

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Maria Planas (ESP)

Oral History Interview Questions

Setting the Scene from the Baseline

1. If we may 'start at the beginning' and ask how you first came to the sport of basketball? What was the genesis moment? Can you recall when you first picked up a ball? Who were your peers and role models at this stage?

Basketball came to my life in my house. We were five sisters and three brothers, my parents, before the Civil War lived in the center of Barcelona but decided to move to the outskirts following the example of my grandparents. Shortly after, I was born, number five, and eight days later the War started... Family kept growing in a house that had a small backyard and really helped us developing.

2. Thinking a little further here about the society - circumstances and environment - of your initial contact with the game in Barcelona as a youngster. Circumstances: To what extent did being part of a relatively big family (4 sisters, 3 brothers) instill a sporting/competitive dimension that you brought to your engagement with Basketball? Was there a particular family heritage with the game?

Before I started playing in a competition monitored by the local church when I was around 11 years old, I enjoyed performing local catalan dances. A woman from the Feminine Section, that was very influential at the very early stages of post war, came with a hoop and showed us what was the game of basketball.

I, like my brothers and my dad, really liked sports, so when this woman showed us what was the game 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.

3. Environment: Was there a court in your neighborhood? 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?

Shortly after I discovered basketball, this woman who discovered basketball for me, died in an accident and we were left there, kind to abandoned to ourselves... but luckily, Eduardo (Portela) who

would become my husband later, he started also in the game of basketball and along with his father and some friends funded a Club called PEM, it was logically played in sand, very humble lockers, two rims, but it was a club...

I started playing there with some friends. We listed ourselves through the Catalan Federation in the Catalonia Championship where some other women clubs were listed. This was around 1950, 1951. There was even one club, called Picadero, who was later on very successful in men, that really made a difference in our competition. There were no age categories like today, and we played there and many times we manage to become runner ups... I kept playing but I was studying and working, I had to choose between catalan dances and basketball, what I chose, and I had little time so I quitted despite the fact that Picadero came to try to sign me around 1954... But I was young, I had to move alone and they didn't allow me at home. It left a bad taste in my mouth because it was a very well organized club playing even in international competitions... So I started working in an office to help in my house. And that was my life until I married...

4. Society: what did it mean to be a female player as you first picked up a ball? What kind of challenges did you face as a young girl? To what extent did you recognise them at the time?

When I married, women didn't work so I told my husband, who insisted right away that I get my driving license, that I was getting bored so he told me not to worry: "We go back to PEM". He was in the front office of the club and I accepted the challenge to put some order in the women section. I started to work with them and I did a casting and chose the ones I felt they had the passion and desire to play. We started growing and developing from the lowest category, with girls who were 11 years old, but each year we ended champions... and let be known I wasn't any kind of expert. But I had my husband support, his knowledge and some books I read. We managed to become champions of the 2nd Division but we had to renounce to the 1st Division due to financial problems. We stayed one more year, we were the runner ups and we faced the Standard of Madrid to promote and we won against a team of girls of 25 and 30 years... I couldn't believe it, and this time we promoted to the 1st Division, to the Liga Nacional. We even got a sponsor and this way it worked out financially for us. Bear in mind that the oldest player in our team had 15 years! We played there in a League with many quality teams: Picadero, Argentona, Joventut, Mataro, Canoe, CREF... We ended 6th out of 12 and Rosa Castillo was the best layer of the league... Unluckily the sponsor couldn't continue and the club couldn't face the financial obligations, the trips....So we couldn't continue, they wanted us to play in lower division but we had several players with many talents and I offered them to Picadero, the pioneer club along with Mataró. So That year I was left without team, and when I

started thinking about different possibilities like creating a club where I could teach young girls to play and realize that they could become whatever they would like... But at the end of the season Picadero came searching for me. I felt I wasn't prepared, I thought about it a lot... the players tried to convince me, the sponsor left... but I continued, I had given my word and we fought to make it any how any way no matter anything and the trips we would do them by plane, train or anyway. That year we were champions of the League, the Queens Cup and the Catalan League. We won it all, I couldn't believe it... even against teams like Vigo who had many teams of the Spanish National League and I remember clearly that in that crucial game there were thousand of fans left out of the arena because it was a sellout. I continued in Picadero, Barcelona facilitated us their courts to practice and play at the Palau Blaugrana. I think we won also the League and the Kings Cup. It was amazing... The team was amazing, like a family, playing really well and I remember in Leon, once, the players pranked us tying my assistant and me to a lamp post... People passing by were shocked offering us some scissors to free us! We were crowned there as champions and they put me in the shower

