

Chapter One

A Woman in a Man's World

"Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good."

- Charlotte Whitton

"I've played against Calvin Murphy, Wilt Chamberlain, Julius Erving and other male pros in pick-up games and I've always held my own," I shouted back at the hoards of reporters, hoping to give as good as I got.

"The Detroit Free Press called you the butt of a cruel joke. Any comment?" I didn't recognize the face, but his microphone had an NBC flag. *The Today Show* was preparing to run a segment with the heading: 'Ann Meyers' NBA Bid: Hype, Hope, or Hoax?' to compete with my upcoming appearance on ABC's *Good Morning America*.

"It's a free country." My voice reverberated across the vast banquet hall of the Century Plaza in Los Angeles. Wednesday was L.A., Thursday: New York. The Indiana Pacers had just signed me to a one-year contract after I'd been chosen number one draft pick by the Women's Basketball League, or WBL, and it was big news.

"Minnesota Fillies owner, Gordon Nevers, says you're betraying your own gender going out for the NBA," another voice called out. "At five-foot, nine-inches, and 134 pounds, wouldn't you be better off in the WBL?"

"I'll let the way I play next week answer that."

I hadn't made the decision lightly. Signing with the Pacers meant forfeiting my chance to compete at the '80 Olympics. It also meant angering some people in the Women's Basketball League. The last thing I wanted was to upset anyone. I'd been flattered when the WBL chose me as the overall first draft pick the previous year, but the timing wasn't right. I still had a few classes to finish up at UCLA in order to get my Sociology Degree. And there was the big question of whether I wanted to play professional women's basketball enough to give up my amateur status. I'd played on the first U.S. Women's Olympic Basketball team in '76 where we'd taken the Silver, but nothing compares to taking the Gold, to hearing your national anthem as they raise your flag. I'd experienced that at other International basketball events and I believed the U.S. women had a good shot at Olympic Gold in 1980.

Now Sam Nassi, the new owner of the Pacers, was giving me an amazing opportunity to play in the NBA and suddenly the stakes had changed.

"Come on Sam, isn't this just a gimmick to sell tickets?" Sam was sitting to my right while the Pacers head coach, Bob "Slick" Leonard was to my left. They were also on opposite sides when it came to my bid.

"We're as serious as a heart attack," Sam shot back. "Ann's a great athlete. Have you ever seen her play tennis? She can blow 90% of the guys right off the court. If we didn't think she had a chance, we wouldn't have signed her."

Slick felt otherwise. He had flown out early to California to persuade me not to try out. "Annie, are you sure you really want to do this?"

I chalked it up to generational differences more than anything. While Slick's wife was the GM of the Pacers team, a female *player* was something else. Slick Leonard came

from an era unaccustomed to seeing women suited up in athletic uniforms, much less those belonging to a men's team, and I don't think he was too happy about what my bid meant for the team. Larry O'Brian, the commissioner at the time, had already green-lighted it with his official statement that "The NBA does not discriminate against athletes on any basis including sex." Slick must have wondered what the world was coming to.

"Annie there's no way someone your size is going to make this team," he told me. But the more he tried to talk me out of it, the more determined I became to do it. That's a failing of mine, or maybe it's a strength. Either way, if you want me to do something, just tell me I can't.

I had always played with the guys. I had learned to arch the ball over my brothers who were a foot taller, and maybe because of that I realized early on that the winner wasn't always determined by size and strength, just as later I would realize the single characteristic distinguishing an outstanding athlete from a Hall of Famer was not always physical ability, but desire. The capacity to dig deep down and come up with that little extra when others felt like their tanks were empty was, in my mind, the greatest ability an athlete could muster. It was that indefatigable force which had set me apart and which had now landed me this invitation to try out for the NBA. It was heart.

I was born loving athletic competition, especially if it was against the guys, and each time I did something that had never been done before, I wanted to find new frontiers to conquer. I had been the first high school student to make it onto the US National team; I then went on to lead UCLA women's basketball to their only National Championship before winning a Silver Medal on the first Olympic Women's Basketball Team.

