stepped away following a tournament in Yugoslavia to raise her children. Though Switzerland finished ninth in the 1953 World Cup, she is celebrated for her "unbreakable spirit" and work to help preserve the tournament's history by donating rare artifacts to the FIBA Foundation.

Laura Pina (Chile)

Born in the 1930s, Laura Pina became a symbol of excellence and relentless determination through her role as a crucial player for the Chilean national team throughout the 1950s, a period during which she competed in two World Cups (1953, 1957) and two South American Championships. The highlight of her career was securing the Silver Medal at the FIBA Women's World Cup 1953.

Maria Planas (Spain)

Born in 1936, Maria Planas is a foundational figure in Spanish basketball who served as the first-ever female coach of the national team. Her career spanned several decades, from the 1960s through the 1990s, as she moved from a brief period as a player to a highly successful coaching tenure where she led teams like PEM and Picadero to numerous titles. She was inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame in 2022.

Her legacy was publicly honored by Spanish legend Amaya Valdemoro, who recognized Planas as the "trendsetter" who paved the way for all Spanish women in the sport.

Shin-Ja Park (Korea)

Born in 1941, Shin-Ja Park emerged from the hardships of post-war Korea to become one of the most revered figures in international basketball. Her playing career, concentrated in the 1960s, was highlighted by her performance as the MVP of the 1967 World Cup as Korea won that tournament's silver medal. She also appeared at the 1964 World Cup and was inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame in 2021. Park is considered a trailblazer who redefined the pursuit of excellence in Korea, providing a beacon of hope for future generations.

Jackie Chazalon (France)

Born in 1942, Jackie Chazalon was an artistic trailblazer who resisted social pressures to become a legendary figure for Clermont-Ferrand and the French national team. Her career, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and included an appearance at the 1971 World Cup, was characterized by a playing style that combined "grace with a fierce competitive spirit," famously evidenced by her ability to score against the much taller Uljana Semjonova. Chazalon pioneered the first youth basketball camps in France, which fostered new generations of players and coaches. Inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame in 2009, Chazalon is remembered as a catalyst for French international success.

Carol Callan (USA)

Born in the early post-WWII era, Carol Callan has made a tremendous contribution to the development of global basketball throughout her career. Her professional background transitioned from high school administration to high-level leadership at FIBA, where she currently serves as a FIBA Central Board Member and was the first woman to serve as President of a FIBA region, leading FIBA Americas. She is also heralded as the "Architect" of the USA Basketball Women's program. She oversaw the U.S. national team during its era of unprecedented global dominance, guiding the team through six consecutive editions of the World Cup between 1998 and 2018. Callan was known for her "human-centric" leadership style, prioritizing the creation of a team culture that allowed legends like Diana Taurasi and Teresa Edwards to thrive and ensuring that USA Basketball remained ahead of the "wave of change" in the global game.

Uljana Semjonova (Latvia/USSR) |

Born in 1952 in Latvia, Uljana Semjonova became perhaps the most dominant force in the history of women's basketball. Her career, spanning from the late 1960s through the 1980s, is defined by a staggering record: she never lost a single game while wearing the USSR national jersey. This included being crowned a World Cup champion in 1971, 1975 and 1983. She also led TTT Riga to 15 European Champion titles. Inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame in 2007, Semjonova was also a two-time Olympic gold medalist who was as famous for her "big heart" and humility as she was for her height and skill. She passed away on January 12, 2026.

Tom Maher (Australia)

Born in 1952, Tom Maher is a pioneering Australian coach and a member of the FIBA Hall of Fame Class of 2021. A self-taught expert, he entered coaching in his mid-teens and revolutionized the sport in

Australia by cross-pollinating strategies from boxing, football, and athletics. His career, which spans the 1980s through the 2010s, is marked by guiding the Australian national women's team to its first major successes including a World Cup (1998) bronze as well as an Olympic silver (2000) and bronze (1996). In total, he coached at four editions of the World Cup with Australia and China. Maher eventually also coached the national teams of New Zealand, and Great Britain and is celebrated for his ability to adapt his philosophy to different cultures while maintaining brutal honesty.

Natalia Hejkova (Czechoslovakia/Slovakia)

Born in 1954, Natalia Hejkova is a trailblazing coach who rose from a short career as a player to become a dominant force in European basketball. A member of the FIBA Hall of Fame Class of 2019, she is best known for winning -a record-breaking six Euroleague titles and creating "Cinderella-like narratives" with underdog teams. Hejkova is noted for her deep personal connection with players, often studying their home cultures to create "safe spaces" within her teams.

Maria "Magic Paula" Silva (Brazil)

Born in 1962, Maria Paula Gonçalves da Silva was a leader and point guard with creative flair who debuted for the Brazilian national team at age 14. Her career, spanning from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, featured a legendary rivalry and partnership with Hortência Marcari, leading Brazil to a historic FIBA World Cup title in 1994 and a silver medal at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. In total she played at a staggering six World Cups, stepping out in 1979, 1983, 1986, 1990, 1994 and 1998. In 2004, she founded the Instituto Passe de Mágica, dedicating her post-playing career to using basketball as a tool for social good and the development of "people, not just stars."
She was inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame in 2013.

Teresa Edwards (USA)

Born in 1964 in Cairo, Georgia, Teresa Edwards is a FIBA Hall of Fame icon (inducted with the Class of 2013) who redefined the athlete experience through her resilience and leadership. Her career, which spanned the 1980s through 2000s, is defined by her record-breaking participation in five Olympic Games between 1984 and 2000, during which she earned four gold medals and one bronze. She also won World Cup titles in 1986 and 1990. A standout at the University of Georgia, she was known for her fierce work ethic and helped legitimize women's basketball on a global stage. Edwards served as the "glue" for her teams and continues to inspire future generations through coaching and mentoring.

Mame Maty Mbengue (Senegal)

Born in 1968, Maty Mbengue is a legendary figure in African basketball and a member of the FIBA Hall of Fame Class of 2022. From her career in the 1980s at home and overseas for Central State University in the United States through her last national team appearances in 2001, Mbengue was a towering symbol of pride for Senegal. She led her nation at two World Cup tournaments in 1990 and 1998. As a sports ambassador, she broke gender stereotypes across the continent and is remembered for her modesty and dedication to the mantra that "only hard work pays."

Introduction

Picture this: thousands of fans cheering lustily as some of the world's top women's basketball players vie on court for a podium finish in an international FIBA competition.

This image may conjure up the Paris 2024 Olympic basketball tournament, which set new records as an average of 19,763 people attended each women's game.[2]

But in fact, such scenes played out decades earlier at the first FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup. Held in Santiago, Chile in March 1953, some 20,000 spectators regularly turned out to loudly cheer on the 10 national teams who participated in that groundbreaking tournament.[3] One of those in the stands was Chilean President Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, for women's basketball in the host country was a serious endeavor.[4] A phalanx of photographers covered the tournament from the sidelines of National Stadium, a football venue temporarily turned into a hoops terrain thanks to wooden flooring. The images they captured of the tournament, disseminated worldwide, were an early illustration of what the women's game could be like.

