

Flying Queens: The Forgotten Legacy of Basketball's Most Successful Female Team - Broadly

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All photos courtesy of Flying Queens: A Basketball Dynasty

The most successful women's basketball team in US history won 131 games over the space of five years, but today the Flying Queens are forgotten. A new documentary aims to change that.

Imagine that when you're growing up you're told you can't play sports because if you run too fast, your uterus will fall out. That you probably won't get into university because you're a girl. That your career options are limited

to teaching, nursing, or being a housewife. Welcome to 1950s America, when Title IX, the law [forbidding schools from excluding people](#) on the basis of their gender, was barely a flicker on the horizon.

It was a group of girls from the rural communities of America's heartland who broke down these barriers, becoming the greatest female basketball team of all time with an unprecedented—and still unbeaten—winning streak of 131 games between 1953 and 1958.

They're the subject of [Flying Queens: A Basketball Dynasty](#), the film by Kellie Mitchell documenting how they changed the face of women's sports decades before professional women's basketball leagues were introduced. It's a crucial piece of sporting history that shockingly few people are aware of.

While many people find it easy to dismiss large swathes of America's Deep South and Midwest as less-than-tolerant backwaters, these communities defied the prevailing sexism of the era to proudly support their players. When Kaye Garms' parents couldn't afford to take her to the Flying Queens' trials for a basketball scholarship at Wayland Baptist College in Texas, her local community in Kingfisher County, Oklahoma, banded together to pay for her. There were 45 girls vying for one scholarship; Garms got it. "I never worked so hard in my life!" she tells *Broadly*. She eventually played for the team from 1955 to 1958.

The Flying Queens had already started their phenomenal record by the time Garms got there. "We never thought about losing," she says. "We thought, we know we're going to win. It was just a matter of how much and how long it took to win a game."

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Wayland was one of only two colleges in the US to offer scholarships to

women at the time. Although it was a faith school in a small town, it had a progressive president. "Dr James Marshall's ideas were particularly wild," says Mitchell. "He integrated the college at a time when all the schools were segregated. This is long before the civil rights movement. He was very influential as a president. He just had a gregarious personality everyone loved."

Marshall was enthusiastic about backing this all-girls team, so he got in touch with local businessmen to sponsor them. Among them was Claude Hutcherson, who owned the planes that the Flying Queens took their name from. With Hutcherson as their benefactor, they went from living on farms with no running water to jetting around the US and beyond.



The Flying Queens in 1956.

Half the team were from farming communities in Oklahoma, which was a hotbed for girls' basketball. "The southern states really supported women in sports," Mitchell says. "They felt they were one of their own. They were pretty excited about having something so extraordinary, and the local papers finally had something to write about."

Wayland would post the scores in the newspapers and reporters attended

every single game. These were exciting times—the Queens never expected this level of coverage and collected all the press cuttings for their scrapbooks.

Behind the scenes, they worked around absurd rules like not being allowed to wear shorts on campus. A typically insightful account in the documentary is when Joyce Kite (who played between 1955 and 1959) explains how they had to wear skirts over their basketball shorts, only taking them off right before the start of a game in full view of the public. "What will people notice more, me walking across in shorts or having to change out of a skirt on the court?"



