Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 110: THE INAUGURAL BALLER Lusia Harris

[music]

Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: It is July 19, 1976

KN: Ooh!

OM: and we are in Montreal, Canada. The players are on the court for the very first game of the Women's Basketball Tournament at the Olympics.

KN: Ah!

OM: The *first* women's basketball ever played at the Olympics.

KN: Cool.

OM: It's the U.S. versus Japan.

KN: Hah!

OM: The whistle blows. Japan takes the ball. A Japanese player runs down the court. She is about to score when she is fouled *hard* by one of the American players.

KN: Ah.

OM: She is confused. The Japanese team are looking at each other like, 'What was that about?' The Americans are determined that if they are going to have to play this early-morning game, they are going to make the most of it, and they're going to make some history.

KN:.. by fouling people?

OM: Yes.

[KN laughs]

OM: The first woman to score a basket in the Olympics is *gonna be an American, dang it!*

KN: Oh! [laughs]

OM: And not just any American. It's going to be Lucy Harris.

KN: Alright!

OM: Lusia Harris - she always went by Lucy - is 21 years old. She is fresh off her junior year in college. She is African-American. She is from a Mississippi town so small it barely exists and is not on the map.

KN: Huh!

OM: She is an incredibly unlikely candidate for finding herself in this time and this place. And yet, over the next seven days, she will lead her team from barely qualifying for the Olympics at all to a silver medal - and change the face of women's sports forever.

KN: Wow!

[music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle,

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And this is *What'sHerName*

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[music]

OM: To learn more about Lucy Harris, I talked to Andrew Maraniss.

Andrew Maraniss: My name is Andrew Maraniss. I live in Nashville, Tennessee and my new book is called *Inaugural Ballers*. It's the story of the first U.S. Women's Olympic Basketball Team which played at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.

OM (to KN): It is a fascinating and incredibly compelling book. He's authored many books which often focus on the intersection of sports and race, identity, gender, politics. And he's also Special Projects Coordinator for the Sports and Society Initiative at Vanderbilt University.

KN: Huh!

OM: Lucy Harris's story begins in Minter City, Mississippi, where - as a local journalist said at the time - her days were spent laboring on the farm picking cotton, or scrubbing clothes in the Tallahatchie River, and at night she played basketball.

KN: Wow. Picking cotton… like in the 50s?

OM: In the 70s.

KN: Wow!

OM: Yep! Her family was very poor. Her opportunities for education, travel, achievement, were probably going to be very limited. She is the tenth of eleven children, and she learned to play basketball in the backyard with her brothers and sisters.

Andrew Maraniss: Just a piece of metal sort of shaped into a rim, nailed to a post.

KN: Huh!

05:00

Andrew Maraniss: She's living, basically, in the same part of Mississippi where Emmett Till was murdered, you know? She's living in the same part of Mississippi where Robert F. Kennedy made his famous tour through Mississippi to see people living in poverty. She's living near where Fannie Lou Hamer was living and becoming a political activist. So this is a really important part of the country, but a very poor and overlooked part of the country.

Also, she was bullied in High School for being tall. Her classmates would say, 'Long and tall, that's all'. You know, as if it was a negative that she was tall and becoming a good athlete. Lucy, growing so tall, was sewing her own clothes. You know, there wasn't a store that was making clothes big enough.

Playing basketball was fun, even though her parents really didn't really want her to do it. And she would stay up late at night with a blanket covering some chair, sort of in a little cave, watching basketball games on TV. Her school coaches, middle school and High School, really had to convince her mom to let her even try out for the team. This is a time where girls all over the country were told, 'You're not supposed to compete. You're not supposed to sweat. You're not supposed to build muscles. You're certainly not supposed to beat a boy in a race or in a basketball game.' And so she had so many things in her life or in society telling her 'this is not something that you should do'.

OM (to KN): Eventually her mother gives in. She is so determined to play that they say 'Fine, okay.' She convinces her parents to allow her to join the High School basketball team.

KN: Hm!

