

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: Shin-Ja Park (KOR)

Oral History Interview Questions

Setting the Scene from the Baseline

1. Shin-Ja, thank you for your time today as a member of the FIBA Family as we undertake this interview, part of our project to celebrate the relationship between Women and basketball. Let us start at the beginning : how did you first come to basketball? What was your gateway experience? Can you recall when you first picked up a ball? Who were your peers and role models at this stage?
I was born in 1941, and the Korean War started in 1950. It was a very difficult period for everybody. I was too young to do anything else but to follow my parents' lead and thanks to their support, I survived. The first time I picked up a ball was in 1953, the year I started middle school. That was the first time I saw someone playing basketball and let me say I then didn't know how this sport was called! Youngsters were taking some shots and then they went to class. That was the first time I picked up a ball and took a shot. That feeling has stayed in my mind until today!
It was so special that whenever I saw a ball while walking around the village, even if it was in someone else's yard, I picked it up and shot. I liked that feeling so much that I had to take it, I loved the sound of the ball swooshing through the net. It was wonderland for me! And you know what : it still is the case today!
2. Probing a little further here about the environment in which you engaged with basketball. What was the basketball structure that you first encountered? Was there a hoop/court in your neighborhood? Was basketball played at your school? Was there a club structure you could engage with?
I think there was a basketball team in my school, but due to the Korean War there was nothing much done. There was no gym, it was just a dirty ground pitch with water here and there, we tried to draw some lines with some powder and create a basketball court. So, it was more a court to dribble around and shoot.
Later, I was chosen to play basketball, and I remember running out of class as it ended to go to the court and play. At the beginning, it was just a lot of running. Not just for me, for all my classmates. I was a survivor, and I kept running and running. These are my first memories with basketball.

3. **You spoke briefly about the Korean War. For sure, you lived awful situations, these were very hard times for yourself and your family. How big was that toll on your life and did it mark you despite being so young?**

The memories remain, even today. We lived in the capital city, Seoul, in the center of the country, and we had to leave, we had to move. My whole family walked away with a little bundle, a little carrier, pushing it around, and the day before crossing the Han River, the bridge exploded. Many people died. My father saw a small boat, he went into the river, removed the bundles and put me in the boat with my mother, other family members and other families and we crossed over, staying hidden in the mountains for a couple of nights. We then had to walk until we found a train and we jumped in. It was a freight train. Maybe you've seen a war picture, with packed train cars, with a lot of persons, some of them even on top of the train. I recall the "too-too" of the train horn and people stopping and leaving, others going to pick up some vegetables and fruits to cook. I just watched, I was only 9 years old. One thing I still don't like are green tomatoes. I tried back then, it had an awful taste and it still does!

My memories of the Korean War are my parents trying to do everything they could so we would survive and somehow, we did. I think I must have very good genetics from my parents and ancestors.

4. **Focusing on the genesis of your own career, when did you first get involved with organized basketball? Was basketball a way to escape from problems and tough moments?**

I don't think that way much. When I started playing basketball, my duty in the school was studying because even in my time, I was lucky to be sent to school and I passed the examination. Then, during the war time, I didn't go from third grade on during three years. I did nothing, no studying, but I guess it was the same for everybody. So, when I had to go into middle school, seventh grade, I had to have at least a written test. I don't know how I managed to pass it successfully, but when my number was posted, I was extremely happy to be able to go back to school.

And there were three very good women in the middle school in Seoul city at that time kept up and all three teams had basketball team. When I think of it now, I realize how important it was because thanks to this, students started to play. And then the principals of two schools, including mine, were female principals, which was very unusual.

Not many girls went to school. In the countryside, the girls would often sacrifice themselves, just working to send elder or younger brothers to school. Many of the mothers couldn't read and were

not sent to school before my time. So, I was lucky enough not to do anything during three years of war, and after that, I could go to school and then compete with other smart students or schools. I must also highlight that the principal of my school was very enthusiastic on sporting activities, so I experienced a great environment. I must say that I was very lucky, I still firmly believe so.