Women, Basketball and your nation.

5. **Over the longue 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? You never thought of coaching abroad?**

I always coached in Cataluña different teams and also the Spanish national team, always at home. I said "no" to a French team that came to convince me, but I said "I'm sorry". I started coaching with one idea, and tried to manage it, I wanted to coach in my country... There was one time I nearly went to Iran. I said yes, but one month after, before even going I refused, I was scared... They told me I had to wear trousers and Hijab and I said myself: "María, you're very clueless many times and you will forget...." I decided not to go, and I think I took the correct decision.

6. **As a national coach you've enjoyed such great successes on the court. That international competition has exposed you to many different identities and cultures: what have you taken from that exposure?**

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?

After two years with Picadero, the Spanish Basketball Federation, with Juan Tamames, came to see me and told me that the comitee had chosen me to lead the National Team. It was totally unexpected for me. “Oh my God, this is something big”, I thought. It went beyond my capacity, I thought. But I said yes.

At that time there weren’t many women coaching, all coaches in the clubs were men. I coached two years the NT and my team in the Natonal League, and by that time there wasn’t any women. Later on, Carme Lluveras came, she was way younger and coached El Mansou in Barcelona. The champion teams gained a spot in Europe, in Saporta times, and at that time our teams faced eastern Europe teams who were taller and more skilled and prepared. At that time, the national team didn’t had the success that has been achieving for the past years. I recall I was the first woman going to Europe since no other team was coached by a woman until two or three years later where the Russian teams had all women in their staff, later, one in Hungary.

So after 4 years with Picadero and two with the NT, I quitted the team and focused in the NT. I had a blast, I truly enjoyed ad I had many contacts with foreign coaches, many from Italy. Also men coaches and this helped me a lot. For example, Antonio Diaz Miguel invited me to the pre camp of the NT prior to Los Angeles 84 Olympics. I was there with them and this way I learned, I observed, he explained me many things, very detailed and this way I could practice them and use them in the women NT. My husband helped me introducing me to other coaches since he was having mnay meetings with greats like Ranko Zeravica or Bozidar Maljkovic, also Dusko Ivanovic, Lluís, Nino Buscató, Aito García Renésés... Everything I felt it could be useful, I tried to learn it and they offered me many solutions! I learned a lot.

From 78-85 I coached the Spanish NT and I must admit I am satisfied with what I achieved despite not being on top and ending between 8th and 10th but many European countries like Scotland, Italy, France, the Czech Republic invited us to play and this was great satisfaction. There I realized one thing I told in an interview in Gigantes, a basketball magazine: “In ten years, Spain will be one of the bests in the world”. And it happened. I realized I had some promising players with some height, like

Betty Cebrian... They were very young but they had the knowledge of the game, they could perform on court. In 93 Spain was European Champion, that was something amazing, then World Cup, then Olympics... we could see the great work behind by the Spanish basketball federation to grow and develop the players along with the Spanish clubs, who worked very closely for the Federation.

Basketball, gender and society

7. A 'big question' if we may: in your experience, what can basketball do for Women and Girls in society? To what extent do you see basketball playing a role in addressing gender inequality? May you share some examples?