Basketball's rich history is replete with evidence of its global reach. Networks created on and off the court, as well as within the stands, built relationships that transcended playing rivalries, ethnic and religious boundaries, and national frontiers. They fostered different types of leadership and created pipelines for knowledge transfer and the game's development.

For decades, many of these contributions were overlooked even as players, coaches, and teams compiled steady seasons while fans built different spectator cultures. However, a new era of women's sports was sparked within the last decade thanks to new investments, media broadcast deals and sponsorship packages that have infused more money into the burgeoning women's sports ecosystem. Equally important, the maturation of social media platforms, where players communicate directly with fans, and women's sports are covered in new ways such as live streaming platforms have provided greater access than ever before to consume and engage with women's sports.

Basketball is at the forefront of such efforts. The top five teams listed on the *Forbes* World's Most Valuable Women's Sports Teams 2025 are all WNBA teams, with an estimated $1.7 billion USD valuation

2. FIBA, "Record-Breaking Attendance at the Olympic Basketball Tournaments Paris 2024," August 11, 2024, https://www.fiba.basketball/en/events/womens-olympic-basketball-tournament-paris-2024/news/record-breaking-attendance-at-the-olympic-basketball-tournaments-paris-2024.
3. Claudine Clot-Ducommun, Interview, interview by FIBA Foundation, 2025.
4. Laura Piña, Interview, interview by FIBA Foundation, 2025.

thanks to a combination of media rights, sponsorships, ticket sales, and marquee players driving consumption, viewership, and in-stadium attendance.[5] American players Sabrina Ionescu, Caitlin Clark, , Angel Reese, and Paige Bueckers topped the world's highest paid female athletes in 2025, thanks to lucrative sponsorship deals, with Clark, Reese, and Bueckers set to take center stage at the FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup 2026, highlighting the growing global appeal of the women's game.[6]

Today, scholars, institutions, and public memory seek to reclaim the narrative on women's sports. New research, including this project, moves to correct this decades-long oversight.

The twelve oral histories that comprise Eliane's Journey show how basketball served as a universal language that transcended timelines, geographic borders, and divides—a tool for diplomacy and connection. It built a range of identities, from transnational and national, to local and individual, while fostering pride in communities large and small.

Institutional and, in the case of the United States, legislative change helped further basketball's integration within different societies. Still, national teams were some of the most visible "successes" historically.

Vitally, the game served as a type of educational Swiss Army Knife: a lifelong learning tool, a way to travel and experience the world, and a means to better understand others within the basketball family on and off the court. The values basketball extolled thus extend into deeply humanistic territory.

Basketball also fostered different types of leadership, providing opportunities and pipelines for individuals to grow through and thanks to the game that prepared for post-playing careers. For many of the interviewees featured in this project, they had to break existing societal norms, overcome sexism from male referees, officials, and fans, and defy cultural myths about women who play sports. In doing so, they helped pave the way for others and invested in the next generation, which had a multiplier effect on the game.

Interviewees forged new pathways. Many of them did not have female role models and thus looked to male players like Dr. J, Magic Johnson, or Michael Jordan or female athletes in other sports. Thus, part

5. Brett Knight, "The World's Most Valuable Women's Sports Teams 2025," Forbes, December 17, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettknight/2025/12/17/the-worlds-most-valuable-womens-sports-teams-2025/.
6. Justin Birnbaum, "The World's Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2025 List," Forbes, December 16, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/justinbirnbaum/2025/12/16/the-worlds-highest-paid-female-athletes-2025/.

of their collective legacy was to ensure that future generations could look to women's basketball for influence and inspiration.

From a sporting perspective, these oral histories reveal how women's basketball evolved over time, from different rules and styles of play to the increased competitiveness of the game as trainings became more regular, formalized, and intense. More rigorous preparations skilled-up the competition levels and produced higher-level international successes.

Taken as a whole, the experiences shared by the project's subjects coincides with the development of basketball in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Their roles demonstrate the practice of sports diplomacy as "diplomats in tracksuits," performing across a network of networks, with basketball's convening power coming to the fore.

Setting the Scene

Basketball, the world's first born-global team sport, was invented in 1891 and within a decade was exported outside North America to France (1893), China (1895), Brazil (1896), Australia (1897), and throughout Europe by the eve of the Great War. Women began to play in 1892, the first game held in Massachusetts, and spread by 1896 to women's colleges in California, such as Stanford University and UC-Berkeley. Basketball became integrated into women's colleges and high schools in the United States while it spread overseas embedded in education endeavors. By the 1920s it was played by Chinese women (within a decade it would be a national sport) while a French women's championship began to crown the first national winners. Women's sports pioneer Alice Milliat, in a 1934 interview with *Les Dimanches de la femme*, noted that basketball was the most accessible sport for young women. "It's also the sport expected to gain the most traction," she said about its relatively low-cost barrier, small courts, and non-threatening athletic attire.[7] The first continental women's championship was FIBA Women's EuroBasket, hosted by Italy in 1938. Thus, by the eve of the Second World War, the women's game was entrenched across the globe.

This is perhaps not surprising given basketball's DNA as an educative tool for mind, body, and spirit when it was first introduced by YMCA educators. Moreover, many societies and opinion-making elites at the time considered basketball suitable for women to play. As a non-contact sport, as it was played at the time, it lacked the violence that typified "masculine" sports such as rugby or American football. Indeed,

7. Western fashion norms at the time still privileged skirts or dresses for women. For more see Annabelle Caprais, "La 'Comtesse' du basket français: la trajectoire d'Anne Almeida au prisme des rapports sociaux (1892-1983)," Université Paris-Saclay, 2023, p9.

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within several Western societies, notably France, basketball was viewed as an elegant, graceful endeavor that respectable women could engage in for it could help strengthen female bodies for motherhood without endangering them.[8] Basketball did not suffer negative stigmatizations or stereotypes and women were never banned from playing basketball.[9]

Basketball proliferated in the post-1945 era, when many of those interviewed for this project came of age. At the first FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup, the United States, the hosts, and France garnered gold, silver, and bronze, respectively, in front of packed stadiums. This spoke to the growing global game overall. The FIBA South American Women's Basketball Championship held its inaugural edition in 1948. FIBA Women's EuroBasket recommenced in 1950, followed by implementation of the FIBA Women's Asia Cup (1965), FIBA Women's AfroBasket (1966), and FIBA Women's AmeriCup (1989) while the first women's Olympic basketball tournament was held at Montreal in 1976.