OM: She is an instant star on the basketball team. She's 6'3".

KN: Dang!

OM: That's not super tall for a center, but it's pretty good for a High School center…

KN: and a woman

OM: who is a girl.

KN: Yeah.

OM: And she is dominating everything from the get-go. But after High School there are very few trajectories for her.

KN: Yeah.

Andrew Maraniss: She was gonna give up basketball. But then Margaret Wade from Delta State had mentioned that they were reviving their basketball team there. Margaret Wade had played at Delta State back in the 1930's. And one of the things I found interesting in the book is just - this rise of women's sports is not a straight line. There are ups and downs. And every time women's sports became popular, there would be some movement to squash it.

Margaret Wade was a star player there in the 1930's and women's basketball became too popular and men were threatened by that. And so they got rid of the team. And Margaret Wade said she burned her jersey, she was so upset, in tears, that her team was gone. Well, they bring it back, and she's the coach. So she's building a program, and she recruits Lucy Harris to come play for her team.

OM (to KN): Delta State had canceled women's basketball because it was 'too strenuous for women'.

KN: No! But Title IX?

OM: But Title IX - so they have just brought it back, under Margaret Wade's leadership.

KN: Huh!

OM: And here Lucy goes once again, a superstar on this team

KN: Cool!

OM: Their very first year back in existence, they are incredible out of the gate. And she *loves* playing basketball, and she *loves* this opportunity to be at Delta State - attending college, playing basketball.

KN: And I'm trying to picture, like, what are their uniforms like? Is it like 1970's classic basketball, like tall socks and

OM: Yep!

KN: and striped shorts and

OM: tank tops

KN: sweatbands, the whole thing? All right!

OM: Yeah. And there's some *amazing* pictures from this time. It's very difficult to get permission to use any of the photos that I would love to share…

KN: Aw!

OM: because, unfortunately, with these more recent subjects, copyright still is held on a lot of these pictures. I will share the ones that I can, but I can encourage listeners to google Lucia Harris, and look at some of these amazing pictures. I swear she must have been able to fly…

KN: Cool!

OM: because she is so high in the air!

KN: Wow!

OM: This is a wonderful experience for her that she did not ever anticipate having. But it's hard to be the only Black player on the team at a school that has only recently been integrated.

09:55

Andrew Maraniss: Lucy Harris said that there were times that she felt so lonely at Delta State that she would ride her bike back home dozens of miles just to be with her mom. Imagine a young Black woman riding her bicycle through the Mississippi Delta - that was dangerous in itself, you know. You don't know what sort of policemen you might encounter on that highway. But she felt that she needed that comfort from her mom.

She said that even though she was the best player on the Delta State team and her teammates were not hostile to her, that she still felt pretty lonely on that team. And one of the interesting aspects was the toll that it takes on an individual to be a pioneer. We often celebrate the first without really diving too deeply into what it takes out of that person, and what they are sacrificing, really - for the benefit of other people, and for society.

Andrew Maraniss: My last book was a biography of Glenn Burke, who was the first openly gay Major League baseball player. And some people will say, 'Oh, he wasn't that great of a player. The only reason anyone's ever heard of him is because he had this trivia of being the first gay player.' Well, we don't know how great he could have been if he hadn't been looking over his

shoulder the whole time. If he had had managers of the team supporting him, rather than saying that they weren't gonna allow him to, ‘contaminate their team’ is the quote, you know, from his manager, right?

Andrew Maraniss: My first book, the biography of Perry Wallace, who was the first Black basketball player in the entire SEC. You know, he was playing games where he was threatened to be killed. Being, you know, hit in the face on purpose. Lucy Harris talked about the same thing - opposing players scratching and clawing her. Referees weren't calling fouls. And so imagine just the physical and mental abuse that they were taking - but it was that loneliness, really, that's the most difficult part. On their own college campuses, where they weren't necessarily treated as an equal person who deserved to be there like anybody else. The extra burden that these pioneers are carrying - we don't account for that. And it makes Lucy's accomplishments all the more remarkable.