In college I played pick-up games with guys like Magic Johnson, Mark Eaton, and Marques Johnson at Pauley Pavilion and with Calvin Murphy and Julius Erving in Vegas. They were fast but so was I. They had size, but I had quickness. They had strength, but I had heart.

While my ability to play at the men's level brought double-teaming on me in college, it also took women's basketball in a new direction. I was becoming known across the country for my jump shot and versatility at a time when the country was coming to view women in a very different light. I didn't need my newly earned sociology degree to realize that. You'd have had to have been blind not to see it.

Some said my ability to play was taking women's basketball in a new direction. If that was true, it was because the good Lord put me in the right place at the right time. John Wooden had been coaching the UCLA men's team to stratospheric heights for years before my older brother, Dave Meyers, stepped foot on campus. But in the early to mid 70's, as Coach Wooden's career was winding down, Dave helped lead the Bruin men to Wooden's last Championship during his senior year while I was making inroads for the Bruin women as a freshman. I benefitted from having the support of both my brother and Coach Wooden during that period. The national attention Dave and I received as UCLA's sibling basketball players undoubtedly spilled over onto women's basketball at a pivotal time in women's sports.

The 70s had given birth to Title IX allowing young women in general more equitable access to school funding and allowing me in particular to become the first female athlete to receive a full athletic scholarship to a Division I university. Culturally, the decade had ushered in the likes of *Maude* and *Mary Tyler Moore* to replace TV

stereotypes like Harriett and Lucy. Now at the decade's close, Patty Hearst, whose automatic-rifle-wielding image was emblazoned in the public eye from four years earlier when she robbed a bank with the Symbionese Liberation Army, was being released early from prison, her sentence commuted by President Carter in part due to pressure from the ACLU, NAACP and various women's rights organizations.

The image of the fairer sex as hiding behind an apron in the kitchen was definitely being replaced, if not by that of a woman with an itchy trigger-finger, then by that of a woman with a naked ring-finger throwing her hat up in the air to the lyrics, "You're going to make it after all." If ever there could be a female NBA player, it seemed 1979 might be that time; and it looked like I might be that player.

The press wasn't so sure. Some thought it was just a publicity stunt on the part of Nassi. While I was well aware of the Bill Veck story, the baseball owner who had hired a midget in the hopes of upping attendance, I never believed that Sam wanted me as a side show. Sure, there was publicity involved, but not for me. I just wanted to compete and I'd been given an opportunity to compete with the best. I knew it would be at a price.

Leading women's magazines accused me of slighting my sisters at a time when it looked as though there might finally be a viable women's basketball league, just as the women's rights movement was finally gaining traction. Others implied that the NBA might be trying to dishearten the new league out of existence rather than take a chance on sharing even a slice of ticket revenue. "Shame on you, NBA, for crossing the sex barrier and letting the Pacers sign Ann Meyers when the WBL has been drooling over her for over a year now," wrote *Mademoiselle*, while sportswriters said I didn't

stand a chance. "I am five-foot-nine and weigh 175 pounds and haven't shaved my legs in thirty-eight years. I have a better chance of dancing with the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes than Ann Meyers has of playing basketball in the NBA," one *Washington Post* reporter wrote.

"It won't be a joke when they see her play," Denver Nuggets coach, Donnie Walsh, told the press. "I've seen her play against David Thompson, Wilt Chamberlain and Quinn Buckner. She's good. From far away, you couldn't tell it was a girl." My biggest supporter was the owner of the team himself, Sam Nassi.

It was early August when the phone rang in our home in La Habra, California. I'd just returned from the Spartakiade Games in Russia on the heels of playing in the World Championships in Korea where we'd won the Gold. That summer we'd also taken Silver in the Pan Am Games. I was team captain and recently named overall first draft pick of the WBL Houston Angels.

"Ann, how would you like to try out in the NBA with the Indiana Pacers?"

