

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Natália Hejková (SVK)

Setting the Scene:

1. Help us set the scene and describe how you first came to the sport of basketball: how and why did you first pick up a ball, and what was it like? Who did you play with in those early years (and was that a unique scenario)? Who were your early basketball influences and/or role models?

It's very interesting because I can even remember the day, but not the year. It was in November. I'm from Slovakia and those days all the people go to the cemeteries to honor and remember departed family members. When I was a kid, we had a family reunion in the small village where my grandparents cemetery is located, grand-grandparents and so on... We were like 15 people and a very small house. I was the youngest of all the cousins. Suddenly all of them disappeared into one room where there was a very small radio with a tiny television screen, you know, it was the 50's or 60's. They were watching something: it was basketball! And it was the first time I heard about it and watched it for the first time. I was 7 or 8 years old. I didn't find it, but the passion of my cousins for the game was what made me think that it could be really interesting.

I started to play much later, I tried many other sports: diving, swimming, ballet, gymnastics, track and field... everything that was possible. And when I was 14 years old, I started to play basketball. A school friend invited me to a practice. I said "Ok, let's go". I found out it was the best ball game for me. And since then, my passion for basketball has never waned. I never gave up and I'm still here. More than 60 years later. It's so interesting, I love it.

2. (Environment) We're curious to learn what basketball was like at that time in Zilina, and whether you think it was representative of the larger environment in Czechoslovakia—or whether you think it was more unique (and why). What was the basketball structure that you first encountered? Was there a hoop in your neighborhood? Was basketball played at your school? Was there a club structure you could engage with? When did you first get involved with a 'club'? What did that mean to you at the time?

The first team I played for was in my hometown. The University had a club and there was a pyramid structure for the young kids to seniors. There was a women's team, but basketball was mainly considered a men's sport. I played for the U14, we had a really great coach and for the first moment, I never missed any practice and I lived many great stories. In the first game, we lost 86-6 and I didn't give up because I made the 6 points! I was so proud of myself.

3. **(Society) Reflecting on basketball's impact in the region, can you describe the role it played when you were growing up? Was it part of the larger culture or media atmosphere at the time—and how did the success of the Czechoslovakian national women's team at FIBA World Cups and EuroBasket play a role, if at all? How did basketball afford you different opportunities than earlier generations—and how did that imprint within you the desire to create change?**

Basketball was popular and successful. Men teams lived a very successful era from the 60's, the Olympics, the European championship, a silver medal... At the same time, I think the women team was between the 3-4-5 best teams in Europe, sometimes with medals, but never lower than a 5th place. It was really high level and popular. Growing up I always dreamed of being part of that success story. My role model was Milena Jindrova, one of the best point guards in Europe. Watching her play felt like a dream to me; I aspired to be her teammate. 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.

4. **World War II ended some years before you were born, and there was a new political scenario in Eastern Europe... Was it something you noticed or was relevant during your childhood? At any point, did basketball serve as a means of mental escape from difficult situations?**

I recall my childhood was pure happiness for me. I don't have bad memories. Certainly the worst part of it was for my parents. They gave to me and my sister everything, they cared about us. We didn't feel anything was bad. Sports was a priority for me, I loved it. Escape? Not at that time, maybe later. Basketball was really good to travel and go beyond the Iron Curtain. For example, I travelled for the first time when I was 18 to Budapest. Sports provided a means of travel and that's why many sportsmen were very happy even though it could happen once per year, not like today where you travel without borders. It was much difficult and even sometimes the teammates didn't want to travel.

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

Basketball was great for me, it gave me a lot, many friends from different countries, cultures and races. I visited many countries, got to know different people, cultures and it was very beneficial for me.

Diving Deeper

6. **You studied Law at the University. Was it something usual for a woman at that time that was also playing basketball? Why did you decided to do it?**

For my parents, who belonged to a different generation and had a different mindset, sports were 2nd priority and education the 1st: "Sports is not a job to feed you, you have to have a normal education and then you do sports". Gradual changes began to take place in the country. Knowing that I had to go to University, I started to consider what kind of University or which one I should attend in order to be able to play basketball. My father was an engineer for road construction and his dream was that his daughter would follow his path, but It was impossible. You had to attend the classes, you couldn't take the book and study during practices or while travelling, and Law University gave this opportunity. I travelled with the books. So that's why I ultimately decided to study law. However in my club in Prague it was something normal because my teammates were also at University. We were amateurs, you couldn't make a living of basketball. Now things are different. For example, in my team I only have one player at the University.

