The AVCA History Commission was formed as a subgroup to the AVCA Diversity Development Team on December 1, 2020. The History Commission’s purpose is to recognize, amplify, and celebrate the rich and diverse history of the sport of volleyball. The first phase of the Commission’s work will explore the contributions of Black Americans to the sport of volleyball. Phase 1 is timed to coincide with the 40th Anniversary of the founding of the American Volleyball Coaches Association.
Verneda Estelle Thomas was born June 21, 1936, in Chicago, Illinois. It was not popular for young Black women to engage in sports, let alone the sport of volleyball during those times. The social dynamics for women were so much different, “the expectation was you went to school, then got married then lived happily ever after”. That was simplest way to describe the social paradigm placed on women at that time.

To understand Verneda’s story is to understand courage and persistence. Amazingly as a youth, sports and volleyball was an everyday aspect of her life growing up in the Windy City. Verneda was not the only trailblazer in her family after all. Her introduction to volleyball came from older sibling, Mary (Eloise Love) who had been playing volleyball for years before Verneda even picked up a ball. Mary, about 15 years older than Verneda, began “playing volleyball in her late teens, early 20s before going on to play professionally on courts from Hawaii to New York”. Mary would play for the Chicago Rebels in the 1930s and 1940s under legendary coach Bertha H. Lucas (who passed away on June 11, 2021 at the age of 102), ending her professional career in 1960 when her daughter and Verneda’s niece Karen was born. Mary would later become known as “the volleyball lady” in the Maywood and Proviso Township area of Chicago due to her long service as a volleyball referee, where she was seen on a ladder well into her 80s doing high school volleyball matches.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Mary and younger sister Verneda were the only two Blacks in volleyball. In a later interview, Thomas would describe her experience like this, “I was a little older (28) and we had nothing in common. And in the 1960s, it was kind of devastating as far as the racial discrimination thing. At the (USVBA) nationals, I couldn’t stay in the same hotel as my team….I had competed internationally in track and never had that same segregation in other countries that I encountered in the U.S.”

Mary’s and Verneda’s love of volleyball would “many times lead to sleeping in the station wagon because my sister and I couldn’t go in the hotels”.

Being such an active and exuberant child, the youngest of twelve children, Verneda found an outlet for her energy in athletics at the local YMCA. Showing a talent for track and field, Thomas would join the Chicago Comets track team and travel across the country for meets. The Comets being an integrated team meant almost insurmountable challenges in a segregated America in the 1950s. It resulted in serious challenges with access to ‘whites-only’ hotels and restaurants, etc. Facing those challenges with courage and persistence, Verneda would become an elite high jumper and at age 17 won the AAU Championship. Joining the 1956 Pan American Games track team, Verneda would compete internationally in Mexico City and from there would go on to compete all over the world representing the United States as a track athlete.

“Struggling to crack the top spot in the high jump”, Verneda began the transition to her ‘other love’, Volleyball. Transitioning to volleyball was not extremely difficult with help from Mary. “After a strong performance in the national tournament” that demonstrated her skill and athleticism, Thomas was chosen to be a member of the 1964 U.S. women’s volleyball team that would represent America in the Tokyo Games. Not only would Verneda break barriers as the first and only Black player on the team, 1964 was also volleyball’s introduction as an official sport of the Olympic Games. The team would finish ninth, but there are no words that could describe the elation Mary felt to watch her and Verneda’s love of volleyball lead from sleeping in the station wagon to this groundbreaking moment at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Thomas would return the Chicago Rebels after the Olympics and later would go on to join the Locahi Hawaiians in the mid-1970s. In 1972-73, Verneda attended Graceland College (University) in Iowa in hopes of furthering her education and starting a career outside of volleyball. Graduating in 1973, Thomas would move on to work for a cardiovascular research lab in Honolulu. She worked at the Queen’s Medical Center as research associate and then as a surgical technician until her retirement in 1996. In 1982, Verneda became a national volleyball official and was an FIVB qualified scorekeeper before retiring from that role at the end of the 2012-12 season. Verneda Estella Thomas passed away on March 30, 2016, at the age of 79. In a statement at the time of her death, then-USAV CEO Doug Beal said this, “To describe her as a ‘trailblazer’ hardly does her justice, but she surely was that…”

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