OM (to KN): And they're impressive enough on their own! Lucy led her college team to three National Championships, defeating teams that had been regarded for years as untouchable. She spent her sophomore year with her team undefeated, 28 to 0 -

KN: Dang!

OM: The only undefeated college season that year, men or women.

KN: Wow!

OM: And in 1976, she led the nation in scoring.

KN: Wow, that's amazing.

OM: She was unbelievable. She was *so good*. Lucy Harris finished her college career with 2,981 points

KN: Um, okay! [laughs]

OM: and 1,662 rebounds. Her college career record was 109 to 6!

KN: Wow! [laughter]

OM: She lost 6 games in her *entire college career.*

KN: Amazing.

OM: So this should have been a blissfully happy time for her. But, of course, there is the constant stress and threat and loneliness. And, of course, she knows from the beginning that once college is over, there is no path. There is no WNBA.

KN: Yeah.

OM: There are no commentator jobs. There are no coaching jobs for a Black woman athlete.

KN: Mmm.

OM: When college is over, her basketball days will be done. ***But!*** For the first time in history, women's basketball will be included in the Summer Olympic Games.

KN: Woohoo!

OM: That means the U.S. will be putting together a national team, and Lucy tries out for that team. In an interview she did in the 2000's with the University of Kentucky Oral History project, Lucy Harris talked about what those tryouts were like.

[interview excerpt]

Lusia Harris: My athletic director, Horace McCool, told me that there was a tryout for the Olympic team and he asked me did I wanted to go? I said of course I wanted to go!' [interviewer laughs]

LH: He said, 'Well, I'll get you there'. So he took me to the tryouts. When I got there, there was *so many people.* [Lusia and interviewer laugh] There were so many people and there were only twelve spots!

Interviewer: Exactly.

LH: There were only twelve spots and three alternates that could be on this team. So you know, I'm thinking, 'Gee whiz, what am I going to do to get on this team? What do I *have* to do to get on this team?'

OM (to KN): She is trying out for this national team against hundreds of other girls.

KN: Yeah, but she's the highest scorer in America!

OM: Yes, of course.

15:08

[interview excerpt]

LH: Luckily, the coaches had seen me play, and they pretty much knew what I could do. And I'm saying, 'Thank God!' [laughs]

OM (to KN): She makes it, obviously.

KN: Obviously!

OM: And she begins to travel with this U.S. National Team to play against other national teams.

KN: So are they like, training for the Olympics?

OM: Yeah, so I… I guess I didn't understand that this is how it works. You put together a national team, and then that team goes and competes against all of the other national teams in kind of a run-up to the Olympics, and for the World Championships.

[interview excerpt]

Interviewer: What was that like for a little girl from Minter City, Mississippi?

LH: That was awesome. Because I got a chance to really travel outside of the United States, and kind of see how the other part of the world, other people lived. I got a chance to travel a little bit, and just kind of see how things were for myself. And I thought that was awesome.

KN (to OM): That's the power of travel.

OM: Her family was not aware that she was doing any of this. [laughter]

[interview excerpt]

Interviewer: You all went to Colombia. You went to the Pan-American games in Mexico. What did your family - here you are traveling the world - I know they must have been like ‘what?!’

LH: Matter of fact, they didn't know!

Interviewer: Get out of here!

LH: [laughs] They didn't. They really didn't know where I was. I really just didn't want them to worry about me.

Interviewer: Wow

LH: My mom would always say, ‘Just be careful wherever you go. Be careful.’ So a lot of times I just didn't go anywhere, because I didn't want to get hurt going over there, didn't want to be

involved with nothing. So I pretty much just stayed alone watching TV. [interviewer laughs] Cuz my TV at home was a little black-and-white thing… [both laugh]

OM (to KN): Now, the odds of this team actually going to the Olympics is tiny. They are absolutely the underdogs. Nobody expected this to happen. She's not trying out for this team going, 'I'm going to the Olympics!' That was *never* going to happen.