7. **Looking back and comparing the situation to nowadays, do you think its harmful for the players? Do you think that getting an education, a degree, could help them?**

I think if you study, it always helps. You have to have discipline: time for basketball, time for education, not sleep all day, organize yourself... Discipline is good. It helps you to think wide. If a player comes to me and explains me that she's coming a little bit late because of studies, I never say no. I even push her. You never know what future holds; you might suffer a very bad injury and you

have to quit playing and if you have something behind, it's good. And also, I think it's good, and I love, when the players don't have only a ball in the brain. Studies help for sure.

- 8. Thinking back on your career, what is the importance of having either a role model or someone who has played or coached at the highest level serve as a point of reference? How did they transfer their accrued knowledge to you as a fledgling coach? What made you most passionate to pursue a career coaching?**

It's a very interesting question. I was a law student, I never thought I would become a coach... so the only experience I had was my player experience. I had some role models or liked this or that about different coaches, and 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". When I started to coach, I met my first coach and he was laughing: "The goat is the gardener". You know, 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.

- 9. You were a fast learner but also a self-made coach, correct? You did it your way.**

I did it my way, I was a woman and I studied books because I didn't have a sports education. I started to read but back then it wasn't like now where you can find everything anywhere in the internet, you had to buy books, educate yourself... I only had my experience as a player.

- 10. When you look back, you see yourself more as a player or as a coach?**

My playing career was shorter than as a coach, but I have many great memories. And it was nice to just have to play and no other responsibilities. Overall, I had great time as player and we even won championships. As a coach, I have proudest memories. I'm very proud of my players, the job we made, the titles we won like Euroleague but also about every game we win. It gives you euphoria because you work in this game for these feelings, these endorphins!

- 11. What do you consider to be the most significant chapter/phase of your career, and in your mind, what makes it important? What were the global events that most influenced it? In what ways do you**

think your role as a highly successful female coach impacted the development of basketball in Slovakia, Czech Republic (where you currently coach), Europe, and more globally?

Its difficult to say because I have to speak about me. In Czechoslovakia there are two parts: when I was in Ružomberok for 15 years and then, Prague. In Ružomberok we built a great basketball team and we started to be something good in Europe. We came from second division to win a Euroleague title in 15 years. Impact was great, big. Other teams could see that if you work hard and you have good people around, you can do it. And I showed a woman could do it. It was disappointing to see that there weren't many women as coach in Europe and I showed we could do it.

Look, when I started coaching, I had to coach my teammates, build a team... we had to fire one player who was very smart laughing in the bench. To me, to be an authority it was hard, but I felt very supported. Players knew that I did what I had to do. One single player can destroy the atmosphere of a team. Every year I wanted to upgrade the team. Even in Moscow I had 8 WNBA players. But winning a championship is not that easy, you can't make miracles in three days. You have to build a solid foundation.

- 12. What are the most important things that you've achieved, learned, or observed thanks to basketball? In other words, in what ways was basketball a tool for you throughout your career—and since?**

My character is that I never regret what I did in my previous years. Basketball brought me a lot; it gave me so much. I was lucky, not everybody is like me. When I started to coach, I was alone, and it wasn't easy in the time. If I were married, I couldn't imagine that there would be a man waiting for me at home with the kids. My character is that I didn't wanted this. Many players have kids and wait to coach until the kids are older or they coach the teams where their kids play.

- 13. It's very interesting thought and somehow aligned with what Maria Planas and Jacky Chazalon said in previous interviews. Long story short, basketball was indeed a way to express themselves and become the woman they wanted to be.**

Listen, I could have married later, but (laughs) who wants a woman that strong and successful? Men don't like it. I wasn't married to basketball, but it happened this way.

Going Global

14. In your experience, how did you learn from international colleagues through basketball or sport more broadly—and what do you think you might have relayed to them in turn?

I must say that I don't differentiate between men and women coaches. One interesting thing is this mentoring program we have in FIBA for three years now. Every year I have two coaches and they're talking with me all the season asking all type of questions. Every year we have new groups and it's a great program: assistant coaches, head coaches... We stay in contact, it's a way to teach and learn from many others.