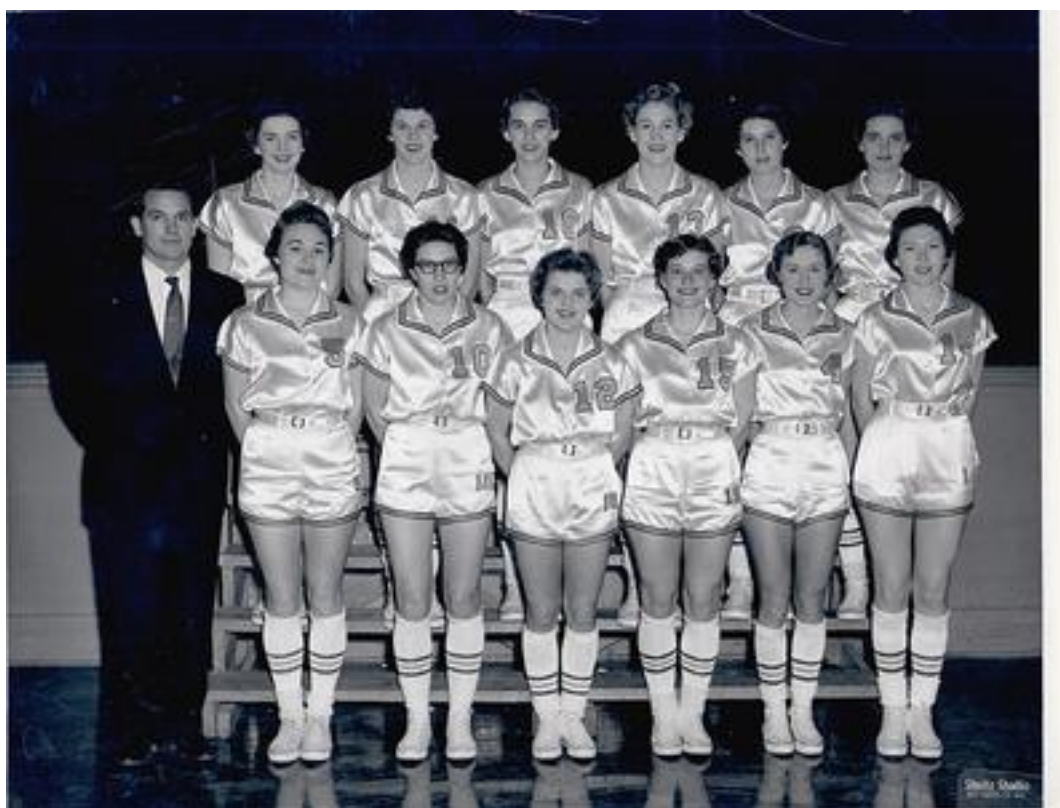
Members of the Flying Queens posing with their trophies.

They were banned from dancing and playing cards in the college dorms, but they took it all in their stride—Garms says she felt privileged to be able to play at this time. "Sports were the centre of the community and people would support it. They came to our games, and all the kids would come. It was a very loyal town."

Thirty-one players in total graced the team over the course of their

legendary winning streak. It was Nashville Business College who finally beat them, in a sold-out game where a security team had to be hired because of the huge crowds in attendance.

This defeat didn't stop the Queens, and they carried on playing until they reached the end of their four-year studies. After this they moved on to pioneering roles as coaches and games officials. "I used to tell my high school players that they could go to junior college, they could go to Division II, Division I, whatever level they had the ability to play, and they could go get scholarships," says Judy Bugher, who played for the Queens between 1955 and 1958. "I wanted them to have the same opportunities that I had."



The 1957 team.

Their accomplishments took place when access to sports was an unattainable dream for most women, as Title IX was still 20 years away. "It opened up sports careers for women," Mitchell says. "Most of the great women's coaches like Marsha Sharp and Jody Conradt were products of Title IX. The colleges finally had to start offering as many scholarships to women as they did to men."

Bugher says the sky's the limit now, especially with professional leagues like

the WNBA. However, she adds that women don't get paid as much as men —"but that will come."

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In 1997, Violet Palmer became the first female NBA referee. She directly credits the Flying Queens for making it possible for her to be the first woman to reach the highest position of authority of any major sport in the US. The Flying Queens continue to inspire athletes today, and in 2013 they were inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. So why is this film is the first time their story has been told?

Mitchell laughs. "Predominantly," she explains, "sexism in the media." She mentions thumbing through a magazine that she thought would be perfect reading material for one of the Queens during a hospital stay. The cover featured the best 50 athletes in the US, but there wasn't a single woman on the list.

Read more: [The Guts and the Glory of Being on an All-Female Sports Team](#)

Some of the Flying Queens have now passed away, the others are mostly in their 80s, but this film will ensure their legacy lives on. Mitchell says it's important for reporters and athletes to see it to understand that they fought long and hard for their achievements, paving the way for the female athletes of today. "Especially for people who haven't had a lot of opportunities. What it says is that it doesn't matter where you come from, your background doesn't matter. You can do it, be anything." It's also an antidote to the paltry 4 percent of sports coverage devoted to women, where sexist headlines—like those seen at the Rio Olympics this summer—dominate the news.

For her part, Judy Bugher would like to see Flying Queens in classrooms. "I brought some of the DVDs to put in the library of the local high school and I hope that there'd be a few people who'd check it out because it's

inspirational and entertaining." But more importantly, she wants young people to learn about where women's basketball started. "In the beginning, there was Wayland and our team. Basketball for women, and success, didn't wait until the 80s and 90s—it was going strong back in the 50s."

Flying Queens *is available to buy on Blu-ray from flyingqueens.com.*

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