Andrew Maraniss: They're anything but an underdog now. They never even lose a single game in the Olympics, let alone don't win the gold medal. But back in '76, the U.S. Women's Team wasn't even really considered a factor at all. They hadn't even qualified for the Olympics at the primary qualifying tournament, which was the World Championships the year before. Came in 8th place, which was, you know, pitiful. And heading into the Olympics, there was one last ditch qualifying tournament in Hamilton, Ontario. They're one of the last teams to qualify. The Soviet team was by far the best team in the world, never lost a game. And so the Americans, like any team, went into the tournament thinking 'We can beat anybody' - but really had no realistic chance of winning a gold medal.

OM (to KN): Lucy Harris said herself she did not really understand the gravity of this opportunity. She's 21. This is kind of a summer gig before her senior year of college, to be on this national team, and this kind of snuck up on her. She had not *ever* anticipated ending up at the Olympics.

[audio excerpt from the games. Voice announces 'United States of America' and the crowd cheers.]

[interview excerpt]

LH: I didn't realize at the time. I think I really realized the significance of being on the Olympic team when I scored the first basket. And Meyer saying, "Lucy! You just made history!" I said "What?" She said "You just made history. You scored the first basket, girl!"

Interviewer: Wow.

LH: I said "Ooh." [laughs]

OM (to KN): Now this is really the first time that she has really gone up against a very formidable opponent, here.

[interview excerpt]

Interviewer: Your girl, Semjonova, over 7 feet tall. She wore size 21 men's shoe. I hope she never stepped on you! [laughter] And the USSR was the most dominant women's basketball team, and they never lost a game in an official international competition during that period. What was it like playing against her?

LH: It was tough, because - I mean, I have a picture of her, and I'm trying to guard her. And she is so much taller, so much bigger. She didn't jump!

Interviewer: Nope!

LH: All she had to do was extend her arms! I mean, I'm only 6'3!" [laughs] I'm only 6'3."

KN (to OM): Woah!

OM: This picture is amazing. I also cannot include it on our website, sadly, but I encourage everyone to go google this picture because it's very funny.

Lucy Harris has never experienced somebody like this. Nobody has ever been able to stop her, to compete with her, *personally.*

[interview excerpt]

LH: The thing I figured out is that I would beat her down the court [laughs] because she wasn't that fast.

[possible ad break]

22:00

OM: So the structure of basketball in the Olympics was different at that point. It is just a round robin - so all the teams play and the medals are based on who wins the most games.

KN: Okay.

OM: So instead of getting to a championship, and you lose the gold medal game to win the silver, that U.S. actually *wins* a game to get silver. And by the time that silver medal game comes around, they all understand what's at stake.

Andrew Maraniss: The head coach was Billie Moore, who was a really successful college coach at the time. And she gathered her team in the locker room before the silver medal game and said, you know, if they win this game they're going to change women in sports in America for the next 25 years. And so that's a little bit of pressure to put on a team before a basketball game! But she really believed it, and the players understood that also. That this was really the first major women's team sport with any sort of visibility. There was no Women's World Cup back then, women soccer wasn't in the Olympics. So this women's basketball team in '76 was a pioneering team across all of women's team sports. And because the games were in Montreal,

Americans felt a real attachment to these Olympics - it wasn't a big time zone difference. People were paying attention. Like, this really mattered.

This was a time when Title IX was finally starting to be implemented around 1976. So you had schools, whether they're elementary schools, High Schools, colleges - by law, they had to have women's sports programs or girl's sports programs. And so this Olympic basketball team came along right at that moment, at a chance to inspire girls who would then actually have an opportunity to go play.

You know, that's an extra burden that these players had. They weren't just playing for themselves or each other. They were playing for future generations that weren't even born yet. Numbers of women and girls participating in basketball skyrocketed after the '76 Olympics. So they did have that impact. And then you have sports like soccer and volleyball that follow on that success and become extremely popular sports, too - and I think they owe it, you know, like a debt of gratitude to this '76 Olympic basketball team.

