

Phyllis Bailey Pioneered Women's Sports At OSU

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Phyllis Bailey never envisioned a career in athletics, but early in her childhood, she developed a love for sports. A passion for education took the Painesville, Ohio, native to Earlham College, where she graduated in 1948 before eventually pursuing a Ph.D. at Ohio State.

Her career took another big leap in 1956 when Ohio State named her the first head coach of the women's basketball team – a spot she never saw coming.

Bailey embraced being a head coach, leading the Buckeyes on the hardwood from 1956-69 before transitioning to an administrative role in OSU's athletic department.

Upon her promotion, she oversaw the development of Ohio State's women's athletic programs, elevating many from club status to Division I while giving the women's basketball team its necessary resources.

Bailey's program-altering hire of head women's basketball coach Tara VanDerveer

in 1980 put the Buckeyes on the map nationally, competing with Iowa and other Big Ten powerhouses before the team made school history in 1993, when Katie Smith helped lead Ohio State to its first Final Four.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin recently caught up with Bailey, who lives in the Columbus area and turned 93 years old May 10, to discuss her unlikely rise through the ranks of athletics and the impact she had on OSU before retiring in 1994.

BSB: You became the first women's varsity basketball coach at Ohio State in 1956. How did you get to Ohio State?

Bailey: "I got to Ohio State to be a student. I was going to try to get my doctorate. So that's where I first was. I was in the school of education and physical education, and during that time, they said, 'No, we need to have you there as a professor rather than to be a student. Will you be willing to do that?' And I had to think about that for a while because I thought that I was going to have to have a Ph.D. in order to get any kind of a job that I might want to have."

"They told me what they wanted me to be doing, and I said, 'Well, that's what I came here to have the degree to be able to do that,' and they said, 'You don't need to have that degree because you had enough experience at that time. Are you willing to just drop the idea of being a student and just take this job?' And I really had to kind of think about it because I thought that if I didn't want to stay at Ohio State or if Ohio State didn't want me after some time, then I said, 'Well, what about that?'"

"And they said, well, they didn't think that was going to happen. I would have had enough experience in my profession already that they wanted to have me to do the job that they were giving me. So that's just the way it went."

"At that time, there were hardly any of the colleges or the universities having women's teams. So it was just there. They just said, 'Hey, we'd like to try to have a team, and we'd like you to be the coach. Will you forget about your student part of it and just take this job?' And that's what happened."

BSB: Were you surprised they wanted you to fill that role?

Bailey: "Yes, I was."

BSB: You mentioned your Ph.D. What were you originally pursuing? What did you originally want to do with that degree?

Bailey: "Well, I wanted to be able to do exactly what I finally got without having the Ph.D. You know, there wasn't much that young women had ever had. As a matter of fact, I never had a basketball with anybody telling me how to use it until I was in college. We didn't have it in high school – we didn't have it in even, oh, maybe down

to the fifth or sixth grade. We just didn't have that. So I was just lucky, a very lucky woman who loved sports. My father loved sports and my mother liked them, too, and they encouraged me. And I said to them, 'I don't think I really want to be in the field of sports.' And they both said, 'Why?' And I said, 'Well, I don't want to be called one of those tomboys.' Which was kind of, you know, a bad thing at that time. And they said, 'Do what you want to do. You need to do the things that you think you're going to be happy with. So don't worry about what people are saying. Just go on and do it.' And I just had great parents, a mother and father who felt that way about it, and that's how we all went."

BSB: You mentioned that women's sports weren't really as big back then. How did you see women's sports grow over the years you were the coach at Ohio State and when you eventually became an administrator?

Bailey: "Well, any of the young women at any colleges were overshadowed by men. They didn't have anything like (those sports programs). That was just the time after that when it came along to Title IX and they said, 'This is something that's happening for the girls. We're going to have to have the young women have the same things that the young men at these colleges and universities have. We have to give them the programs.'"

"They wanted me just because they thought I could help grow the program. And I said, 'I haven't had the experience for it.' But they said, 'Well, we think you can do it anyway. We want you to try it.'"

BSB: When you were coaching, did you play 3-on-3 basketball – three on

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THE INTERVIEW ISSUE: PHYLLIS BAILEY

offense and three on defense? If so, why was that even such a thing?

Bailey: "Yes. That was all the girls and women had, was half of a court. You had six people. You were either on defense time or on the offensive time, and you just had to make the idea of what you were going to do and picked it up. And that's the way it started."

"I think they were being pushed that way. You look at the history of what was going on at that time about girls and women, young women. Every woman was having to be looked at like the man and to be equal. We were all just good humans."

BSB: You were the head women's basketball coach from 1956-69 and then bumped up in the athletic department. How did you become an administrator?

Bailey: "I asked my mother once, 'I don't know what in the world's happening to me.' And my mother said, 'Phyllis, you have some things that people see that you don't know about your own self.' And that's just the way it was. I just dropped in. It's a crazy thing to say this, but I just got adopted into our country at the time it did."

"When I was a basketball coach, they moved me up until I had the position that I had the responsibility of all of the women's teams. And I said, 'Well, I've never had any work like this.' And they said, 'Neither has anyone else.' And that was just the time when they needed to have somebody who, I guess, they thought had maybe a loud enough voice that people would listen to me."

BSB: While you were an administrator, you hired Tara VanDerveer as Ohio State's head women's basketball coach in 1980. Why did you hire her? What do you remember about her that stood out?

Bailey: "Tara, I saw her as a player. Tara was a player at Indiana University. And I don't know why I knew she was good about women's basketball, but I was in a family that knew a lot about sports. You had some kind of idea of what a person might be able to do. So that was my first hire, and then by gosh, that's the best thing I ever did. She was a great one."