Although the game was caught in the Cold War's crosshairs, ideological competition stimulated investment in the game. The United States and the Soviet Union engaged in basketball diplomacy exchanges in the late 1950s and 1960s while the rise of the Eastern Bloc women's teams, thanks to state investment in sports to cultivate soft power and influence through elite competition, fueled further growth.[10] The Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria dominated during the early Cold War era, followed by Yugoslavia by the late 1960s. Apart from 1970 vice champion France and 1974 bronze medalist Italy, East Europeans consistently claimed the EuroBasket podium until the post-Cold War era.

As Western and/or European colonies were dismantled in the 1950s and 1960s, basketball, particularly in West Africa, emerged as means to assert legitimacy, a sense of belonging, national identity and pride.[11] After 1960, Senegal built on the basketball infrastructure and training systems first imported from France,

8. Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s-1930s* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).
9. In England, the Football Association banned women's football in December 1921; a ban that would remain in place until 1970, The Football Association https://www.thefa.com/womens-girls-football/heritage/kicking-down-barriers accessed 26.4.25. Similar bans were put in place by French and German football authorities, accompanied by considerable prejudice.
10. Kevin B. Witherspoon, "America's Team: The U.S. Women's National Basketball Team Confronts the Soviets, 1958-1969," in *Defending the American Way of Life: Sport, Culture, and the Cold War* (University of Kentucky Press, 2018), 99–112.
11. J Simon Rofe and Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "Transcript: Interview with Alphonse Bilé" (SOAS University of London, May 2020), Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History from SEED Project to the Basketball Africa League (BAL), https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/32968/1/BBDipAF2020%20Alphonse%20Bile%CC%81.pdf.

then mastered a development system that produced generations of players who dominated African competition. As longtime Senegalese basketball executive Amadou Gallo Fall, President of the Basketball Africa League (BAL), co-organized by FIBA and the NBA, noted,

> "It was our women's national basketball team that was a big source of inspiration in terms of team sports in Africa. I used to know the names of all those ladies on the team through listening to national radio broadcasts. Those names remain legendary to this day."[12]

The second wave of feminism also powered basketball's proliferation. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, semi-professional leagues in Europe and the creation of the FIBA Euroleague Women (1958) incubated the women's game and provided a way for women to play beyond secondary school—including those from the United States, such as 1976 Olympic silver medalist Gail Marquis.[13] The Women's Professional Basketball League in the United States, which played from 1978 through 1981, provided new opportunities for professionalization; the NBA, also began to look at female players during this era. Lusia Harris was the first woman drafted by the league when she was selected in the seventh round by the New Orleans Jazz in 1977.

Passage of U.S. Title IX legislation in June 1972 created a further impetus for women's basketball and sport more widely. The law's implications for sports was to mandate equal access and opportunity for women and girls within federally funded education institutions; while many universities, colleges, and high schools created women's football programs, others invested in their basketball programs.[14] Early pioneers included FIBA Hall of Fame Coach Pat Summitt, who built the perennial powerhouse Lady Vols basketball program at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and helped put the women's game on to national television and sports coverage.[15] By the 1990s, U.S. NCAA women's basketball programs, such as that at the University of Connecticut under FIBA Hall of Fame Coach Geno Auriemma, fostered American and global talent alike, including ever-more student-athletes from Africa.

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12. J Simon Rofe and Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "Transcript: Interview with Amadou Gallo Fall" (SOAS University of London, May 2020), "Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History from SEED Project to the Basketball Africa League (BAL), https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/32957/1/BBDipAF2020%20Amadou%20Gallo%20Fall.pdf.
13. "039 Gail Marquis," FranceAndUS, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.franceussports.com/voices/038-gail-marquis.
14. Alexandra E. Petri, "Once an 'Easy Way Out' for Equality, Women's Soccer Is Now a U.S. Force," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2022, sec. Sports, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/27/sports/soccer/title-ix-soccer.html.
15. *Origin Story: Joan Cronan - IX at 50: The Lady Vols Experience*, accessed October 1, 2022, https://ixat50.buzzsprout.com/1948784/10181748-origin-story-joan-cronan; Center for Sport, Peace and Society, *Strong Women, Better World Title IX's Global Effect* (University of Tennessee Press, 2022).

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The end of the Cold War in the 1990s opened new opportunities for the exchange of basketball knowledge as the global player and coach migration exchanges that began to thrive in the 1970s and 1980s gained tempo. The 1996 Olympics in Atlanta helped birth the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) which has evolved to become one of the world's elite women's pro leagues, as well as a place where the best global talent competes for one of the highly competitive roster spots.

It is against this backdrop that this study's participants came of age and helped further grow knowledge around the game.

Basketball Origin Stories

From Europe to Asia, Africa to the Americas, those interviewed for this project described numerous types of influences that drove their entry to basketball and subsequent careers. This "first contact" with the game is catalytic to their ongoing engagement. Despite divides across geography and communities, nearly all first encountered the game during childhood, and by no means all were associated with an instant love or success.

For some, family was the initial gateway. American Carol Callan, whose father was a coach, was exposed to the game from a very young age and even had a small court at home in the basement. Slovakian Natalia Hejkova was intrigued when one day she and her family watched a game on television. In Brazil, Maria Paula Gonçalves da Silva, "Magic Paula," grew up in a family immersed in a local sports club, which facilitated her trying different sports; she grew up playing with her older sister. The United States' Teresa Edwards also came to the game thanks to family. "The first time I played basketball was with my cousin Charles," she confided. "Cousin Charles was exciting and independent, so I tried to be the same. Every time he picked up a ball to play basketball, I would follow him."[16]

For others, their local community was another pathway. Spain's Maria Planas began playing around 11-years-old after being introduced to the game by a player from the local women's team—a team that was highly influential in Catalonian basketball in the early post-war period. For Planas it was "love at first sight," she explained,

16. All Teresa Edwards quotes in this report are from Teresa Edwards, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.

> "When this woman showed us what the game was, and I learned how to bounce the ball for the first time, quickly, I told myself, 'this is the sport that I like, this is my dream, this is what I want to play.'"[17]

Schools served as important conduit into the game. Inspiration to first pick up a basketball came from educators and teachings directly and indirectly. Switzerland's Claudine Clot-Ducommun, who played in the 1953 FIBA World Cup, noted how her entire gymnastics team was inspired to try basketball by two professors at a nearby university. "All the other girls got tired of learning the [basketball] steps, the movements, the shooting techniques," she recalled. "They didn't like it. But I still enjoyed it. That's why I was able to continue."[18]

At other times, it was through school-based physical education class that future players were exposed to the game. Korea's Shin-Ja Park picked up a ball for the first time in middle school, while France's Jacky Chazalon played at school, mainly with boys. Latvian legend Uljana Semjonova grew to love the game after she was identified at age 13 as a potential talent given her height then sent to a special sports school specializing in basketball.