5. How was your approach and first memories playing organized basketball? You soon started to shine and draw attention.

Again, I was very lucky. Before joining Commercial Bank Team six years later, there was a very important period. When I was in ninth grade, somehow, our school arranged to participate in a tournament in Hong Kong, which was very unusual. Nobody ever flew by airplane to anywhere outside of Korea. I mean, not only me, but many of the people within our group had never boarded on an airplane.. It was a propeller airplane. This tournament in Hong Kong was not a school competition, but a club team tournament. So, there were 20-, 30-, or 16-year-old players all involved in the club activities. We played seven games. Luckily, we won all of them. That made our president so happy. Lee Seung-man, the first president of the Republic of Korea, invited our school team to his place, which was called the Blue House. He cheered us and gave a big applause. Then the next year, we went to the Philippines, and we beat all our opponents. I was so lucky. The team that I played on, wherever we went, beat everybody. Especially in 1961, when we went to Japan, playing nine games against Japanese teams, and we beat every single one of them. So, we won all the tournaments, which was very important in 1961 because Korea had been under 36 years of Japanese government until the independency in 1945. From then on, the Republic of Korea never managed to beat Japan. Japan taught us many things, and we learned, but we could never beat Japan in any sports. Then, at one point in basketball, we did that, and that made the whole of Korea boom. Never had a Korean women's team done anything like that. So, I think it marked the beginning of my lucky life.

6. You then played a big part in this cultural change in your country. Somehow, basketball became a powerful tool to impact young kids and fans.

Yes, after that, there were more games in Japan, and knowing that Korea had a good team, it also encouraged another president, Park, to host the Park Jung-Hee's Cup tournament in Korea. So, we had Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia or other countries come, and we showed to Korean people, who saw it with their own eyes, how a Korean women's team could succeed in other

international tournaments. In this sense, if you want to blossom sports in a country creating a boom, the recipe is easy: win! 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. So, in my case, I think I was very lucky to win so often.

7. How did you feel, and can you share some memories and moments you could experience thanks to basketball?

Sure, that brought me the opportunity to see other players, to visit other countries. And then finally, the Secretary General of FIBA Jones suddenly invited the Korean team, out of the blue because one of the teams couldn't come, to the Lima-Peru World Championship in 1964. The Korean team went there. We had tied with Czechoslovakia, the game was very exciting, one referee even fainted because of Lima's altitude. We lost that game and the following one against Yugoslavia. So, we had to go to Iquitos, which was a jungle up north of Lima somewhere. There, we defeated five teams in the classification round to finish 8th. I was lucky, because I was designated as one of the best five players of the tournament.

Next was Czechoslovakia in 1967, in Prague. That's where we beat everybody: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and all those teams. We only lost to the Soviet Union. We took second place in that World Cup and I was named MVP of the event, which was another great honor for me. I'm telling you, as a basketball player, I was just extremely lucky.

8. You then joined Commercial Bank team. What was the origin of your commitment to that club and how did you combine playing basketball with the team and working in the bank?

I was in Commercial Bank from 1959 on after high school. I worked part-time for Commercial Bank, but I kept going to school, college, graduate school, I continued my studies. One thing I must tell you is that during my time, I strongly believed in amateurism. I'm old-fashioned. The only thing I got money from was my part-time salary at the bank, but there was no big money going from one team to another, there wasn't such a situation. But because we all got a salary from the bank, I didn't get any more than my teammates. We called ourselves semi-professional because we got money and played basketball.

So, during that period, there was this Summer Universiade in Tokyo in 1967, the same year we finished 2nd at the World Cup. As I was still a student, I went to play. For some reason, only 14 teams participated in the competition in Japan and we won the gold medal. Silver medal in Prague and gold in Tokyo the same year! I then retired on November 2nd with a retirement ceremony!

9. Thinking a little further here about the society in which you grew up and your initial contact with the game in Korea: what does basketball mean to Korea and Koreans?

I do not know that really, but during the Japanese period, in the 1920s, , not long before my birth, the Japanese spread basketball at the YMCA. So, there were many male players playing basketball, but women were not supposed to play basketball. They believed that even riding a bicycle would prevent them from carrying babies. That's the kind of belief that they had in Korea at that time. So, it was not really popular. But 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.

I think that was the beginning of all these sports in Korea in general, like figure skating or volleyball, in which we are doing very well now. Back in my days, nobody played any of them, but I did because I liked basketball.

10. How tough was it for you, as a woman and as a trendsetter, to lead this cultural change in a somewhat 'traditional' society, where the male figure was prominent?

I guess I was probably very stubborn, or I simply didn't care. I just did it and my parents didn't say anything. At the beginning, they tried to stop me because I was very skinny and I was weak, I had never gained much weight since my birth. But thanks to basketball, I became a little stronger. My parents didn't mind that their "weak" girl was getting tougher. I was very shy and, as said, maybe a bit stubborn: I just did it and my parents supported me, and it turned out fine.