KN (to OM): Wow! I never realized. I never really thought about that. I played basketball in Junior High, and

OM: [gasps] I had totally forgotten that.

KN: Yeah, I learned in our backyard with our crappy wire hoop. [laughs] But I had never really… it didn't consciously occur to me that there must have at some point been the first women's team.

OM: Yeah, it's really easy to just kind of assume that these opportunities have always been available

KN: Yeah.

OM: and they have *not*. They are quite recent.

KN: Thanks, Lucy Harris!

OM: Yeah.

KN: Thanks, 1976 National Team!

25:21

Andrew Maraniss: My hope with this book, in particular, will be interesting to young women, girl athletes who may not be aware of what things were before Title IX and some of the obstacles that these women had to encounter. But, also, I've had lot of women who are in their sixties and seventies who lived through that time, but maybe were athletes who, at their own school, had to

fight for access to the gym, or create the first girl's sports team at their middle school or their High School, who are really enjoying this book also. There aren't that many nonfiction books that deal with women's sports, so I think it's something that many generations could read and enjoy.

OM (to KN): When the team comes home, they are national heroes.

KN: Rightly so.

OM: Rightly so! And Lucy Harris is a Mississippi hero. Minter City is so excited she has put them on the map - literally.

Andrew Maraniss: When the team comes back from the Olympics, Delta State holds a big, like, welcome back. The whole town is there. She's given every award possible by the university, by the local chamber, and everyone is celebrating this winner and lauding the fact that she's brought attention to Delta State and to the Mississippi Delta.

It was a lot easier for the White community in Mississippi to celebrate this Basketball player. It was easier to celebrate her - this is the same time that Fannie Lou Hamer is dying of cancer in that same part of Mississippi, who had been fighting the same obstacles as Lucy Harris, and was routinely beaten or jailed for what she was doing. And so there was no opportunity for white community down there to share in the reflected glory of what she was doing in fighting for democracy. But there *was* an opportunity for them to attach themselves to Lucy Harris as a basketball player and to say that 'we won the silver medal together!' And so I thought it was important to point out that hypocrisy in the book.

OM (to KN): She finishes her senior year of college, leads the nation in scoring, graduates from college. As predicted, she is not offered sports-affiliated jobs… until! In 1977, Lucy Harris became the first woman drafted into the NBA.

KN: The NBA?!

OM: The NBA.

KN: The National Basketball Association?

OM: The National Basketball Association drafted Lucy Harris.
KN: Really?!

OM: Specifically, the New Orleans Jazz…

KN: No!

OM: Now the Utah Jazz

KN: Oh my gosh!

OM: Your hometown basketball team…

KN: No way!

OM: drafted Lucy Harris.

KN: [gasps] I have a sudden pride for my hometown team… that… came from New Orleans [laughs]

OM: Well, don't get *too* excited.

KN: Uh-oh.

OM: She was drafted in the seventh round. She was the 137th pick. There were more rounds in the draft at that point.

KN: I'm very surprised that it was even allowed to draft a woman. I thought for sure there would have been a ban or some stupid thing.

OM: Well, yes. So there was actually one woman who had been drafted many years earlier. But the NBA refused to certify the draft, so Lucy Harris is the first woman *officially* drafted into the NBA.

KN: Interesting.

OM: This is actually how I learned about her for this episode. Because when my husband was little, he had a Utah Jazz calendar and it mentioned Lucy Harris.

KN: Really?!

OM: and he always remembered that and thought it was *amazing*. And then, last year he was like, 'Hey, you know, this might make a cool episode…' and I agreed. [laughter]

KN: Wow!

OM: So she, again, has made history. But…

Andrew Maraniss: She was just starting a family, and chose not to report to the training camp for the Jazz. She says herself that she felt it was a publicity stunt - the reason that she was drafted. And I do think that there is a strong element to that.

KN (to OM): Aw. You could call it a publicity stunt. You could also call it a symbolic gesture, or a *first step*, or...