For some of those interviewed, their basketball origin story was a combination of family encouragement and exposure at school. Such was the case for Senegal's Mame Maty Mbengue, who was encouraged to play by a friend of her father, but her first hoops memories are of playing at school. "It was very, very, very hot at three in the afternoon," she recalled,

> "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."[19]

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17. All Maria Planas quotes in this report are from Maria Planas, Interview, interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.
18. All Claudine Clot-Ducommun quotes in this report are from Claudine Clot-Ducommun, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2025.
19. All Mame Maty Mbengue quotes in this report are from Mame Maty Mbengue, Interview, interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.

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Australian Coach Tom Maher, on the other hand, didn't become a "basketball guy" until the relatively late age of fifteen.

> "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."[20]

Environmental factors such as family, community, or school play were at the heart of these origin stories, regardless of continent or decade. This emphasizes the importance of human networks and connections fostered through basketball in introducing many to and whetting their passion for the game.

Role Models and Early Influencers

Role models played an influential role in further stimulating love for the game, even if such figures were typically male (initially). Chazalon idolized cyclist Jacques Anquetil, as well as some of the U.S. men who played at Clermont-Ferrand. Callan looked up to players like Jerry West, due to the lack of female professionals. Magic Paula's first basketball idol was a male player in her town and she later admired Magic Johnson, from whom she gleaned her moniker.

Edwards idolized Dr. J who, in her words, "was the only role model because he was the absolute best." She was amazed by his style and technique.

> "I wanted to fly like him. I wanted to cradle that ball like he could in his hands. I wanted to deceive my opponents like him. I wanted to feel that joy of winning. The thrill of victory is when you can see three people in front of you and still get to the basket. Dr. J could do that. I would look at him like I could do everything he could do. I could immediately go outside and try it."

Within some countries, however, female role models were easier to come by. Hejkova looked up to Milena Jindrova, one of the best players in the former Czechoslovakia (and widely regarded as Czech Basketball's Player of the Century)[21] as a role model. "Watching her play felt like a dream to me; I aspired

20. All Tom Maher quotes in this report are from Tom Maher, Interview, interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.
21. "Czech Basketball Player of the Century Milena Jindrová Dies at 80," Radio Prague International, September 21, 2024, https://english.radio.cz/czech-basketball-player-century-milena-jindrova-dies-80-8829445.

to be her teammate," Hejkova said. "When I was 18, I came to Prague and had the opportunity to play with her on the team. She wasn't only my teammate, but a great person and a mentor."[22]

Similarly, Mbengue found role models in the older players on the Senegalese national team. "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," she said. The team acculturated new players by assigning a "big sister" who served as the first point of reference for any questions or problems. Hers was Aminata Diagne Poulain. But Mbengue also admired Marieme Ba. "When I saw how she moved and behaved, I said: 'I want to be like her.' She was my reference," Mbengue recalled. Marieme was also someone who she exchanged with and who provided advice on how to improve her game.

As women's basketball developed, later generations found many of this project's interviewees influential. U.S. legends Sheryl Swoopes, Teresa Weatherspoon, and Lisa Leslie have cited Edwards as among their role models and basketball influences while Diana Taurasi and Sue Bird named Callan's crucial role in front of and behind the scenes.[23] Chazalon's imprint on the French game extended for generations, particularly her role creating the country's first summer youth basketball camps in the late 1970s. "Nearly all the presidents of the clubs and the coaches came to my camp back in the days…also, many sports journalists" she noted, including longtime coach of the men's national team Vincent Collet (who coached France 2009-2024). "Collet came when he was 15, and stayed for 30 years."[24] A mutually reinforcing network thus emerged by the last part of the twentieth century.

The most significant influencers, however, were not male professional players; instead, it was the coaches who inspired many—and who many credited with their passion and game style. Park was "very lucky to have good coaches" in middle school and her commercial bank team, coaches who emphasized fundamentals and organized plays.[25] Chazalon credited Coach Joe Jaunay with having the "most impact" on her generation and pushing them to train intensely, while Semjonova was influenced by her coach at Riga, Raimonds Karnitis, who was strong in tactics.

Even the coaches interviewed for this project cited the influence of other coaches in their careers. Callan, for example, recalled that, "when I became the coach, [I thought], 'okay, I've got to find a really good coach out there to model after. Pat Summitt and Geno Auriemma are the two. There was [also] a coach at the University of Colorado in my town of Boulder, Ceal Barry, who was a great coach when I was a high

22. All Natalia Hejkova quotes in this report are from Natalia Hejkova, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.
23. Edwards, "Interview"; Carol Callan, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.
24. All Jackie Chazalon quotes in this report are from Jackie Chazalon, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.
25. All Shin-Ja Park quotes in this report are from Shin-Ja Park, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.

school coach. I would also pay attention to what she was doing."[26] But not all coaches had coaching role models.

That was the case for Hejkova, who relied on what she knew from her playing days as guidance. "When I started to coach, I tried to pick from my brain moments when I thought 'If I were a coach, I would never do this to my players,' she admitted.

> "When I started to coach, I met my first coach and he was laughing: 'The goat is the gardener.' I pushed my teams to be in the best physical condition and when I was a player, I hated this, and he knew it. It was funny that I started like this when I didn't like it. So the goat became the gardener.

Maher was also self-taught. "There were no basketball coaches," he confessed of when he entered basketball in Australia. "I didn't have a role model; you can't be what you can't see."

Here, again, the human network fostered within the larger basketball family, whether coach-to-coach, coach-to-player, or player-to-player, was instrumental in sparking inspiration and influencing individuals to pursue their craft.

Basketball Youth Development

Different basketball cultures dictated how countries approached youth development, access to the game, and evolved to become more formalized. Often, early exposure occurred wherever rudimentary courts could be created. Planas began playing with a small club on sand courts in early post-1945 era Spain while Park's first encounters were on "dirty ground pitch" with makeshift lines, a result of the tumult of the Korean War. In post-war Neuchâtel, Switzerland, Clot-Ducommun played in a club newly formed by a coach and his wife who were passionate about basketball. More than a decade later, Magic Paula played in the street with friends in Brazil. Edwards described how she deployed the "resources in our yard" as "great toys and tools to play with." As the oldest of five siblings, and the only girl, she sparked inspiration for using what was around.

Whether through clubs or school, youth development programs varied. The most formalized structure was in Soviet Latvia, where 13-year-old Semjonova was recruited to learn the game in a special basketball

26. All Carol Callan quotes in this report are from Callan, "Interview."

program in Riga. "Nowadays, when a young person is invited to play basketball in the capital city, he is very happy and runs to the capital," she said. "But for me, it was the opposite situation.

