

Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Basketball's DNA as an educative tool made it the first globalized sport by the early twentieth century. Its reach extended across the globe with remarkable speed, helping establish basketball as one of the world's most widely played and embraced sports. Furthermore, from its earliest steps, basketball was also played by women. Thus, from its outset, basketball has truly been "the" global game for women and girls.

This FIBA Foundation Women's Basketball Oral History Project, "Through Their Eyes: Stories of Women Who Shaped Basketball," shares the lived experiences of some of the biggest names involved in basketball, revealing the influences that molded their basketball lives.

It delineates several major themes that guided the sport's global reach and role over time and space:

- Basketball Origin Stories
- Role Models and Early Influencers
- Basketball Cultures and Youth Development
- Basketball as a Mirror of Society
- Basketball Learning and Leadership Development
- Friendships, Rivals, and Fierce Competition
- Basketball Identities
- Evolution of the Game

Interviewees were selected by the FIBA Foundation to cover the timeline from the first FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup in 1953 through to the present day. They represent some of the game's best-known players, coaches, and administrators representing a cross-section of continents and generations.

Project participants: Carol Callan (USA), Jackie Chazalon (France), Claudine Clot-Ducommun (Switzerland), Teresa Edwards (USA), Natalia Hejkova (Czechoslovakia/Slovakia), Tom Maher (Australia), Mame Maty Mbengue (Senegal), Shin-Ja Park (Korea), Laura Pina (Chile), Maria Planas (Spain), Uljana Semjonova (Latvia/USSR), and Maria "Magic Paula" Silva (Brazil).

These twelve oral histories interviews make clear that basketball served as a universal language that transcended timelines, geographic borders, and divides—a tool for diplomacy and connection. It built a range of identities, from transnational and national, to local and individual, while fostering pride in communities large and small.

Institutional and, in some countries, legislative change helped further basketball's integration within different societies. Still national teams were some of the most visible "successes" historically; they could also serve as a test case for economic investment in, and professionalization of the game. As a prime example, preparation for the 1996 Atlanta Games helped U.S. basketball stakeholders explore the business case for what became the WNBA, the Women's National Basketball Association, as the preeminent US professional league in the women's sport.¹

Vitally, the game served as type of educational Swiss Army Knife: a lifelong learning tool, a way to travel and experience the world, and a means to better understand others within the basketball family on and off the court. The values basketball extolled thus extend into deeply humanistic territory.

Basketball also fostered different types of leadership, providing opportunities and pipelines for individuals to grow through and thanks to the game that prepared for post-playing careers. For many of the interviewees featured in this project, they had to break existing societal norms, overcome sexism from male referees, officials, and fans, and defy cultural myths about women who play sports. In doing so, they helped pave the way for others and invested in the next generation, which had a multiplier effect on the game.

Interviewees forged new pathways. Some of them did not have female role models and thus looked to male players like Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, or even some local players. Thus, part of their collective legacy was to ensure that future generations could look to women in basketball for influence and inspiration.

From a sporting perspective, these oral histories reveal how women's basketball evolved over time, including:

- **Changing Styles of Play.** Basketball moved from more restrictive rules (formats like that of 6-on-6 played in some regions of the United States (a passing-centric game that limited players to three dribbles) to a modern, rapid-tempo 5-on-5 game. Technical shifts also occurred, such as greater adoption of the jump shot in the 1970s so that it was more commonplace in the mid-1980s. Today basketball is a highly physical, technical sport, which is played at a significantly faster pace than in its early days.

1. Carol Callan, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.

- **Transition to Formalized, Strategic Training.** The transition from basketball as a hobby with once or twice weekly practices to daily hours-long training sessions helped Western European teams play on par with their East European counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s. Within the United States by the mid-1980s, once Title IX forced universities and colleges to invest in women's sports, NCAA basketball programs provided rigorous regimens that helped level-up the competition – for their U.S. as well as international players.
- **Player development.** Accompanying changes in style of play and strategic use of training has been a focus on developing basketball players as athletes. Enhancing scouting from an early age, feeding into player development pathways, has allowed for a greater focus on developing the physical attributes of the players. Dedicated strength and conditioning coaching, a focus on diet and rehabilitation, mental well-being, and learning from other sports, have fundamentally altered what it takes to be a player. It is also worth noting that it is perhaps only in recent times that there has been a dedicated focus on the female physique and female health.
- **Strategy Over Rivalry.** High-level international success sometimes required setting aside domestic club rivalries for a common goal; Magic Paula and Hortencia realized that their personal competition "wasn't good for the country" and that they needed a strong, united team to win a World Cup.²

Taken as a whole, these oral histories show how the experiences of the project's subjects are deeply intertwined with the evolution of women's basketball from the second half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first. Their journeys reflect not only the growth of the game, but also its wider power as a vehicle for learning, leadership, cultural exchange, and connection. As "diplomats in tracksuits," they helped carry basketball across borders, generations, and communities, shaping the sport's legacy while opening new pathways for those who would follow.

2. Maria Paula Goncalves da Silva, "Interview," interview by FIBA Foundation, 2024.