

The Stars Of Women's Basketball's First Dynasty Just Want To Be Remembered

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Photo via Kellie Mitchell

On April 2, the 2017 Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Class was announced. Among the inductees were basketball luminaries like Tracy McGrady and Rebecca Lobo, and lesser-known figures like Robert Hughes, the all-time winningest high school boys basketball coach. Failing to make the cut were the Wayland Baptist University Flying Queens, the most dominant women's basketball team in history.

The Flying Queens were women's basketball's first true dynasty, a perennial powerhouse based in Plainview, Tex., that won 131 games in a row from 1954 to 1958. They were also an anachronism, a group of women living in the

heart of conservative Texas that enjoyed a level of freedom and comfort that not even their male counterparts could claim. They sported custom uniforms and matching travel outfits, ate at the finest restaurants, and traveled to games by plane.

The team was started in the late 1940s by Wayland president [Dr. James "Bill" Marshall](#), who set out to attract students to the school through innovative marketing means—including women's basketball. He started the women's basketball program and began offering scholarships, but his biggest contribution came from securing a lucrative sponsorship from local rancher Claude Hutcherson, a Wayland grad who took a liking to the team and provided all of the lavish perks. Hutcherson owned his own flying service, and so the team would fly to games in four separate bonanza planes, which is how they earned the Flying Queens nickname.

The project was nothing short of revolutionary, and it changed the course of many lives, including that of Alice "Cookie" Barron, one of the Flying Queens' most visible, vocal, and talented players.

When Barron heard that she and her team didn't get in the Hall of Fame, she was understandably disappointed. "Those awards seem to go with the here and now, and pass history by," she said. "I would love to know why the Queens are not deserving. But I would like for people to remember the history of what we did just as they will certainly remember the history of what UConn is doing in NCAA Division I basketball. It seems everyone wants to overlook that we were in college, had full scholarships, flew to our games, had a great budget, could only play four years, and had academic requirements. Players played four years and were out and that is what makes this record so unique."

Back in the mid-1950s, when Barron was playing basketball, scholarship opportunities were extremely rare. There was no Title IX, and schools weren't particularly interested in creating opportunities for female athletes. Barron was one of the lucky ones who got plucked off a farm in a small town,

where she used to shoot hoops on a dirt court in her backyard, when she was recruited to play basketball for Wayland. She became part of a dominant team that helped shift the perception of female athletes.

“These women lived and breathed basketball and their coaches worked them hard,” said Kellie Mitchell, a Colorado-based filmmaker behind the 2016 documentary, [*Flying Queens: A Basketball Dynasty*](#). “It’s impressive to me because they were women who came from nothing and they had a lot of drive. Women were very oppressed at that time and they had very few options. Only privileged women got to go to college. And women didn’t get to go to college and play sports for scholarships.”

The scholarships, Mitchell believes, were actually funded by Hutcherson. “Hutcherson gave them the opportunity to play in various locations both nationally and internationally without having to drive long distances,” Mitchell explained. “Back then, most teams in the American Amateur Union (AAU) were sponsored by various companies that would give the women jobs in exchange for playing basketball. Wayland started offering scholarships to women in order to do the same thing.”

Barron remembers how rare it was for women to get scholarships to play basketball at colleges and universities at the time. “The only ones that I knew of were Wayland Baptist University, Iowa Wesleyan, and a few junior colleges in Texas,” she says. “Wayland gave me that opportunity. I grew up in a farmhouse in a small Texas town without running water, electricity or even an indoor toilet. It was one of those situations like Eisenhower used to say: you don’t know your poor until someone tells you.”

Kaye Garms, 80, also played for the Flying Queens. She also came from nothing. “I was the youngest of seven children. We lived on a farm in Oklahoma without running water or a bathroom in the house. My dad loved basketball and he put up a hoop on the barn. I grew up playing the game,” she said.



Photo via Kellie Mitchell

At 5-foot-10, Garms was taller than most of her classmates. In high school, she scored a lot of points and made the all-star team her senior year. The team was sponsored by a local banker, and his wife drove Garms and another player to the national tournament in Plainview—six hours away. The coach of the Flying Queens, Harley Redin, saw the game. Two weeks later, Garms received a letter from Wayland Baptist University offering her a full scholarship.

“I still have that letter,” she beamed. “That’s a moment that will stay with me forever because I was the only kid in my family to graduate from college.”

Both Barron and Garms made the most of their opportunity to get an education.

“It was a tremendous commitment and most of us worked hard to make our grades because we didn’t want to lose our scholarships,” Barron said. “We didn’t have tutors or study sessions like they do today. We had to do it all.”

“When you entered as a freshman, you had to sign a card that you wouldn’t

dance, smoke, drink or play cards," Garms added. "We didn't have any money to do any of that anyway. But, I'll tell you this—that gym was never locked. And we always had a basketball. So, when we weren't studying, we spent all of our free time playing ball in the gym."

After graduation, Barron went on to help develop and implement girls' sports programs in [Colorado high schools](#) and Garms carved out a successful career as a [women's basketball referee](#).

Today, Barron and Garms are no longer able to play the game they love so dearly, but they watch basketball regularly. They even made the trip to Dallas, Tex., to watch the 2017 Women's Final Four. Barron had been especially impressed with the UConn women's basketball team and their own winning streak of 111 games, which was abruptly ended by Mississippi State in the semifinal game—a game she and Garms got to witness live.

"When we were winning [all of our games] it seemed neutral crowds always cheered for the underdog, which is exactly what was happening the other night [with the crowd supporting Mississippi State]. I understand that mentality," she said.

Despite the shocking loss to Mississippi State, Barron still believes that the Huskies will bounce back and one day best the Flying Queens' consecutive wins streak. "UConn is such a great team," she said. "The girls are incredible athletes and [Geno] Auriemma is the best coach in the nation. I've watched him over the years and he's gotten better and better. And I do believe that they can and will break the all time winning record—not just the NCAA winning record—but the all time record we achieved."

Like UConn, the Flying Queens eventually lost, too. The loss came in 1958, during the final game of Garms's senior year against their bitter rival, National Business College (NBC). Barron says that if she had been still playing, Garms would have gotten the ball a lot more in the key.

Garms laughed at that. "She liked to pass me the ball," she said. "But we knew the streak would end sometime. We just wanted to keep it going as long as we could."

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