> "The first time the sport committee visited my family to bring me to Riga, I hid in the bushes and didn't want to even meet the delegation. But my parents and brothers, who didn't know anything about basketball, told me that playing basketball was very interesting, a good opportunity to travel, allowing me to eat chocolate and even go to the cinema and to the circus. They were decisive actors who made me change my mind and basically decide upon taking on basketball."[27]

Yet, many future players and coaches described difficulties pursuing their passion due to lack of access to facilities - particularly for girls. Playing infrastructure was also an issue. For some, formal women's basketball leagues or teams were not readily available at the youth level. Chazalon primarily played with boys and at school because there wasn't a girls' team at her club. "Magic Paula" started basketball by watching and imitating boys' teams. "I was born in a very small town in the interior of São Paulo, called Osvaldo Cruz," she said.

> "They started with a men's basketball team, and when I was at the club, I would sit and watch the boys train. When I got home, I'd grab a ball, any ball I could find, and I would start trying to do what I had seen the boys doing." The club finally created a girls' section when she was 11 or 12 years old."[28]

In the United States, the situation was different. Callan grew up in the pre-Title IX era where girls' sports were often underfunded or even discouraged due to perceived dangers. Thus as a kid, she played with boys in her neighborhood due to a lack of school sports opportunities for girls. Once Title IX passed in June 1972, federally funded educational institutions in the United States were required to provide equal access and opportunity for women and girls to play sports (just one of the legislation's many provisions). Edwards was part of the first generation to benefit. "It just opened my world up tremendously," she said of how she was able to play in high school and at the collegiate level thanks to more organized league play. "The University of Georgia provided me a lifeline and basketball paved a career because I was fortunate to be born after the trail was blazed to offer me a scholarship with equal access."

27. All Uljana Semjonova quotes in this report are from Uljana Semjonova, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.
28. All "Magic Paula" Silva quotes in this report are from Maria Paula Goncalves da Silva, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.

Despite the challenges posed by a lack of facilities or organized playing opportunities in some countries, those who loved basketball found ways to feed their passions.

Basketball as a Reflection of Changing Societies

One of the most common thematic threads in this project is how women in basketball and those working in women's basketball defied traditional gender roles and thus reflected changing norms within societies. Within many cultural contexts, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, it was not common for married women to work—or for women to aspire to playing a sport as a career, as Planas and Chazalon described.

Yet, even in what Park describes as a more traditional society in Korea, women's basketball was supported due to its success. In the early days of basketball in Korea, there were strong beliefs and societal norms against women playing sports. "There were many male players playing basketball, but women were not supposed to play basketball," she recalled. "They believed that even riding a bicycle would prevent them from carrying babies." But for Park, basketball's popularity grew partly due to the success of her team.

> "Personally, I think the reason that helped basketball become popular was that, luckily, the team I played on beat the foreigners, we won against other teams, not just on the national level, but also internationally, against other countries. This gave the Koreans, with their subdued lifestyle and their belief of not being good at anything, the feeling that suddenly there was something we could achieve."

This suggests that on-court success could help gradually shift some of the cultural norms.

Pride, in participation or in winning, could also shift proscribed gender roles, starting within the home. It helped foster family support for some female basketballers. For example, Clot-Ducommun recalled her father's immense pride that she was selected to play for Switzerland at the 1953 FIBA World Cup.

> "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 father was there…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."

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Chile's Laura Piña originally had to sneak out of the house to play basketball in the afternoons--but not because her family disapproved. Her mother, in fact, understood Piña's passion for basketball, yet her father worried that she was too young to be out of the house on her own. Once Piña was selected to play with the national team and travel abroad, her parents were fully supportive. "[My father] saw my progress and said, 'that's great!'" she recalled.[29] Piña met her husband, a journalist, at the 1953 World Cup, someone who recognized her love for and dedication to basketball–and understood that she did not want to have children and sacrifice her on-court career. "He was a widower and already had a daughter," she said. "He was at peace with it. He never said anything [negative]. Quite the opposite. He helped me go to games, play, and train."

For others, it was opening their parents' eyes to new possibilities that basketball began to offer. Edwards, who grew up in a rural area of the U.S. state of Georgia, noted that her mother–a single mother–was a devout church-going woman who was a singer in the choir. "How was I going to explain to her what I was doing and how was she going to pay for it if I made the team?" Edwards mused about her first basketball team tryouts.

> "For as much as she watches me run around outside with the boys, she's wondering where in the world am I getting this basketball skill set from? She had never watched long enough to realize I was playing basketball in trash cans, off the tree and sneaking off to the park with the boys. She just went to work, came home, cooked, cleaned, and took care of the children. She didn't pay attention to the in-betweens of running around with marbles, kick ball, running races and playing football. She really didn't think I could play when I was forced to own the truth of tryouts. She didn't understand."

Winning and recognition of on-court successes helped drive interest and grew women's basketball. As Park observed,

> "Victory will get the people interested, the politicians too. And then after that, they will create more teams, and they'll spend more money. Consequently, young people will be able to enjoy sports they like very much."

Yet, some women recounted instances of sexism or a lack of respect in the basketball world. Planas experienced a referee in France telling her she couldn't talk to her players because she wasn't considered the coach. "I was shocked," she recalled. "In disbelief, the delegate rose up and showed the file [proving

29. All Laura Pina quotes in this report are from Laura Pina, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2025.

she was the team's official coach] … He politely apologized." Another time, a male coach insulted her when he implied that Planas's success as a National Coach meant anyone could achieve anything. Hejkova also faced situations where she was initially overlooked as the head coach and recalled a disturbing incident of inappropriate behavior by a youth coach. "[He] entered the locker [room] and he even touched the players. One of them decided to quit after talking with her parents," she said of the incident. During the subsequent investigation undertaken by a commission of experts to evaluate the situation, some giggled. "I told them they should imagine that those girls were their daughters," she said."

Regardless of where they plied their trade, these women had to navigate the societal expectations and gender norms that dominated their societies. Women were expected to get married and have children, and in many societies, it was not common at the time for husbands to participate in childcare. For some, however, basketball was an opportunity to do and to be something more.

Take the example offered by Chazalon, who was told to marry and have children. "I dreamed of having a totally different life. I wanted to express myself and basketball was the way," she recalled.

> "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."

Basketball was thus a way to resist social pressure, to pursue one's sporting passions, and live a different type of life than what was normally proscribed at the time. At a time when more women entered the workforce and navigated some of these similar challenges, basketball thus reflected changing societies even as it offered unique opportunities.

Basketball Learning and Leadership

Basketball has been synonymous with education, learning, and development since its 1891 inception. The game was and remains viewed as a multidimensional tool that can make an impact far beyond the hardcourt for individuals, teams, and communities alike.

For starters, it imparts the meaning of effort and hard work. Park recalled how she followed her coaches' instructions but would purposeful disobey so that she could put in extra time to improve her game. "I

remember them telling us to make 10 free throws before going home," she said, "and I would intentionally miss one of the last shots so I could stay longer and practice more!" Mbengue, too, was motivated to go above and beyond in her determination to play with the Senegalese national team. "If we practiced three times a week, I did five by myself to continue developing and be part of the best," she noted. "I gave my best all the time."

