

Through Her Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball

Oral History Interview transcript: LAURA PIÑA (CHI)

Sneaking Out to Train and Winning Silver for Chile in the First-Ever World Cup: The Untold Story of Laura Piña in Her Own Words – 'Basketball Was My Life'

Laura Piña, a pioneering figure in women's basketball, shines brightly in the annals of Chilean sports history as a member of Chile's national team in the first-ever FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup in 1953, held in Santiago, Chile.

Laura developed a passion for basketball at an early age. In a time when women's sports were often sidelined, she pursued her love for the game with relentless determination. Unlike many women of her era who followed societal expectations of marriage and motherhood, Piña made the bold choice to dedicate her life to basketball. Her decision to prioritize the sport over what was considered a "normal life" for women at the time was a groundbreaking act, challenging gender norms and setting an example for future generations of female athletes. She was a symbol of defiance against societal norms, proving that women could pursue professional sports at the highest level without conforming to traditional expectations.

Piña was a crucial player in the Chilean squad, which fought its way to an impressive second-place finish, securing the silver medal. Her leadership and teamwork were evident throughout the tournament. The bond between her teammates and her was described as one of deep camaraderie, a spirit that propelled them to victory in several key games.

The memories of that groundbreaking championship remained some of the most cherished of her life. In this interview, she recalls the immense joy of winning, the emotions of playing on home soil, and the unwavering support among teammates who felt like family.

Laura Piña will always be remembered as a trailblazer, a champion, and a symbol of the resilience and passion that define Chilean sports, but no one better than recap her amazing life: "I am Laura Piña, a Chilean national team player who was in a wonderful World Cup where we became world vice-champions. It was something marvelous for me. It was so great that we even cried when we became vice-champions. It was beautiful,

beautiful, beautiful. I have never forgotten that championship. South America, or rather, the 1953 World Cup. There is nothing more to say. That's it."

PART 1. Setting the scene (Environment and Society).

You played on the Chilean National Team in the very first World Cup in Chile, but let us go to the start of that amazing journey. 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?

My life as an athlete was the most beautiful thing I've experienced. I became so fond of basketball that I never missed training or a game. There were boyfriends, but I put them aside. Training and playing came first. It was such a beautiful athletic life for me because I played in 2 World Cups and 2 South American Championships. In the 1953 World Cup, we became World Vice-Champions. It was the most wonderful thing.

But how did it all begin? What sparked your interest in basketball as a child?

I started at school. There was a small basketball court, and I already liked running because I won all the races at school. I thought I might be good at running. I went to Club FAMAE (Fábricas y Maestranzas del Ejército) to try out, but they didn't pay attention to me, so I went back. Since there was a small court at school, and some girls played for the Municipality of Providencia (I was born in Providencia), that's where I started playing. Later, a girl who played for Santiago came along. She invited me to join a club, Juan Ramsey, which had an excellent coach. He taught me so much, and that's where I really learned. We played in the Third Division. I started in the Third Division because there were three levels: Third, Second, and First. After two years, I was already playing in the First Division. And that's how I continued...

Part 2. Society, women, values, tradition.

Reflecting on basketball's impact in the region, can you describe the role of women's basketball in Chile in the 1950s? Was it part of the larger culture or media atmosphere, and if not, how did basketball carve out its special niche? How was it perceived in your family?

It was tough to leave the house. My mom understood, but my dad... he didn't know anything because he wouldn't have let me go... So, I would sneak out to play. We played around one in the afternoon... And that's how it all began...

So, if your father didn't agree, does that mean that, for Chilean men in the 1940s and 50s, sports had a negative image? Was it not considered appropriate for women to play sports?

No, it wasn't that. Later on, when I started traveling to play abroad — mostly in Mendoza, Argentina, and other provinces — he saw my progress and said, "That's great." Since I was underage, they had to give me permission.

Would you say it was the coach at the club who inspired you to pursue basketball seriously?

Yes! He saw I had great potential. He taught me very well, and we trained a lot.

And the more you trained, the more you wanted to keep playing, right?

Exactly! Back then, we used balls filled with sand to strengthen our arms. Everything he taught me was so beneficial.

We will dive later into it, but can you pick one amazing anecdote of that epic achievement outside the court?

It was an incredible achievement for us to become Vice-Champions. And the anecdote I have is that they invited us to a party after we became Vice-Champions to celebrate at a restaurant. Many journalists were there. And that's where I met my husband. He was a journalist, and I met him there and later married him. I also never wanted to have a family because of basketball. I was very careful, and my husband knew that I was deeply involved in basketball. And he understood.

Did you ever regret choosing basketball over having a family?

No. No. Because he was a widower and already had a daughter. He already knew what it was like to have a child. So, he was at peace with it. He never said anything. Quite the opposite. He helped me go to games, play, and train.

Part 3. The first World Cup (Atmosphere).

Do you remember when you were selected for the Chilean national team? What did you think? What did you

feel at that moment? Was it a surprise? Pride?

I started playing at an early age, and when I was selected for the Chilean team, it was the first time I went to a South American tournament in 1950, which was in Paraguay. We were runners-up there in South America. Then came the 1953 World Cup, which was held at the National Stadium because, of course, there weren't... there were gyms, but they were small, so they had to do it here. Lots of people came, many people. It was packed. There were so many people cheering for us.

Do you remember what the atmosphere was like in the stadium?