OM: Right, yeah! I mean, it's still cool and exciting. It's cool and exciting enough that Matthew remembered it his entire life. But she was not interested in participating in what she felt was a dead end for her.

KN: Interesting.

Andrew Maraniss: I don't think that diminishes Lucy Harris one bit - but I also don't think there was a realistic chance that she was gonna be playing for the New Orleans Jazz. She was a center, but she was only 6'3". There's no 6'3" centers in the NBA. You know, she would have been dwarfed, and there's never been a woman played in the NBA since then.

She did not maintain any bitterness about that, nor the opportunities that she was denied that potentially could have been a lot more realistic, like playing professional women's basketball or coaching or having endorsement deals. Anything like that.

30:30- 34:50

OM (to KN): Because here she is. She is leading an Olympic team of what will basically become the 'Who's Who' of women's basketball - and she's the star of that team. And *every* player on that team will tell you she was the star, she was the best on that team.

Andrew Maraniss: Pat Summitt, who was Pat Head at the time, who later became the all-time winningest college basketball in history at the University of Tennessee. Nancy Lieberman, who was just in High School at the time of the '76 Olympics, then she went on to a great college career: professional coaching, broadcasting. And there was Ann Myers who was a star at UCLA.

And her peers who were men were being drafted into the NBA and becoming rich off, because of how hard they had worked in their abilities as a basketball player. And not just paid by their teams, but the endorsement deals that they were getting too, right?

Andrew Maraniss: So here she was, the best player on the team, and she said that after the Olympics she realized that, she was sort of looking around like, 'It's over. What am I gonna do now?' She had to find a job.

Why weren't there more opportunities for her as a coach or some affiliated job related to sports? And why did other players on that team who weren't as good receive those opportunities?

OM (to KN): *Why?* Well, for the obvious reasons - and then some less obvious ones.

Andrew Maraniss: So what were the factors that played into the range of lack of opportunities presented to her? You have to consider race, and aspects of sexism in terms of beauty standards. Because there's no doubt that she was denied so many opportunities that she deserved. And so her name, to some degree, was lost to history, until very recently, when there was an Oscar winning short documentary made about her called the *Queen of Basketball.*

[music]

OM (to KN): So after graduating from college, she worked for Delta State as an admissions counselor.

KN: Oh, wow!

OM: She was the Assistant Basketball Coach at Delta State for a while. She eventually went back and earned a Master's Degree in Education from Delta State in 1984. And then returned to Mississippi, where she worked as a High School teacher and coach at *her own* High School, Amanda Elzy High School.

KN: Ah!

OM: So she is coaching and teaching - but High School in tiny rural schools, not University of Tennessee Head Coach.

KN: Yeah. Well - maybe she wants to reach girls like her! She wants to give sports and basketball and those opportunities to the people who really need them.

OM: Yes! I mean it is easy to look at this from the outside and be angry at what was denied to her.

KN: I don't see that, though.

OM: Yeah, it's that temptation - it's so easy to slide into viewing a life a life that isn't 'publicly oriented,' perhaps, but is more oriented in - children, your local schools…

KN: Community
OM: what we tend to see as 'less ambitious' - yes, community… [easy to see] that kind of an orientation for your life as a failure, as a missed opportunity. But we don't know what was going on inside her head!

KN: No way. I respect it more. There's so many people who are promoted into misery, and they climb to the top of the heap because society tells you to climb to the top of the heap. *That's the goal.* Then you get to the top, and you're like 'I'm not happy.'

OM: Yeah.

Andrew Maraniss: When I interviewed her it was, unfortunately, during COVID and so I wasn't able to be in the same room with her. We just talked on the phone. But even over the phone, she wasn't somebody that reveled in her personal success or tried to put that over on anyone. She was just doing what she enjoyed doing, and maybe the success came with it.

For her, it was more about the process, I think, than the results. And at the end of the film, like - I hope people read the book, but I also hope they watch the documentary. [laughs] It talks about the various degrees that all of her kids have received, and you can see just a mother's pride in what became of her family.