Basketball teaches how to be resilient. This was something Semjonova learned early on through her difficult transition from a rural village to a boarding school in Riga. "It was very tough for me to stay in this boarding school," she said.

> "I was so close to my mother, and she guided me every day. I left and I cried for several weeks, I was homesick and whenever I had the chance, I tried to get on the train to go back…[the] people who were put there to take care of me told me I had to be patient and adapt. Sometimes they had to take me out of the train! It was tougher than you might think nowadays."

It helps individuals recognize their roles and respect authority of others. Callan described how one key to her success is knowing the boundary of her expertise. "I'm not an Olympic level coach," she reflected. "I've observed a lot, and I try to offer some thoughts on international basketball and rules and the things that maybe coaches that haven't been involved as much aren't aware of." But she understood that as an administrator she was a "gatekeeper" of sorts of the culture, not a player or elite-level coach.

Basketball is also instructive for building perseverance. Magic Paula and the Brazilian national team provide just one example for how they worked for fifteen years after the team's renewal, learning from mistakes and setbacks, before achieving success on the global level. "We struggled a lot because we didn't have anyone experienced to guide us, to say 'no, don't go that way, come this way, that path isn't good,' she noted. "We had to learn from our mistakes."

Because basketball is a team sport, the game teaches about the work that goes into playing and helping each other – teamwork and working together for a common goal. As Planas noted, "to play in a team you have to sacrifice, be a good partner, to love the team." Moreover, one needs generosity to be a good basketball teammate.

Others pointed to the values and character that the game imparts, such as respect for rivals, referees, and rules. That includes self-esteem. For Maher, this is a vital aspect. "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." The game and the camaraderie it instills is helpful to this endeavor, he noted.

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As Planas noted, basketball is "a school" for life, a way to learn about the world and the different opportunities it offers. "My intention always was to show the players that there were many other things besides basketball," she noted. "I wanted to help them, to have their freedom and realize that women could have power in society, and this would help them."

Learning how to teach oneself is another type of way that basketball imparted lessons. Passion for the game prompted some players, like Edwards, to teach themselves. That meant learning how basketball worked: the physics of the ball, the arc of the shot. "Basketball really chose me," she said.

> "I didn't really choose it because the first time I touched a ball, it felt like I knew the ball. I could truly connect to it. No one taught me how to dribble. I taught myself or I just learned simply by watching others."

Basketball fosters a multi-way exchange. Learning from others is crucial, whether a player, rival, coach, or administrator, and occurs through observation, imitation, and competition. Maher learned from other coaches, notably *Practical Modern Basketball* by longtime University of California-Los Angeles Coach John Wooden, and *Hints on Defense* by Bobby Knight. Hejkova emphasized the need for coaches to learn from their players—particularly when they have international rosters. "It's interesting to talk with my players, get to know them on the court but also off the court," she said.

For the Slovakian coach, "I always try to make them comfortable and happy," she described of how she would learn about the history and hoops reference points for her international players.

> "Since I like to travel and read, sometimes I even surprise the players by knowing more things about their countries than they [do]. This makes them feel safe and they think, 'She knows a lot about us, she is our friend.'"

Such lessons contribute to personal development, creation of a champion's mentality of tenacity, resilience, and the ability to rebound, and build confidence. Learning how to live with others, as well as to recognize one's limits, are also valuable components of the basketball equation.

Thus, as many interviewees noted, basketball can positively impact society. It can help in the personal journey from child to adolescent to adult, while many former players desire to give back to others the bounty that they themselves reaped. As Planas said, "I really believe that basketball values can help young kids become better people and build a better society."

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Importantly, the journey of learning and basketball improvement builds perseverance and a refusal to give up on one's dreams. It also develops problem-solving and leadership skills, for individuals must communicate, represent, and negotiate with each other to foment team chemistry and work towards goals.

Lastly, basketball served to learn about and travel the world while experiencing different cultures. For Clot-Ducommun, going to Chile in 1953 "felt like going to the ends of the earth…it was extraordinary—unbelievable—to think we could go that far just to play basketball."[30] Park's participation in the World Cup allowed her to visit Peru and later play in Czechoslovakia. For Slovakia's Hejkova, "basketball was really good to travel and go beyond the Iron Curtain." It provided a means of travel and adventure, such as for Edwards, who noted, "I've dribbled the ball around the world, and it's given me a whole world…Just because I can shoot this ball, I can see the world."

Basketball was also a way to learn what the game was like in other countries. For Semjonova, basketball was a mean to live abroad and learn another culture during her time with Getafe (Spain) in the late 1980s. "The cultural experience and everything around were really emotional because of how I really felt," she noted.

> "For the first time, I understood and felt how it was to be a basketball star. It was a big difference compared to my USSR farewell… where I barely received a 'thank you.'" President Antonio (Jareño) and all my teammates made me feel special and a key part of the team. I wanted to be part of it and embrace the Spanish culture, so that's the main reason why I started to learn the language…I tried to learn every day some new words, some new expressions, and I practiced even with the president. It was the best year of my life as a professional basketball player and I will always be grateful for the way fans treated me."

Thus, basketball provides opportunities and can open doors, whether that is for education, travel, employment, or a life better lived. It's far more than just a game.

30. The Swiss and French teams flew together on a multi-stop transatlantic flight.

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Friendships, Rivals, and Fierce Competitors

Throughout careers playing on or coaching teams with international players, competing in FIBA competitions such as the World Cup and Olympic games, different types of relationships blossomed between players and coaches from various countries. These rapports and exchanges were beneficial to individuals while also shaping development of the global game.

Friendships were forged through shared experiences and love for the game. Throughout the Cold War, before greater liberalization of travel, basketball provided unique opportunities to become friends with those from different countries. This was beneficial on an individual, human level, as Hejkova pointed out. "It gave me many friends from different countries, cultures and races…it was very beneficial for me." Such relationships could also be beneficial professionally, too. Planas leveraged her international friendships to improve her coaching, such as consulting with legendary Serbian coach Ranko Zeravica thanks to her close relationship with his wife. Chazalon struck up a lifelong friendship with one of the American male players at Clermont Ferrand, Carmine Calzonetti, who she later teamed up with to launch the first youth summer basketball camps in France.

Rivalries, perhaps the flip side of friendships, also sculpted the global game. In Brazil, a strong rivalry between Magic Paula and Hortência propelled each player and their club teams to new heights, often resolving in the championship final. "I believe we were very different players, with distinct profiles, but we complemented each other," Magic Paula noted. Their rivalry also fostered external narratives and fan engagement. The media played a significant role in amplifying the rivalry, creating a debate about who was better, which "drove us," she noted. This external attention and the rivalry among fans heightened the stakes and importance of their encounters. Such intense competition initially hindered Team Brazil's impact at FIBA competition. "This rivalry wasn't helping our game, our team, or the atmosphere on the national team," Magic Paula reflected. It took time for Magic Paula and Hortência to "leave behind the club dynamics and focus on the national team" to achieve collective success for Brazilian women's basketball.

