



# Barnstorming America Stories from the Pioneers of Women's Basketball

*John Molina*

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In an era when women had only recently been given the right to vote and the Great Depression made jobs of any kind hard to come by, American women of the 1930s faced an uphill battle when it came to accessing opportunities to work outside the home.

About the same time, the relatively-new sport of basketball was gaining popularity in America and its schools. Girls were allowed to play basketball, too, although the rules were modified to accommodate the lack of strength, stamina and selflessness of the "weaker sex" attributes deemed necessary to play basketball the way boys and men did. Many girls, however, excelled at basketball, to the extent that they wanted to keep playing after finishing high school. But apart from Amateur Athletic Union programs and the rare college teams, organized basketball after high school was out of reach of most women. Women's professional leagues were still four decades away from reality.

But in 1936, entrepreneur and visionary C.M. "Ole" Olson, already in the barnstorming basketball business with his own men's traveling team, felt that not only were women ready to play basketball at a high level, but that people would turn out in large numbers to pay to see them play. From his home base in Cassville, Missouri, he recruited the best female basketball players he could find and formed the All American Red Heads the very first women's professional basketball team to hit America's roads and operate successfully. Playing against men's teams by men's rules, the Red Heads barnstormed across America, playing a grueling schedule of one-night stands and winning the vast majority of their games. Other barnstorming women's teams joined the Red Heads as barnstormers, including the Ozark Hill Billies, Arkansas Travelers, Texas Cowgirls, Southern Belles and others. In the years and decades that followed, these groundbreaking women dismantled the wall of gender stereotypes and barriers regarding women, each victory over men taking another brick out of the wall.

*Barnstorming America Stories of the Pioneers of Women's Basketball* tells the story of the women who helped reshape America's attitudes toward women in sports and paved the way for today's professional women's leagues. Award-winning historian and author John Molina interviewed over 80 veterans of the barnstorming wars and their families, recording their experiences both on and off the court. The result is a treasure-trove of anecdotes and stories that paint a vivid picture of life as a professional women's basketball player something almost unthinkable before 1936.

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