

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Uljana Semjonova (LAT)

Oral History Interview Questions

Setting the Scene:

1. **(Circumstances) Help us set the scene and describe how you first came to the sport of basketball: how and why did you first pick up a ball, and what was it like? Who did you play with in those early years?**

I must say I didn't know anything about basketball, I was practicing handball, track and field, athletics, I was never acquainted to basketball. My first encounter with basketball was when I was 13 years old, I was already rather tall and there was a special program during Soviet-Latvian times where the, let's say, central basketball authorities searched for tall children. I lived far away in a countryside right next to the Lithuanian border. And when somebody heard that there was a very tall girl, a delegation came to where I lived.

2. **In a documentary about your life, the person who 'discovered' you in the village recalls the first time he saw you: you were carrying buckets of water to your house and he was impressed by your physical condition. How were those early days with your family and were you always the 'chosen' one to do physical activities?**

We were six kids in the family, I was the most gifted physically, the strongest and tallest, even more than my parents, so from the early days on I did the most demanding duties. I have great memories of school times, family times, but we lived in a humble house in the countryside, we had to walk to the school and come back to work because we needed to eat. That's why I didn't play or practice basketball before until coach Strupovich (?), who was the head coach of the junior or cadet Latvian National Team, came to meet me.

3. **Probing a little further here about the environment in which you engaged with basketball. What was the basketball structure that you first encountered?**

There is a funny story with my first encounter with basketball. When the delegation came, they took me immediately with them to Riga. We went to a basketball hall where a game was taking place and I sat down next to the coach, who started to explain everything to me. It was a huge surprise for me because I didn't understand what those 10 girls were doing there with only one ball, and why two men were somehow trying to put into trouble those 10 girls.

But slowly, everyone started to explain the rules to me, the purpose of the game and of the referees on the court, etc. So, in the end, there was a lot of help for me.

4. Your adaptation process was then amazingly quick. Was it love at first sight? How was that process and how tough was it for you?

The next day, I was taken to a training facility, and everyone saw that I was really physically well-gifted thanks to the sports I practiced prior to basketball. So, we started to practice some exercises: first, finger rolls, then stepping away from the basket. The main problem was to understand the feel for the ball and the feel for the shot, because thanks to my physicality, I was already there at a very decent level. I realized quickly that I liked basketball, and I understood the game. So, I practiced hard putting a big effort in it and that is why there was a rapid development of my abilities on the basketball court.

5. In this adaptation process, you were suddenly discovered and immediately taken away from home to start an adventure to the unknown world of basketball. Can you elaborate on your personal feelings and how you faced such a significant challenge trying to understand a new sport and a new life far away from home after so many years surrounded by your family in a safe or known environment?

When I was taken to Riga, it was very tough for me to stay in this boarding school. It was a difficult decision because 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, so there were some people who were put there to take care of me. They 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.

5. That tough beginning must have marked your life.

Nowadays, when a young person is invited to play basketball in the capital city, he is very happy and runs to the capital. 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 cinema and to the circus. They were decisive actors who made me change my mind and basically decide upon taking on basketball. In the team, everything was planned, not just the day or the week, but months ahead. During the week, I went to school and practiced, then we played games during the weekend and also tournaments. We practiced a lot.

6. After this tough adaptation process, you started to show your skills at practice, you started to play, to gain minutes and to prove you could belong in this new family. How did you feel being part of a basketball structure, part of a group?

At the time, yes, it was a hard process. When I entered the TTT Riga team, I was only 15, but I understood that I had to work hard, even more and harder than my teammates, because they were very talented and more experienced than me. So, I was determined to work hard and to be ready and be at the level of the others. I studied what other players did, I analyzed it at home, and I would do it the next morning at practice. I wanted to show that I could do it, to prove it. I wanted to show the results, because I grew up in Zgara, it was harder for me. I didn't have any shortcomings, and I had to train harder also because prior to me, there was a legendary duo of centers at TTT Riga, who were also on the USSR national team, who took part in world championships...

7. Particularly thinking about the genesis of your own career, when you first got involved with TTT Riga, was it a 'women's basketball club' rather than a basketball club with men's and women's teams? Was there a big difference back then between men and women basketball?