Rivalries played a role in influencing players, coaches, and interest in the game, as well as pushing players and teams to be better. Such was the case for the cross-continental European rivalry between Chazalon and Semjonova, who sparred on the court with CUC and Riga, respectively, while off-court they held each other in high esteem. According to the Frenchwoman, Semjonova's team was "the best" and "at another level," making them seemingly "unbeatable," which all drove Chazalon to close the gap.

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Yet, constructive rivalry can lead to more than mere respect; it can lead to genuine friendship. Despite the intense competition, Chazalon, Semjonova, and their teammates spent time together after games. "We were like friends who loved basketball," Chazalon recalled.

> "With many other players, you wrote cards in French, English or any way we could. With Semjonova, I talked via Aija Erta, the director of her Riga museum, and during the championships we talked frequently."

The working relationships forged also helped improve the overall level of competitiveness as players challenged each other to play better, harder. Edwards discussed this in detail when she narrated her first time living overseas after signing with Italian team Vicenza in 1986. It was a move that "changed my life," she said. While she loved the food and learning to live in Italy, the basketball was hard thanks to the fierce competition on court—even among teammates. "When I got off the plane and got onto the basketball court there, it was the first time that I realized that I was not a star. I had to start over," she said.

> "Those girls you're playing with are great. They're just as good. They're not going to let this foreign player come over here and just be a great player. You're going to have to earn it. It was really like starting all over again…when we practice, practice was harder than the games. Those girls beat me down. Not in a bad way. This was a competitive energy. This wasn't personal. They didn't dislike me for any racial issue. It wasn't like that. It was basketball. It was physical. I had never played that physical until I got to Italy."

Still, she acknowledged, "it was the foreign players who taught me how to grow up in the game," she noted. "The growth elevated me."

The ways that interacting with colleagues from different countries built lifelong relationships but also challenged individuals and teams to play or coach at ever-more-competitive levels, a key strength of basketball's networks and value-add.

Basketball and Identity

Basketball played a significant role fostering a variety of different identities.

At the apex sits the ways that a deep love and passion for the game unifies, regardless of how one began a life in the game, at what point in time, or where in the world one hooped. For Park, who first picked up a basketball in 1953 when she started middle school, the feel of the ball in her hands and taking a shot sparked a lifelong passion. “I loved the sound of the ball swooshing through the net,” she said of this particular love song. “It was wonderland for me! And you know what: it still is the case today!”

A basketballer’s identity was another common thread. Chazalon embraced being told that she played like a boy. “In those days…it was a huge compliment and recognition,” she said. Semjonova, during her 1987-88 season in Tintoretto Getafe (Spain), was saluted by people who were so supportive of her efforts for the club. “I really felt like a basketball queen,” the Latvian legend recalled. Magic Paula, her nickname, given by a journalist comparing her to Magic Johnson, became a comfortable part of her identity that reflected her playing style.

The game also fostered individual identity around leadership. Edwards developed a reputation for being a leader on and off the court, demonstrating excellence in a variety of different ways. Part of this was her good fortune to play with great players, she acknowledged, but she developed a way of leading by example. “I always had a way of captivating or being a leader on the floor like [Michael Jordan],” she said. “I didn't like to lead with my mouth. I hated talking, but I had a way of playing that people would follow...In a huddle, I wasn't afraid to get in your face and tell you exactly what you weren't doing or what you needed to do.”

Basketball brought people together and fostered understanding across different social groups. For Mbengue in Senegal, an ethnically and religiously diverse country, basketball “mixed different people, different society, different culture” together. It brough together Muslims and Catholics who spoke different languages and created bonds within the community. “We had to understand everyone else in Senegal,” she said. “There was no problem and basketball made it possible.” Moreover, the national team helped foster Senegalese identity. “People liked the players,” she said.

> “They were role models, they were ambassadors because when they played in another country they were representing Senegal, and did it well because they brought Cups. People were happy, everybody loved and respected them.”

The success of basketball teams and players, particularly in international competitions, fostered a sense of national pride and achievement for their countries. For Shin-Ja Park, the Korean team's victories against foreign teams provided Koreans, who had a "subdued lifestyle and their belief of not being good

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at anything," with a feeling that they could achieve something. Semjonova expressed immense pride in representing Latvia on the USSR national team and the celebratory reception she received upon returning with medals. Similarly, in Senegal, basketball players were seen as "ambassadors" representing their country and bringing pride through their achievements.

That's why playing for the national team was consistently highlighted as a formative and incredibly meaningful experience. For Planas, her time with the Spanish National Team was "totally unexpected" and considered "something big." Shin-Ja Park's most significant memories were tied to the Korean national team and the opportunities it provided. Chazalon's silver medal with the French national team in 1970 is described as one of her most significant career memories. Mbengue's winning basket for Senegal at the 1990 World Championship remains a source of immense pride. "I didn't want to disappoint them," she noted of not letting her teammates down.

Magic Paula noted that while the Olympics have glamour, the World Cup was her most important title due to the circumstances surrounding it. The Brazilian team was unable to play internationally outside of Brazil as they did not have the budget to travel overseas. Instead, "we would play matches against boys, because they were stronger and faster. That made us realize we didn't need to be stronger or faster to play," she said.

Undeniably, the exchange and transfer of knowledge that international basketball facilitated impacted players, coaches, and administrators alike. Callan actively sought to understand how other successful basketball nations operated, and admired initiatives like Australia's Institute for Sport.

Equally important, women's basketball offered a platform for individuals to serve as different types of sports diplomats. During FIBA-sanctioned competition, as credentialed members of their national teams, they engaged in formal representation, communication, and negotiation on behalf of their countries. But some formally represented their countries in other ways, such as when Edwards served as the U.S. *chef de mission* at the London 2012 Games. "I felt really special," she said of the honor. She described this role as being more of a figurehead, that involved representation for media availability, putting out little fires, motivating Team USA athletes, and ensuring that they understood how they were showing up to represent the country.

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Individuals also served as informal ambassadors within their team setting–diplomats in tracksuits. Such was the case for Mbengue during her university years in the United States as she taught teammates about Senegal, as well as African history, culture, and basketball.

Evolution of The Game

There are numerous ways that the game changed in the aftermath of the first FIBA World Cup, reflective of broader socio-cultural and economic evolutions in a more globalized world.