OM (to KN): She seemed really delighted with what she had done with her life, with her legacy and her choices. And what she had done with her life, largely, was

KN: Build community!

OM: build her community and raise her children, and that's where her focus was.

KN: Cool!

34:50

Andrew Maraniss: And, certainly, her success as a basketball player - the worlds that were open to her, even if they were limited in some way. You know, she was traveling the country, playing on national television and then competing in the Olympics internationally, making a name for herself internationally. This girl from Minter City, Mississippi - and you can see that then translate to the next generation.

It seemed to me that she found peace in the success of her children, and that she was proud of her family, that she had opted to support and to raise. Lucy Harris was largely an outsider in terms of the way that the world perceived her, but she gained certain strength from the insider aspects of her life, too. Her large family, parents that loved and supported her, the Black community in Mississippi that gave her great strength, and that took great strength and inspiration from her. So there was a duality to it, like I think there is for a lot of African-American pioneers who are forced to live two lives and seen as two different people.

OM (to KN): And this may have been true for Lucy Harris in a very literal way, which also made it difficult for her to pursue any rare career opportunity which might be offered to her.

Andrew Maraniss: Later in her life, Lucy Harris talked about living with bipolar disorder and the challenges that that presented to her. And she even said that really, if she started to notice it, it really affected her life after her basketball phase, when she was confronted with living this life without the thing that she had worked hardest for.

I don't know if medically, you could draw a direct line between that timing or not - I'm not smart enough to know that [laughs]. But just that broader issue of mental health concerns for athletes is getting a lot more attention now than, certainly, it did when Lucy Harris was playing ball in the seventies or in the immediate aftermath in the seventies, and the eighties.

And I think we've seen especially poignant examples of that with Black women athletes at the Olympics - Simone Biles, most recently. So you see these pressures on all women athletes, but on Black women athletes in particular. And then to see the way that many of these athletes are able to succeed, in spite of that, is what we celebrate - but then we often forget about them when they're not in front of us on TV, or their playing days at our favorite college are over. And that's when some of the mental health challenges become the most severe - when that last game or that last meet is over, and everything that you have put your heart and soul into for years and training is over. Your identity is as an athlete, and all of a sudden, that's over. And you're young! Like, you're in your twenties or thirties.

Much more attention needs to be paid to that 'afterlife' of an athlete, and I think that was one of the really important and powerful parts of Lucy Harris's story - is not only can we look back and celebrate her as a basketball player, but we can take her message of paying attention to that mental health aspect of being a woman athlete.

OM (to KN): Her career changed the lives of her family, of her children. It opened up doors to them that never would have been opened, and it opened up doors to millions of little girls - especially little Black girls - across the country, to imagine an entirely different life for themselves. To try new things, to see the world, to test their skills, to change everything - *if they wanted to.*

KN: Yeah.

OM: She had a bigger impact on the world than the vast majority of athletes - I would even say the vast majority of *people* - ever will, and that's something that needs to be shouted from the rooftops. She was proud of her life. She was proud of the things she achieved and the choices she made. I can't imagine a better epitaph on a life than that.

KN: Yeah.

Andrew Maraniss: There was one player I interviewed, she said she had a period of a little bit of jealousy, or at least a hope, that the generations that followed would - at least, not literally thank them, but understand that *someone paved the way for you*. And that it was a process for her to get to the point where she doesn't feel any of that hint of resentment anymore. She understands, she said, that every generation carries the baton to a new place, and that her generation played its role.

Women now, you know, it's not like all problems are solved, even if it might seem, you know, in athletics there's more opportunities. There's still - we see the tremendous inequities across sports. And so this current generation is carrying the baton to somewhere as well.

[music]

Huge thanks to our guest, Andrew Maraniss, and to the University of Kentucky Athletics Women's Basketball Oral History Project and the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky. Check out our website at whatshernamepodcast.com for photos, links, resources and more, and for links to all the books mentioned in this episode. You can also follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, where we post lots of photos each week. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson, and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.