11. Did you at any point suffer any kind of gender discrimination in this quite traditional Korean society?

No, even though our country was like that. Men's basketball didn't do well in international competitions, so all Koreans cheered for women's basketball. I never said "we are better than you". I

didn't pay much attention to that. Even today, I feel like the question about genders is up to each individual. Expect people to treat you the same way you treat them. If there is something you don't like, ignore it. That's my attitude.

12. Being stubborn, as you say, how was your adaptation to the teams you played on, especially with the national team, with players from all over the country, with different cultural heritage, identities and social status?

I was almost the oldest one! At high school, we had a senior class, and I was once the youngest one, but they graduated and eventually I was getting more experience. I must say I always did what my coaches asked from me. I remember them telling us to make 10 free throws before going home, and I would intentionally miss one of the last shots so I could stay longer and practice more! Can you imagine someone only 13, 14 or 15 years old thinking that way? I did that! Since the last one to finish was dishonored, I always made sure to finish before the last one or two. But this way I could spend more time practicing! I loved practicing... That sound, that feeling of the ball going through the net, it was just wonderland to me. So, I kept doing that, I tried to make others feel like me, but I have never seen a teammate feel and think like me. That's the way I am, I cannot help it!

Women, Basketball and Korea

13. You played many international competitions between high school, the national team and Commercial Bank team. World Cups, Olympics, you achieved things never done before in your early days as a basketball player. How did you feel when coming back home from an amazing tournament and even being chosen MVP of it?

That is a good question, but it is, to me, very difficult to answer. I don't like to be exposed to the public too much. I mean, if it has to be done, I will do it. If other can do it, I will encourage them to do so. But if my presence is required, I will of course do it. I just never really liked that. However, I am still happy and thankful to do this interview.

Some people want to be famous and really enjoy that... I don't. For a while in Korea, I couldn't go anywhere without everybody pointing at me, and I didn't like that at all. When I was very little, at kindergarten, first grader period, I was so shy my mother was embarrassed because I wouldn't even do anything in the classroom. I would just sit and not do anything. When a teacher would come and make my hands clap, I would do it while she was there.. But as soon as the teacher would walk away, I would put my hands down. My mother used to look through the class window, and she would be very embarrassed by my behaviour. Later, I became a very well-known athlete. My mother died early, but at least she had a chance to see me play.

- 14. It looks like you became another person thanks to basketball, you developed another personality on the court, less shy. In this sense, basketball must have been of great help.**

Yes, probably, but not only.. We all have a gift, a talent. That's what I believe.

- 15. You don't like to draw attention, but can you highlight the best moment of your amazing and long career? Maybe the MVP award at the World Cup?**

Yes, it was. I told you back in my days, people believed that a woman over 21 was too old to get married. It was a sort of myth amongst Koreans. In 1967, I was already 26 or 27, I guess. I was getting older, and I didn't mind just disappearing somewhere. So, I thought it was a good time to retire. I think I did it at the right time, because right after that I went to Springfield College, where basketball was invented, a place I had dreamt of visiting when I first learned about basketball. I'm that type of person. Once I get something in my head, I want to do it. That is how I functioned all my life. I am very happy that I did.

- 16. Again, apologies for drawing so much attention on you, but you had a marvelous career, you achieved incredible things on and off court. Do you see yourself as a model young generations can look up to? Do you have any story to share, in particular with a young you might have encountered?**

If I see someone practicing or shooting with a wrong hand motion, I will speak up and go tell that person.. I will then show how to hold the ball correctly or what to do. I still have that desire and ambition. At the same time, I am just happy to stay away from the game and to mind my own

business. I reached a peak in my career and since then, I have simply been trying to slow down and get less involved.

Basketball, gender and society

- 17. You have said several times that basketball was your life. How has basketball helped you? What can basketball do for Women and Girls in society? What advice would you give to younger generations through the game of basketball?**

It's hard to advise you on what to say to young people. Let me tell you something. Although I did what I liked, sometimes I overthought too much. At one point in my life, I thought that faking was gaining importance in basketball and if I could fake better than the others, I would be a better player. I didn't like this feeling, so I asked for some advice. I knew a clergyman and asked him about these worries and how guilty I was feeling about faking. What he said comforted me 100 percent. His answer was: "Shin-Ja, don't worry about the faking. There are two referees watching you. If you are not doing it right, they will call a foul on you, and after five fouls you will be out. So, with the two referees watching, fake as much as you can". That was his answer, and that solved my whole problem. So, I started to think, okay, it's all right, then I can use fakes. He did say that it was okay with the referees watching me, that it was fine.