Take the rules and style of play. In the 1950s, female players had to maintain 90cm between players. "If you got too close, you'd get whistled for a foul," recalled Clot-Ducommun. This perhaps conformed with then-prevalent attitudes about what women should or should not do in public sporting activities. Basketball at that time was thus known for its graceful lines, pleasant plays and non-combatant status, as well as its more skills-based focus. Within some regions of the United States, women played a 6-on-6 game that limited players to three dribbles. Callan played both 5-on-5 and 6-on-6, and noted of the latter that, "in some ways, it actually was a great way to learn the fundamentals." Despite the more restrictive rules of 6-on-6, it helped individuals perfect their passing and off-the-ball movement.

This paved the way for a changed style of the game. For example, the jump shot – a rarity for women to take in the 1970s – became a common hardcourt weapon. As Semjonova explained, "Women didn't take jump shots until mid-80s, when men had already been doing it for a while." The women's game also gained greater tempo and physicality. These earlier styles are a stark contrast with the fast-paced, up-tempo, physical game of the 2020s that requires powerful athletes, while still needing skills and tactics.

The game further evolved with a shift towards more intensive training after the mid-twentieth century, moving from a leisure-oriented approach to one of daily intention. Clubs in the Soviet Union, for example, were at the forefront of this change. As Semjonova recalled of TTT Riga,

> "In the 50s, Soviet politics were special: there was no owner-sponsors, no private sponsors… The sponsoring came from the Government, and then from big factories who sponsored competitions or teams. Also, the players were employed in the factories in low level duties to have time to practice twice a day with the team. They didn't get paid much, just enough to cover the costs of food, but the Soviet propaganda could say that we could beat anybody with factory workers."

Technically, the players were considered 'factory workers,' so that they could maintain amateur status.

Even though amateurism was an ideal, by the 1970s and 1980s several leagues around the world transitioned to semi-professional status so that players could dedicate time to their craft rather than non-sporting careers. "I strongly believed in amateurism. I'm old fashioned," Park said. but her team received part-time salaries from a bank, leading them to call themselves "semi-professional." Chazalon never considered playing for money in the 1970s as it was an amateur sport, though her coach later arranged modest salaries for the team to focus on international competitions.

Callan described a time before significant financial investment in U.S. women's sports. While the Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL) launched in 1978 in an attempt to lure American talent to remain at home, the short-lived experiment ceased operations in 1981. That's why Edwards played her first several pro careers overseas in Italy, Spain, Japan, and France before returning for the next generation of professional U.S. leagues: the ABL and the WNBA.

More intensive trainings, whether in semi-professional or increasingly professional clubs, led to greater competitiveness. This was the case for Chazalon when she played for Clermont-Ferrand. "At that time, our coach convinced us to practice hard," she recalled. "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." This more professional approach is credited for helping the team level-up its play and becoming far more competitive, to the point where they were able to spar with the best of the era's dominant Eastern European squads, such as TTT Riga.

Although their clubs could straddle the line between amateurism and semi-professionalism, these teams were a way to polish skills, techniques, and tactics before national team service. Chazalon credited her CUC coach, Joe Jaunay, who was also head coach for the French women's national team, with instilling a strong work ethic and changing the team's level of play.

Evolving rules and styles of play combined with more intensive trainings indicative of a shift from basketball as a leisure time activity to one of ever-more intentional, systematic preparation, whether for semi-professional, professional, or national team service. The result was an increased competitiveness as players upskilled, worked on the game's mechanics, and prepared physically and mentally for the next match.

Conclusions

The oral histories and thematic analyses presented in these sources demonstrate that women's basketball is far more than just a game; it is a universal language that has successfully transcended geographic borders, timelines, and social divides. Since 1945, the sport has evolved from a leisure activity into a highly technical, professionalized global phenomenon, serving as a powerful tool for diplomacy and human connection.

Based on the main themes of *Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball,* several key aspects stand out:

- *Basketball Origin Stories* Environmental factors such as family, community, or school play were at the heart of these origin stories, regardless of continent or decade. This emphasizes the importance of human networks and connections fostered through basketball in introducing many to and whetting their passion for the game.

- *Role Models and Early Influences* Interviewees forged new pathways. Some of them did not have female role models and thus looked to male players like Dr. J, Magic Johnson, or Michael Jordan. Thus, part of their collective legacy was to ensure that future generations could look to women's basketball for influence and inspiration. Here, again, the human network fostered within the larger basketball family, whether coach-to-coach, coach-to-player, or player-to-player, was instrumental in sparking inspiration and influencing individuals to pursue their craft.

- *Basketball Cultures and Youth Development* Institutional and, in the case of the United States, legislative change helped further basketball's integration within different societies. Despite the challenges posed by a lack of facilities or organized playing opportunities in some countries, those who loved basketball found ways to feed their passions.

- *Basketball as a Reflection of Changing Societies* Many of the interviewees featured in this project, they had to break existing societal norms, overcome sexism from male referees, officials, and fans, and defy cultural myths about women who play sports. In doing so, they helped pave the way for others and invested in the next generation, which had a multiplier effect on the game. Basketball was thus a way to resist social pressure, to pursue one's sporting passions, and live a different type of life than what was normally proscribed at the time. At a time when more

women entered the workforce and navigated some of these similar challenges, basketball thus reflected changing societies even as it offered unique opportunities.

- *Basketball Learning and Leadership* The game served as type of educational Swiss Army Knife: a lifelong learning tool, a way to travel and experience the world, and a means to better understand others within the basketball family on and off the court. The values basketball extolled thus extend into deeply humanistic territory. Basketball also fostered different types of leadership, providing opportunities and pipelines for individuals to grow through and thanks to the game. Thus, basketball provides opportunities and can open doors. It's far more than just a game.

- *Friendships, Rivals and Fierce Competitors* The ways that interacting with colleagues from different countries built lifelong relationships but also challenged individuals and teams to play or coach at ever-more-competitive levels, a key strength of basketball's networks and value-add. Still, national teams were some of the most visible "successes" historically.

- *Basketball and Identity* Basketball built a range of identities, from transnational and national, to local and individual, while fostering pride in communities large and small. Undeniably, the exchange and transfer of knowledge that international basketball facilitated impacted players, coaches, and administrators alike. Equally important, women's basketball offered a platform for individuals to serve as different types of sports diplomats.

- *Evolution of the Game* Evolving rules and styles of play combined with more intensive trainings indicative of a shift from basketball as a leisure time activity to one of ever-more intentional, systematic preparation, whether for semi-professional, professional, or national team serlvice. The result was an increased competitiveness as players upskilled, worked on the game's mechanics, and prepared physically and mentally for the next match.

Taken as a whole, the experiences shared by the project's subjects coincides with the development of basketball in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Their roles demonstrate the practice of sports diplomacy as "diplomats in tracksuits," performing across a network of networks, with basketball's convening power coming to the fore. That's why, at its core, basketball's global impact is rooted in its human "network of networks."

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