The fans came by bus, with flags from all the clubs represented and everything. It was beautiful. It was such a beautiful championship, I get emotional remembering it because being a world runner-up is a huge title... For me, it was — how can I say it? Happiness? I don't know, love — for having been part of the Chilean national team.

Can you describe more precisely how it was? They built an arena?

It wasn't closed. It was open. They built stands all the way to the other side. Big, really big, all around. Because they could. There was room. It was completely full. It was beautiful.

The games were scheduled at 18:00, some at 20:00, and some even at 22:30.

They didn't start at night, eh? Some were early and ended at night. So, we were fine. No, no, it couldn't have been that late. I think around 20:00, or maybe 21:00. You know, so many years have passed that one forgets some things. But I would never forget the World Cup. It was hot, but it wasn't just that. We were used to the heat here, and by March, it wasn't as intense.

Part 4. The first World Cup (Impact in Chile).

It's the only Chilean medal in the World Cup.

Exactly. Then in '56, we went to Ecuador and became champions. And then I went to another World Cup in '57. There, we didn't do as well... But nothing compares to the one in '53. It was marvelous. For me, it was the most beautiful thing ever.

Also because it was in Chile, in your city.

Exactly, we were here in Chile, and everyone — all the people — were shouting. It was very emotional, especially when we scored baskets, the noise they made was incredible. It was so beautiful, very emotional. For me, it was a wonderful World Cup.

Even the president was there too.

Yes, Pedro Aguirre was there... No, not him... I don't remember who the president was back then... Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, yes, he came too. Oh yes, that World Cup was marvelous.

Back then in '53, was women's basketball considered serious? Were there many fans in Chile?

Yes. There was a lot of competition in Santiago and all the provinces because many players were also chosen from the provinces for the World Cup.

In some Latin American countries in the 50s, women's basketball was frowned upon. People didn't want it because they felt it wasn't a sport for women. They were supposed to stay home. Was it like that in Chile?

No, not here. There were players who had young children, and they would go play on the court. Back then, we loved basketball so much that we were dedicated to it, putting everything else aside.

Part 5. The first World Cup (The Final).

Do you remember the United States team and the final game?

It was very exciting. Yes, at the beginning, we struggled a bit because they were so tall. And they were good... They were champions with those long legs. It was a strong team. And we were good too. But we couldn't beat them. Still, achieving the title of World Vice-Champions... It's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me.

Do you recall any other game?

I only really remember the last game we played against the United States. It was the most important one because we could have been champions, but we fell short.

Do you think you could have won that game? Was it close? What was it like?

Well, we were about even at the start. Just about. But then, I think they won by 8 or 10 points. It wasn't by much... 28-37: nine points.

Part 6. The first World Cup (The memories).

Going back to the '53 World Cup, what was your best memory of the entire tournament?

Well, the best part was becoming World Vice-Champions. That's the most beautiful thing. It's truly wonderful. And you carry it inside you. Deep inside.

And don't you have a particular anecdote? Something, I don't know, something funny or unusual that happened during the tournament... Do you remember anything?

No, I don't remember anything. The only thing... is that I met my husband, a journalist, at the World Cup. That's the only thing I remember.

Part 7. Basketball evolution

How important is the athleticism in basketball?

I think they do need to be tall because almost all of South America or the world have very tall players, like two meters, 1.90 meters. Some are even two meters tall. At least in the United States, and from what I've seen, other countries also have very tall players. Now we're seeing tall players here who are training; they're young girls but have great potential.

And now basketball is growing because, back when we played, many people came to watch us play. But after the championships, it all declined. Chile's basketball scene went downhill, and there was no competition. But now, it's growing again. They're paying more attention to basketball.

Do you still watch basketball nowadays? What do you think about current basketball compared to how it was in '53?

Well, afterwards, I didn't go to basketball games much because there was hardly any competition. They only started again recently, about three years ago, when they decided to focus on basketball again. So, it's rising once more. There are good players with a lot of talent, so it's possible that in the upcoming competitions, they might win some games. But others are also much stronger now. Maybe, with determination, we could win a game or two.

What about basketball worldwide?

Well, everyone knows the USA is a powerhouse... France...

And other countries I don't remember, but they're strong too. But the USA is definitely a powerhouse. That's why I think there might be some interesting match-ups when the World Cup comes around.

Part 7. The first World Cup (The Tournament from the inside).

When you think about what you achieved back in '53, what you lived, what you experienced, what you felt...

What comes to your mind?

Oh, it was such a great emotion! Because when we won, it was wonderful for us. We jumped, laughed, and sang. It was very beautiful to have been in that World Cup here in Chile.

And what was the atmosphere like among the players?

Oh... We were like sisters, all of us together. We cheered each other on, all of us, when we played. No, it was wonderful!

And do you think that's important? That, that... that fraternity or sisterhood among the players to win? Is that an important thing for you?

That was very, very big, very wonderful because every time, we played better, and that's why we became world vice-champions. We felt we could win, it was a spirit. At least when we trained, it was great. And we would get together and say: "We have to win, we have to win!" And we won almost all the games, and it was such a great happiness for us.

Well, we were teammates, we were like sisters, all the players. We encouraged each other: "Go, go, go! We have to win, we have to win!" No, it was a very beautiful championship, a precious memory.

I don't remember anything else. But it was wonderful. That World Cup. A wonder.