15. You regularly coach teams with rosters composed from around the world; how do you foster a sense of team chemistry and unity so that your diverse players can bridge the differences in their backgrounds and basketball cultures and form a cohesive unit? How do you motivate or inspire them, when they come from such different backgrounds/reference points? How have you observed them sharing different aspects of their home basketball cultures/games in ways that strengthen individual teammates or the unit as a whole? In past interviews, Maty Mbengue explained us that she had to overcome a very difficult barrier in her first years in the University.

It's not a secret, for me it's interesting to talk with my players, get to know them on the court but also off the court. For example, I have an Australian player for the first time in Prague, I visited her before to the WNBA so she could be more comfortable knowing I knew the history of her country, famous players, etc. I always try to make them comfortable and happy. Also, I ask the players to welcome the new ones, maybe we all go for a walk around Prague and we talk. I try to explain things and make them feel safe. Since I like to travel and read. Sometimes I even surprise the players knowing more things about their countries than they know. This makes them feel safe and they think: "She knows a lot about us, she is our friend".

Change Over Time: basketball, gender and society

16. What are the most significant ways the game has changed/how the game is played changed in Slovakia and/or Czech Republic, Europe, more globally, and what do you attribute those changes to?

If I compare the basketball I played to the one it's played today, we're talking about two different sports. Totally. Before there was no contact. Now our sport is very physical so if you're not a

powerful athlete, you have no chance. It's one thing that men basketball has brought to women basketball. But also, you need more than the physical part, you have to be great with skills, thinking, tactics...

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

There is a big difference between men and woman. We can't fly or dunk that easy. Hopefully the level of aggressivity and physicality doesn't go further, or we will be talking about a different sport. We have still room to improve. For sure. And developing men's basketball also helps women basketball. They take us in their tail. If they can grow, we will also. It's important that we can still grow with the quality of our basketball because this way we will also have more fans attending the games cheering and living the full experience. This way it will become more popular. We have to bring basketball to the people.

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

Due to my character, but not everyone is the same, I don't feel I'm less than anyone, I don't care if someone wears pants or skirts. I don't want to fight men. The important thing it's what is inside the brains. But not everyone thinks the same.

- 19. Did you experience any sexism situation during your longtime career? Talking with María Planas, the spanish legendary coach, she said that even during one game the official didn't knew she was the coach...**

In the beginning it was normal, I was alone. Only one other woman was coach in Europe. So, there were situations like the other coaches shaking hands with my assistants, my manager... because they didn't know me, but I didn't care. Once even a coach tapped my head and then we met in the Euroleague final and then he knew me. During my career I lived hard situations, one for example, that

if it happened today, the coach would be fired 5 minutes later. There was a coach in a youth team of Slovakia that entered the locker and he even touched the players. One of them decided to quit after talking with her parents. There was a commission of experts evaluating this situation and some giggled. I told them they should imagine that those girls were their daughters. You know, you see the coach as a teacher, as a model. This was 20 or 25 years ago...

20. During your time in Spartak, how was your relationship with Shabtai von Kalmanovich? He was a very strong character.

When I think about him, I'm happy. He was a very big personality with big heart and for basketball. But when he was sitting in the bench, he lost his way. He was jumping and yelling the referees, players, everybody. But five minutes after the game, everything was ok.

21. Looking back, do you have any regret?

I don't think so, usually the next day or the next hours I think what I could have done differently but generally I don't regret. Just for short period. But as Edith Piaf sang, I don't regret anything, *Non, je ne regrette rien*.

22. Thinking more broadly on the role of Basketball in society: how would you reflect on the role that Basketball can play in creating identities in communities/regions? Over the *long durée* of your career, how have you seen different 'basketball' identities manifest themselves? What did it mean to you to see different basketball cultures and identities?

Basketball is unbelievable, I love football, it's the more popular sport in the world, but basketball is the n°2. Every year I feel its growing in popularity and I feel blessed to contribute.

23. You're a member of the FIBA Hall of Fame, class of 2019. What does it mean to you after such an amazing career and contributing so much and in so many different ways to the development of basketball?

I got a call from FIBA and I was really surprised. I'm really proud. I come from a small country of 5 million people; basketball isn't the n°1 in the country. It was unbelievable. And even more to go to Beijing and celebrate it.