"Who is this?" I had taken the call upstairs in my mom's room. I was home just long enough to unpack before heading off to train at the Squaw Valley Camp for the upcoming USA Basketball World University Games in Mexico, and whoever this was he was lucky to catch me.

"This is Sam Nassi, owner of the Indiana Pacers, and I'd like you to try out for the team."

Sam who? I'd never heard of him, but he seemed to know me. He'd followed my career and seen the publicity I'd generated for UCLA. To me, Sam Nassi was simply a voice on the phone offering me an outrageous proposition.

The Pacers, however, I knew very well. They were an ABA team who had recently moved to the NBA. Though the conversation was brief, it was long enough for me to see that Sam was serious. I was flattered and excited but I wasn't about to let it show.

"Well, I'll have to speak with my family first." We exchanged further pleasantries before signing off. I bolted downstairs and slid into the kitchen to tell my mother, practically knocking her over onto the cold linoleum.

I then made several calls. One was to my older brother, Mark, who had just become a Personal Injury attorney. I realized I would need legal representation and at twenty-four, the difference between a sports lawyer and a PI lawyer meant about as much to me as the difference between a German Shepherd and a Doberman. All I knew was that my brother would look out for me. Mark negotiated a three-year personal service contract for \$150,000. Whether I made the cut or not, for three years I would be with the organization in some capacity. At that time the minimum annual salary for an NBA player was \$50,000, a lot of money back then.

Another call was to Julius Erving, whom I had played with in various celebrity tennis tournaments, and was a very close friend. Julius was already a legend in the making. An NBA All Star and All Star Game MVP, he was one of the most celebrated basketball players of his time. I knew Julius would be supportive and happy for me, and he was.

But the most important call I made from Mom's kitchen was to my older brother, Dave. His opinion had always mattered more than anyone's. If anybody could advise me, it would be Dave. The Bucks had nabbed him in a trade with the Lakers four years earlier, after he'd led UCLA to two championships and been chosen as the NBA's 2nd overall draft pick. Dave had been there, and he'd know what to tell me.

"That's really great, Annie," he began. "But there's no one in the NBA who is 5'8" and 134 pounds."

"5'9"," I reminded him. "And you said there's a kid in Atlanta who is only 5'8"."

"Charlie Criss, and he weighs 165 lbs. and he's the lightest guy in the NBA."

The conversation wasn't going where I wanted.

"Well, don't expect any special treatment. After all, you're potentially taking some guy's job."

It seemed it always came down to this, the right of men over women to have a job, to get the promotion, to be nominated the party's presidential pick. But Dave? He didn't subscribe to this sexist theory of the world. No, my guess was Dave was more concerned for my physical welfare than anything else. I assured him that I didn't expect to be treated any differently than any of the other contenders, and that I could take care of myself. All I wanted was to go out there and show them I could play.

The truth was, that while I wanted Dave's advice, while I wanted my entire family's input, deep down I think I'd already made up my mind, or at least my heart. The good Lord had given me another opportunity, and this time I wouldn't be held back. Five years earlier - while in high school, I'd chosen not to play on the boys' team.

Now, God had given me that chance again, but on a much bigger stage. This time, I wasn't going to allow anyone talk me out of it.

I headed up to Squaw Valley and let two days pass training with the USA team before I worked up the nerve to tell them that I wouldn't be going to Mexico to compete in the World University Games nor would I be eligible for the '80 Olympics. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do.

When I returned home to La Habra, there were three weeks remaining before the trials. I trained every day all day, often with my brother Jeff. We played as many as fifteen pick-up games a day. When we weren't playing, he drilled me with shots, conditioning, and mentally helped me prepare.

"You'll never get a shot off like that," he'd say.

He knew what I'd be up against and he wanted to toughen me up as much as possible. I'd run the stairs and keep my hands fast using a speed-bag. I may not have been able to do anything about my height or bulk, but I could compensate with speed, quickness, and my shooting ability. I was a pretty good outside shooter, and with the then newly-implemented NBA 3-point rule for field goals from beyond a 23'9" arc, that talent was in great demand.