BSB: Why do you think VanDerveer was able to be so successful at Ohio State from 1980-85? What did she do that she ended up being able to thrive?

Bailey: "I think (her personality stood out most). She was a happy girl. She really wanted to play. She wanted to let other people be able to play. When I had gotten her, I worked seven days a week right along because I was frustrated as a little kid. I couldn't get anything that our girls get now. Just out of frustration, I was willing to say, 'Doggone, I'm going to dedicate my life to try to get people to have that chance.' And that's my story."

BSB: VanDerveer left Ohio State for Stanford in 1985, a position she still holds today. Did you try to keep her? What was that conversation like when VanDerveer told you she was going to leave?

Bailey: "Well, she was going to get (more money there). I worked very hard at Ohio State to try to get the people above me to give me the money and the position that I needed to have to carry Tara. And they said, 'No, we don't want to do that here at Ohio State.' Well, it's people who are in positions of power at times - whether they like something or they don't like it, or they think it's not worth something for women to do or not to do - and we've gone a long life. I've had a long life anyway, but it's gone a long way since then."

"I know that it was a money issue. I didn't want to let Tara go. I tried my best to get the money for Tara. But the athletic director at that time (Rick Bay) said, 'We

don't have that much money.' And I kept saying, 'I don't believe that, because we have all of that money coming out of the football team.' But the football has to have a lot of that money, he told me. And I said, 'They're getting more than they're giving me.' He said, 'No.' And that was just it."

BSB: What do you remember about when Ohio State women's basketball played Iowa in the 1980s and there was a good rivalry going with Iowa when VanDerveer led the Buckeyes against head coach C. Vivian Stringer and the Hawkeyes? One game Feb. 3, 1985, both teams were atop the Big Ten - Ohio State unbeaten and Iowa with one loss - when Carver-Hawkeye Arena's 15,500-capacity seating had 22,157 people show up and cram the building for the Buckeyes' 56-47 win over the Hawkeyes.

Bailey: "Oh, it was like Ohio State and Michigan in football. I mean, because in Iowa, the girls had a lot of high school teams in Iowa. And in Ohio, we didn't have the same resources. We just had to catch up, that was all."

"When Tara was my coach, when she came home from Iowa, she came in and she said, 'My gosh, I felt like I was in the middle of a beehive.' And I said, 'Why?' And she said, 'It was so loud and there were so many people in yellow and black. And I just thought I was around a whole bunch of bees.' And I laughed and said, 'Well, that was a good way to tell me, anyway.'"

BSB: Do you still talk to Tara at all? Does she still check in with you? She was back Nov. 10, 2017, for the season opener between Ohio State and Stanford - an 85-64 win for the Buckeyes over the Cardinal - at St. John Arena.

Bailey: "We do. She was here last year and we had several meals together, and she's busy and I'm not, but I'm not going to bother her. But if she picked up the phone and talked to me, I'd be glad to talk with her. I was happy to see her and talk to her for several times. I was proud of her. She was my hire. My gosh, why wouldn't I want to see her?"

"But I just stepped aside. I retired and when I retired, I said to myself, 'Don't ever put your nose back in there. Just don't. When you retire, you step out of this program and it's over.' And that's just me. That's just the kind of person I am."

BSB: Since you retired in 1994, how much involvement have you had with Ohio State athletics, if any? Do you still follow the women's basketball program?

Bailey: "No, I haven't. I don't know. I think the last two (coaches) weren't people I have anything to do with. And I wasn't going to go down there to watch them and have them thinking that maybe I was just sneaking around."

BSB: The Katie Smith era from 1992-96 elevated Ohio State women's basketball. What do you remember about Smith?

Bailey: "Oh, she was the best player at Ohio State. She was down there in Logan and they're down there in the hills. So the kids down there, the girls just got the ball and they played, too, because they had to do something. So it just grew."

"She understood the game and she had the skills. She was just like the boys. She played out on the playground and played with them, and she got to make herself a good player."

BSB: So you could tell Smith was going to be special when Ohio State recruited her? Why?

Bailey: "Absolutely. At that time, it wasn't even like Ohio State thought about calling young women into here to play sports."

"That's right. She evolved women's sports. And when I got there, which was

well before she came about, they had what they called - and they still do - what they called sport clubs. They didn't have any coaches or anything. They were just sport clubs that played together."

BSB: Led by Smith, Ohio State women's basketball went to the Final Four at the end of the 1992-93 season. What are some of your memories from how Ohio State fared there?

Bailey: "I sure do remember that because I was at Ohio State and Ohio State was a strong athletic program, nationally. Oh, my gosh. We lost on the last game and that's, as far as my job, that's the type of thing that hurt me most. Oh, gee, why not? If you're somebody who's in sports, you always want to win. And we were so close, but we didn't have a chance to. We just didn't get it to happen."

"But it grew. I said I didn't do it on my own - and I didn't do it on my own - but I had to walk up the steps and walk up the steps, and pretty soon the university had to say, 'Hey, we've got to get going on this platform. Michigan and Iowa and others are

doing this (competing at a high level). We can't (not compete). We've got to (let the student-athletes) do it."

BSB: The women's basketball Final Four took place last spring in Columbus. Did you ever think that would be a possibility?

Bailey: "Oh, it's grown. It's grown and grown. I have just been thrilled with it. When the Final Four was here last year, it was just great to me. I didn't think I'd ever live to see something like that for young women."

"I never thought I'd see that. I never even thought there'd be a Final Four for women's basketball, let alone in Columbus. That was just one of the wonderful things of my life. It was the best. I was on the NCAA basketball committee for seven years, and that one we had here was the best they've ever had. We were lucky to have such a good one."

"Think about it. Why are you talking to me? Because I'm talking to you about women's sports. Twenty years ago, would anyone be calling me or any other women to talk about the Final Four?"

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