My mind was much freer after that. . I actually don't have any good advice for the younger generations.

- 18. Basketball is a sport that is all about values: team effort, giving your best, being a good teammate, everybody working with a common goal, trying to win games, etc. In what way have these values helped you outside of basketball and do you think basketball can be a powerful tool to drive change in society?**

I don't know. I just did what I liked. I hope everybody can do what they like and be happy with it. You know, I feel that I just did what I liked. Even today, I do what I like. It's a difficult question. When I'm hungry, I eat. When I want to go to bed, even at midday or at six o'clock, I simply go to bed, and I

wake up at two or three in the morning. If I wish to practice my putting, then I take out my little putter and I practice. I mean, I'm very free and I want to be happy, which is the case right now. I think that if you can do what you really like, you will be happy. I'm sorry that I don't have a good answer for you.

19. During your long career, you had many coaches and mentors to learn from. Can you talk about your relationship with them and the impact they had on you?

I was very lucky to have good coaches. I tried to become a coach once, but I was not a good one. I don't have the required patience and I find it hard to teach to somebody who doesn't like basketball as much as I do. It is difficult. I always did what my coaches asked me to do. Many of my players tried to take it too easy. It was frustrating, so I gave up.

I was fortunate to have a very good coach in middle school and in high school, who was emphasizing a lot on fundamentals, sticking to basic things. If somebody tried to shoot one-handed jump shot or skyhooks, he would shout "No, no, no! You girls, your hands are not big enough to control that left and right. Just use both hands". That coach never told me "Oh, Shin-Ja, good job", except for once, at the end of my very last game in high school. I intentionally made it look like a shooting gesture, and then the player just hit my hand, so the referee called two free throws. We were one point behind. If I made both shots, we would win the championship of that year. I was there alone at the free throw line, my legs were shaking, my hands were shaking, and it was hard to breathe. I remember it was an open-air game, the trees were moving around ... and for some reason the two shots went in. That's the day my coach squeezed me and said "Good job, Shin-Ja, these free throws were very difficult. You made them!". It was the first – and only time – he said something like this. So, from then on, my philosophy in basketball has been that every free throw counts and if you make them all, you will have more chances to win.

My Commercial Bank coach was a very good coach too, well-educated in Japan, and a good national team player.. I played for him in tournaments in Peru, Czechoslovakia, all those international important games. His way of coaching was a drill, an offensive drill, with passes, cuts, dribbles, and pivots, etc. Every single play had four or five options. We had to remember and know all the situations and the different options. We even knew who was going to shoot at the corner, or who

was going to shoot at the 45 degree, and who was not going to shoot but pass instead. That was so organized, it was something totally different to the type of coaching I had before. So, I'm very lucky to have had two good coaches. Without them, I don't know how my career would have turned out. Thanks to them, I know a lot about basketball.

20. Did you learn anything from your teammates, and if yes, what? Did you ever find someone who loved basketball as much as you did?

Of course, I learned. At practice, I would always pair with the fastest player or if somebody dribbled and defended better, I would go next to her and try to learn from her, and then play against the better defender. I was always competing with the teammates that were the best in different areas. There was one left handed player who did left hook shots, layups... I always tried to imitate her. I couldn't make it like her, but still, I tried to imitate. So, my approach was "I'm not trying to compete better than you, it's not that, but I want to be as good as the best one". Of course, it's not easy, but you can do it. Don't give up. You can't give up.

If there is such a thing as reincarnation, in my previous life, I was maybe either some slave or lower, someone always obeying to a master or to a leader. Or if not, then I must have been a soldier or some fighter, ready to go to battle and to win. I must have something in my genes. Maybe my ancestors were one or the other.

21. When you were elected as a member of the FIBA Hall of Fame, how did it make you feel? What does it mean to you to be part of the FIBA Hall of Fame? Your enshrinement speech was simply amazing and truly inspiring.

It's an honor. When you are young, you don't play basketball because you want to become a Hall of Famer or be famous. You never dream about this. I just did what I liked to do and then people thought it deserved a recognition and they decided to honor me. You know, it is the greatest thing. I'm so grateful to be that lucky. So that's how I feel. I was lucky to have great teammates who helped me, good coaches who supported me, and the national support of the people of Korea. As I said in my speech, a part of me feels sorry because many of my teammates worked as hard as I did and didn't get this recognition. I wish all of them had been inducted too. That's how I feel. I really mean it. Sometimes, I feel, I wouldn't say guilty, but a little sorry for them.