It goes without saying that I was about to go up against a lot of good outside shooters and all of them would be bigger and stronger, but none of them could have loved the game any more than I did. Desire and talent don't discriminate between male and female anatomy. I hoped Slick wouldn't either. I wanted to show him that I could play. And for three days, that's exactly what I did.

Holed up at an Indianapolis Ramada Inn at night and Butler University during the day, the Free Agent/Rookie training camp took place inside Hinkle Gym, the same Gym made famous in the movie *Hoosiers*. The tryouts were held in the morning and then again in the late afternoon for three days in September. At night, I would phone my mom, steering clear of the television and newspapers. I'd hoped to avoid all the negativity surrounding my bid, but in one phone conversation I learned that Veteran Pacers player, Mike Bantom, had been quoted saying that if I was going after his job, then he was going after me whether I was a girl or not, and he hoped I didn't get hurt.

My brother, Dave, had been right.

Every morning I rode over to the gym with my trainer, Davey Craig, and the top two draft picks, Tony Zeno and Dudley Bradley. At 6'8", Tony Zeno had played for Arizona State as a forward and he would go on to play for the Pacers for a year before playing in Italy, where in a game against Poland, he broke a backboard with a slam-dunk. Dudley Bradley had played for the University of North Carolina where he was called 'the Secretary of Defense' for his prowess at forcing turnovers. He would go on to set an NBA rookie record with 211 steals.

But for now, both men were simply competitors I would share a ride with in the morning and night, and the court during the afternoon—the three of us sporting the same Pacers uniforms complete with knee-high socks and Adidas high-top Superstars the whole time.

During the first scrimmage, a defensive player came up behind me and set a hard screen. I recovered, pivoted to the left and sprinted down the length of the court. I cut into the lane on the break, received a chest pass from the wing and made a left-handed

lay-up. It wasn't much different from what I had done thousands of times before whether on the courts of UCLA or the playgrounds and high school gyms, or at the Olympics or the Pan Am Games. But now the stakes were much higher: a place in the greatest league in the world.

Even as a little girl, every Sunday my siblings and I would huddle around the television, consumed by the plays of our idols Bill Russell, Jerry West, and John Havlicek. We'd wait for that one NBA game all week and then when it was over, we'd go outside and try to emulate their moves. In my mind, I was John Havlicek. I don't know who my brother Dave pretended to be, but he'd grown up to make the dream come true. Now, incredibly, there was a chance it might happen for me too.

From the sidelines, I believe the press saw something entirely different: a woman amidst a dozen guys a foot taller and as much as 100 pounds heavier. They never thought I stood a chance.

"A lot of people say you're in over your head, literally and figuratively." A microphone was jammed into my face by someone with one of the local stations, and I immediately wondered if a question would follow his comment and why there weren't any women covering the tryouts. There were easily ten cameras and a couple dozen reporters in the Hinkle Fieldhouse, and not a woman among them.

"What about taking a charge from Bob Lanier?" he persisted. "How are you going to do that?"

"Who in the NBA is going to take a charge from Bob Lanier?" I asked back. It was a stupid question.

“The WBL is saying you should promote women’s basketball rather than sham yourself. How do you feel about that?”

“People can say what they want,” I said on my way out. Rather than use the women’s locker room, I headed toward the ladies’ bathroom, where I knew I couldn’t be followed.

On the way, I overheard one of the players talking to the press. “She’s good, but she doesn’t deserve to be here.”

Certainly, he had a right to his opinion, and I appreciated his honesty, but I didn’t agree. While everyone on the court could play, some of them just didn’t seem to fully understand the game. On defense there was a guy who would get lost, another couldn’t read a pick. One didn’t understand how to run the floor on a fast break. I still liked my chances regardless what this guy thought; what any of them thought.