About the comparison to men's basketball, at the time, of course, there was a huge difference in terms of not only pure physicality, but also in the popularity itself, because men's basketball was much, much, much popular here. There was a difference in the approach of the people to men's and women's basketball. Of course, with Riga having won these three Euroleague crowns... they sometimes made the comparison, but it wasn't actually comparable. That TTT women's team was special.

Also, from a technical perspective, of course, there was a difference like for example in the jump shots. Women didn't take jump shots until mid-80s, when men had already been doing it for a while.

8. How did this basketball structure work, and did you get any compensation or help from the Government?

TTT is exclusively a women's basketball team and in the Soviet times, this team was organized specifically. Back then, 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.

The money was very little until you could win some European Cups or play in the Soviet Union squad. Then, of course, bigger amounts of money came from Moscow.

9. As your playing career developed and you enjoyed success at a national level with TTT and with the Soviet team, what did you learn from your teammates and coaches? What were you able to take from your experiences at club level with TTT to the international level? One name that comes to mind is Skaidrite SmildzinaBudovska in particular.

Yes, of course, Skaidrite. She came in when she was already a big star in the Soviet Union, and we were teammates both in TTT Riga and the Soviet national squad. She helped me, but the bigger help came from the coaches. There was huge competition within the team to try to prove oneself to everyone, so at times there were some tense situations, but even up to today we have kept a good relationship. There is a funny story. When I was 15 or 16 years old, Skaidrite was already a star in the national team as starting center and coach Lidiya Alekseyeva made her bring me to practices to Moscow... I didn't want to go, but the coach threatened her: "If you don't bring Uljana, you will not be in the final roster of the national team." I started slowly there, step by step, gaining respect, and from then on, I was on the team the following 18 years.

10. Looking in greater detail at the social and political context of your times: you grew up in the Soviet Union and represented that nation throughout your international career. How do you see your identity as a Soviet and Latvian athlete? Knowing you feel and identify as Latvian, was it a big deal to represent the USSR? Would you have preferred to represent your country instead?

At the time, there were players from Ukraine or Lithuania on the national team, and I was very proud to be Latvian. I can't describe how proud and happy I was whenever coming back to Riga with a medal or a trophy. I was proud to represent the Latvian republic on the national team of the USSR; it was always a very emotional moment for me. I remember coming down the plane... I felt so proud. After the first Olympic Games in 1976, I recall coming to Riga after a stop in Moscow, and there was a huge celebration in my country.

Look, they've asked me several times if I would have liked to live in another country and I always say the same: no, the best place for me is Latvia. The one thing that I would change in my career would be to have been born some years later so I could have played some games with the national team of Latvia after the independence in 1991.

11. You've won so many games, so many titles, trophies, cups, competitions, that we would need three days to list them all. You never lost a game with the national team. It would have been understandable or logical to slow down the pace after so much success, but you didn't. How did you manage to find the motivation to keep on playing and winning? How did you maintain your drive?

I never stepped onto a court reflecting on what I had achieved in the past, what medal or cup I had won. I lived in the moment, just focusing on the present and I did my best to win every single game I played. That was my mindset.

12. You were a winner, determined to prove yourself at every game. It may sound easy, but it does require an amazing commitment and a tough mentality.

One memory that can resume this mentality is the final of the World Cup in Brazil, when we faced the USA. I spoke with my teammates from Almaty and we said that we could go back to Almaty or Riga if we lost that game. For many years and in a lot of tournaments, we faced the USA in the finals. I remember that one time when, before the final, I took the elevator in the hotel and by mistake I went to the floor where the American players were staying. I saw notes everywhere, on each door, with messages like "Let's win the gold", "We're the best", "Let's win tomorrow", ... When I saw that, I was a little bit worried, but at the same time, it was a huge source of motivation for us! We didn't want to lose.

13. You were the first non-American woman to be enshrined in the Basketball Hall of Fame, then in the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, and also in the FIBA Hall of Fame. What do all these recognitions mean to you?

Before being elected, I thought the best recognition ever was to win the Olympics. Suddenly, on May 10th 1993, I received the documents to be part of the Hall of Fame and I couldn't believe it, because I thought there were only men. They explained everything about it, the legends, the recognition, what it meant, and I couldn't feel any happier. I was so proud of this. It was like winning a gold medal. Later, I was inducted to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville (USA) in 1999, to which only two European women belonged: Lydia Alekseeva, from Russia, and myself.