My intention always was to show the players that there were many other things besides basketball. I had players from different social status and many from lower status were really thankful and praised me for helping them. I wanted to help them, to have their freedom and realize that women could have power in society, and this would help them. I wanted to transmit the sporting values to help them in life: to play in a team you have to sacrifice, be a good partner, love the team... This would avert them from bad habits, companies, and make a better world. I also told them to transmit this to others, this was what I really liked. We held campus for 500 girls, we wanted the women to understand that we are really something. I wanted to teach values as a legacy: we are women but we can do at least the same as men and basketball is the same game, now they have the body, athleticism and it's a great joy to watch them play?

8. Basketball is all about values: hardwork, sacrifice, effort, camaraderie... Do you think this can be exported beyond court and contribute to develop a better society?

I really believe that basketball values can help young kids become better persons and build a better society: team work, effort, hard work, generosity, helping your teammates, work together for a common goal... I think the young kids can look in the mirror of their predecessors. We have to fight and ask the new generations to have opportunities. There are many former players willing to work for

others. I always wanted to coach girls to teach them these values and help them. Men had already their coaches. I wanted to teach them, to have an open mind and change society. I lived hard times and I didn't want them to have to live that. In the past meeting with coaches I told them that the only regret I have is that I didn't learn earlier to not considerate bad criticism and just learn from the positive. Never give up and reach the goals you have in mind is what I always worked for.

9. Beyond the issue of gender, and more broadly, where have you/do you see good examples of basketball contributing to society? And what characterises success in this respect?

What I wanted was to promote women and impact them through basketball and use basketball as a tool in society to develop. I enjoyed playing and coaching but I wanted them to change society, raise their voices... Playing abroad and travelling outside it helped me to become the woman I am and I was. Basketball has helped me in many aspects in my life, as a person, as a Woman and as a coach. Basketball has been a school for me. Sometimes in life you learn more than in text books. Going out was key. For example, we participated in the University Games, in Edmonton, Canada and it was spectacular. There were different ethnicities, cultures, languages, social classes, everything and everyone was different but you learned a lot connecting with others... And all coaches were women! I really learned a lot. Being everybody different, we all spoke the same language: basketball.

10. After so many years coaching everywhere, did you live any episode of sexism? Where? What do you recall and how you dealt with it?

Once, in a game in France, it wasn't an official tournament. I called a timeout and the referee comes and says "you can't talk to the players". I was shocked: "Why? Why can't I talk to my players". And he said: "because you're not the coach". In disbelief, the delegate rose up and showed the file... He politely apologized. When I was in Picadero I received criticism and attacks. I recall when we played the final of the Second Division, one delegate of another team called me because she heard I had spent the night in prison after that game because many things happened and it was completely untrue... the only true thing was that the referee, who was excluded shortly after, did some wrong calls... He was drunk.

Also, once, a coach -man- of a women team came and said me very unrespectfully: "If you have managed to be the National Coach, I can become whatever I want". Things like this, I lived several times.

- 11. You were a pioneer, a trendsetter. Amaya Valdemoro, first spanish woman ever to enter the Hall of Fame in the summer of 2023 had words of recognition to you. And now we have the first women ever as president of the Spanish Basketball Federation: Elisa Aguilar. You definitively contributed to pave the way..**

Its great to give chances to women well prepared... I had to learn everything by myself. It's true that my husband helped but he started the ACB and was tired when I tied to ask him some things and always told me: "Maria, you know better, trust yourself". So I had to figure out, and took the advantage to talk with a legendary master like Ranko Zeravica, since I had a great relationship with his wife. I could ask him many things and develop tactics and plays.

My husband is my husband, but basketball has been my life. Even today we have meetings with players of my time when we were 14 or 15... I always carry basketball inside me, in my family they always told me it was amazing: you wake up at 7 am in winter with 14 years old to go to practice... you really have to like it.

I enjoyed much better my time as player, when I was 14, my husband coached us already, I woke up at 7 am, we practiced outdoor in winter... My sister, who was taller and I wanted her to come always, she asked me "how's the weather" and I lied to hear to see if she would come: "Its sunny"... But she always said "ill go next day".

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

There are many... But I will go for this one: the first team I coached, many players came and said me that I thought them many things for their lives and that I contributed to changed their lives.... It's truly emotional despite the passing of the years