I’d long developed the ability to brush off comments made by my male opponents. I’d heard them all through the year, whether from boys, young men, or seasoned pros. I’d seen them express every emotion possible from awe to exasperation, heard every type of remark from nasty to admiring; and I had long ago learned not to let their feelings affect me. Now more than ever, though, I had to make certain nothing got inside my head. I had to play my best.

Was I knocked down? You bet. But I knew how to fall and get back up because I’d done it so many times before. When a 6’10” center went up for a rebound, he brought the ball down in order to stop the fast break. This gave me the chance to sneak in close, turn up my palm and pop the ball loose.

I had learned throughout my years playing that the majority of guys would bring the ball too low on a rebound. At UCLA we were taught to bring the ball to our chests. Because of my size I could sneak in there and with a little jab the ball would pop out of their hands. We both went for the ball and in the scramble he knocked me to the ground. I jumped right back up. I needed them to see it was no big deal because to me it wasn't. I had done my job and he was trying to do his. That's just part of basketball, but I needed both the coaches and the players to realize that I didn't require special treatment; the latter for their sake as well as mine.

John Kuester, who was a free agent guard from North Carolina and played for Dean Smith, showed up for tryouts. Everybody called him "Q" because his last name was pronounced Q-ster. Q and I were in a one-on-one drill, and as I hustled back on defense, we collided and I went down. I was fine, but John's natural instinct was to worry that he'd hurt me.

He bent down next to me. "Are you okay, Annie?"

"I'm okay."

He was such a good guy and, like most of the players there, he'd been conditioned his whole life to take it easy on girls, not to play too rough. Now he was being asked to do just the opposite. We were both playing our hardest at what is a very physical game. We were going to get knocked down, but John wasn't prepared to knock a woman down. After his basketball career, he became the head coach for the Detroit Pistons.

"That's it! Everybody over here!" Jack McCloskey was Indiana's assistant coach running practice while Slick watched from the side lines. He had been with the LA

Lakers, and would go on to become the GM of the Detroit Pistons in the 80s during their heyday winning championships. Jack wasn't happy with what he was seeing.

"You're gonna stop this bullshit now!"

He lit into all of us with the longest, saltiest tirade I'd ever heard. Cursing was a collateral skill developed on basketball courts the world-over, but Jack's pointed list of superlatives effectively worked to shake the reticence out of every player there and replace it with an unbridled determination to play at full throttle. By using the most foul, over-the-top language imaginable, he didn't just give the other players permission to behave ungentlemanly around a woman, he demanded that they go out there and play without constraint of any kind.

"Forget about the cameras and the reporters, and the fact that they're here because of Annie. She's no different than any of us. Now get out there and play!"

His words got through, and I did see a change in the players, and it became a turning point in the tryouts. You could sense the relief. There was a freedom to the movement after that. The drills had more energy, more focus. From my perspective it meant I was one of them. Jack had called me into the circle and spoke the same way to all of us. From that point on, I felt that I had Jack on my side.

"Fundamentally, she's better than half the guys out there," he told one of the reporters at the break.

During the afternoon scrimmage the opposing team made a lay-up on a fast break. Jack had been urging us to push the ball up the floor as quickly as possible and as I took the in-bounds pass, I looked up the court to see my teammate streaking down the wing. I wanted to fire him an outlet pass so we could put pressure on the opposing

defense before they had a chance to set up, but he didn't even turn his head. On the next offensive possession, I was dribbling with my left hand at the top of the key and looking over the defense. I called for a pick from one of my forwards, planning to use the screen to either pull up for an open jump shot or hit him with a pass as he rolled to the basket, but he didn't move an inch from the block. He just sort of went "Huh?" After Jack's directive, it was impossible to believe that these guys were just playing dumb, knowing that it would jeopardize their own standing.

"How do you feel you played this afternoon?" one of the reporters asked me later that day. I told him I'd played well, but was a little slower at one point than I could have been. The following day the headline read, "Meyers Finds NBA Tougher Than She Thought."