Regarding the FIBA Hall of Fame, it was the realization of my greatest dream, I couldn't believe it.

15. Looking back to your career, what has basketball meant to you in your life? What have you been able to accomplish thanks to it? Travel, make friendships...

I'm grateful to basketball, because it gave me a life that isn't given to everybody. I am very fortunate. Of course, traveling and making friends all around the globe is one thing that I could do thanks to basketball, but it also gave me huge self-discipline, something that has helped me throughout life... My structured approach to basketball and sports was very important: always be in a shape, know your regime, follow it, be self-disciplined...

16. Speaking about travelling. The first time you left to play abroad, it was when, towards the end of your career, you signed or were allowed to sign with Getafe (Spain). Was it a shocking experience for you and

how did you approach it from the sports and cultural perspectives? We used the wording “were allowed” because you had to give a big compensation to the URSS, correct?

Yes, a big part of my salary was already collected by Moscow. I could only receive 400\$ and I had to go to the USSR embassy in Madrid every month. It was just a very small part of the contract. But it was that way. The cultural experience and everything around were really emotional because of how I really felt. 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 loved the language, the culture, and everything related to Spain, contrary to what the average American players did. 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.

17. Reflecting on those final years of your career, when you faced difficult problems with your ankle, do you ever think of what could have happened if you had been healthier? In Getafe, you were just one game short of becoming champion...

The answer is very simple: if my ankle had been 100% ready a little bit earlier, I would have been able to play, have some extra days off, rest, and be ready to win the championship. I will never forget when we won that silver medal: all my teammates in Getafe knelt in front of me and they all told me that they would have never dreamed of achieving something this big. They thanked me for winning that silver medal that they would remember forever. Even the mayor of Getafe wanted to make me Honorable Citizen of Getafe. I remember the season 87-88 in Tintoretto Getafe, it was so amazing. It was perfect, I remember it as if it was only a year ago. I have so many fond memories, because I really felt as a basketball superstar there... All the people were basically saluting me, so cheerful, so supportive. That season there was unique. I had never felt like that before in 30 or 35 years of playing. I really felt as a basketball queen. Bringing back these memories is very emotional.

18. You won everything in international competitions, but was there any other kind of challenge that you had to face or overcome, and what was the biggest lesson you learned while playing in different countries, leagues, and being exposed to different cultures? What has your international experience taught you? About friendships: French superstar Jackie Chazalon speaks highly of her memories with you.

Sure, I learned a lot from many different rivals and players, but I will always remember Jackie Chazalon, she was super colossal. Every time we faced France, I knew she was going to play awesome. She was very good.

To be honest, I had many great coaches during my career, and I learned a lot from them, from the youth teams to the senior national team. I also enjoyed watching different basketball games from different leagues on TV.

19. Was there any coach in particular, over the course of your long career, who had a great impact on you?

Raimonds Karnitis was my coach in TTT Riga, he was one of the best Latvian coaches ever, very smart and especially good at tactics. He was my coach from 1968 to 1987.

20. Reflecting on your illustrious career, winning everything and being such a legendary player, FIBA Hall of Famer, being arguably the greatest player ever, etc.: do you see yourself as a good example or a role model for young girls?

Basketball is my life, really. I said it in 1993 during the Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony. I love this game. Basketball is amazing and it is the best sport for young girls. Thanks to basketball, it's possible to travel around the world and to even study and learn different cultures.

Every year in Latvia, we celebrate the Uljana Cup, where girls aged 15-17 years, from different countries, come to play. It's truly amazing.

21. Basketball embodies many values such as hard work, camaraderie, teamwork, and discipline. Do you think it can be a useful tool and a driving force for social change?

You must never forget that basketball is a team sport, in which all individuals must play for the benefit of the group. If you do what you love, it's great. Basketball can be amazing for young girls. Discipline, hard work, etc.: it's very important.

22. Finally, what does it mean to you to be part of the FIBA Hall of Fame?

My induction to the FIBA Hall of Fame is the best thing that happened to me in terms of basketball. I will never forget this moment. Some say the biggest accomplishment is to win the Olympic Games, but I must say that for me, it isn't: it is being elected to the FIBA Hall of Fame. It was the greatest moment of my life. I am there with the best players of the world to have ever played the game of basketball.