I wouldn't have seen it had the paper not been left open near the bench where our trainer, Davey Craig, taped my ankles every morning.

My interaction with the press in college had always been so positive. *People Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, *TIME*, whichever outlet it was, whenever I had been asked a question, I answered honestly, and though I wasn't big on reading about myself, according to my family, the press had always been very kind, glowing even. Now I worried that no matter what I said it would be misconstrued. The truth was that if there was anything I was sure of, it was that I had never been better prepared, mentally, emotionally or physically. I believed I had as good a shot as anyone. It surprised me that many sportswriters had made-up their minds before the trials had even begun.

Three years earlier Billie Jean King had beat Bobby Riggs on a national platform and the press seemed to rally around what was the most widely anticipated tennis

match of the year. There were 'his' and 'hers' camps. Regardless of which side of the court you sat on in that battle of the sexes, there was almost universal support for the concept. Billie Jean became the face of feminist women everywhere. Why were things so different in this situation? Was the skill set really so different when it came to basketball? Sure, men can run faster and jump higher, but there were always exceptions to the rule.

If there were press comments which I found demeaning, the other players likely found them humorous. I was certainly not unaccustomed to feeling like an outsider. In fact, I was used to it. But these circumstances magnified my sense of isolation. Never once did I regret being there, though. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I was playing my heart out. While it was difficult having cameras come within inches of me out on the court, I realized they were just doing their jobs.

Late in the afternoon on the second day, someone shouted out a question at me. "Miss Meyers, I wonder, do you ever feel like Jackie Robinson?"

I was humbled by the comparison. He and I had both played several sports and held several records at UCLA, but my name didn't deserve to be used in the same sentence with Jackie Robinson's. He had opened doors for millions who had found themselves shut out for too long. I wish I could say that I had had some greater plan, some burning desire to make inroads on behalf of all woman-kind, but that would be a lie. My only thought was making the team. Still, I appreciated that someone was acknowledging that what I was trying to achieve was historic, and I'm proud to be on the Board of Directors of his foundation, which generates millions of dollars worth of scholarships for minorities every year.

By the afternoon of the second day if my body was aching, I iced whatever hurt. Mentally I stayed focused and willed myself to the next practice. By the afternoon session of the third day the Hinkle Fieldhouse smelled of war; of the raw combat that had been the domain of men, of battlefields where women existed only as sweet distractions and it was inconceivable that one might actually consider herself a competent warrior. Yet there I was. Only I was no Joan of Arc; I simply wanted to play basketball and I wanted to play with the best. In my mind it was a question of ability, of potential, of seizing the ultimate opportunity. Was I exhausted? Yes. Was I aching? Yes. Did I believe that I'd make the cut? Yes.

During a two-on-two drill, I had the ball when a defender reached in. I ripped the ball through, pivoted away, and blew past him. I got to the hoop, made a reverse lay-up and scored.

Later in the session, Dudley Bradley stole the ball and exploded down court on a two-on-one fast break. I thought he was going to get all the way to the hoop, but the defender cut him off and Dudley passed the ball back to me. I pulled up and hit a jumper from the top of the key, just as I had done hundreds of times before.

In the final scrimmage of the day I pulled down a rebound and drove the ball quickly up the court. I faked a pass to the corner and then stepped into a three pointer, knowing it'd be difficult to get a shot off amongst the big trees inside. It looked good when it left my hand, but it went in and out.

When the session ended, Slick Leonard called me over. I followed him into one of the Butler University classrooms adjoining the gym. He pulled up a chair and sat with his back to the door so that the photographers, who were on the other side, their

cameras vying for a space in the small window of the door, couldn't see his face. I sat on the desk across from him and watched the press jockey for position. *Location, location, location*, I thought. It seemed whether you were an investor, a photographer, or a basketball player trying to get a shot off, it always came down to Real Estate. At least that's what I kept telling myself. I was trying to think of anything to stay cool. I realized it could go either way.