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.

PHASE 1 | VOL. 1.21

NATALIE WILLIAMS
Natalie Jean Williams was born in Southern California and grew up in Taylorsville, Utah, which is a suburb and a part of the Salt Lake City metropolitan area. Coming from a very athletic background, Natalie engaged in softball, basketball, volleyball, and track & field in her youth. With her Southern California roots, Williams grew up idolizing University of Southern California basketball legend Cheryl Miller. At Taylorsville High School, she would lead the Warriors to state championships in volleyball and basketball in her senior year (1988-89).

Many of her classmates tend to get ‘steered toward one sport or the other by high school. And certainly by college. Of the few who may have done that double collegiately, most have a more dominant sport of the two’. Recruited heavily out of high school for basketball, Williams wanted to follow in the footsteps of her idol, Cheryl Miller. Williams strongly considered going to USC, ‘but then fell in love with UCLA’s campus’ and the opportunity to play volleyball and basketball for the rival Bruins. Williams wasted no time proving that she was the exception by establishing herself as a bonafide superstar in both sports.

Joining the women’s volleyball program coached by the legendary Andy Banachowski in the fall of 1989, Williams would end the season as the 1989 Pac-10 Freshman of the Year and a second-team AVCA All-American. In four years of UCLA women’s volleyball, Natalie would be a catalyst for an elite level run that is one for the ages and the record books. In 1990 and 1991, the Bruins would claim back-to-back D-I national championships. Natalie would be named the tournament’s Most Outstanding Player in both years along with garnering first-team AVCA All-America. Coming off consecutive national championships, UCLA was primed to make a run at three in a row. Running the table in the regular season, the team entered the championship match in Albuquerque, New Mexico against conference rival Stanford undefeated. The Bruins would end up losing a heartbreaker in four sets to end the season at 33-1. From 1989-1992, the Bruins would have an overall win-loss record of 130 wins against 10 losses and a conference record of 70 wins and only 2 losses.

Williams would close out her volleyball career in Westwood as a four-time AVCA All-American (1-2nd, 3-1st) with 1,722 kills, 394 total blocks, and hitting percentage of .342. She would be named the 1992 AVCA National Player of the Year and the be named the nation’s best collegiate volleyball player with back-to-back Honda Awards for 1992 and 1993.

Natalie accomplished all this on the volleyball court while operating at a superstar level on the college basketball hardwood where she had career averages of 20.4 points per game, 12.8 rebounds per game, with field goal percentage of 52.8%. She would become the first women to earn All-America honors in basketball and volleyball.

One word. EXCEPTIONAL!

Coming off a disappointing ACL knee injury that robbed her of the final year of eligibility she had in basketball, Williams rehabbed and returned to volleyball competing in several international competitions including the 1995 Canada Cup and the 1995 World Cup. All set to make a run in the Atlanta Olympics, she would be in the last round of cuts and be left off the U.S. women’s national volleyball team in 1996.

Williams’ focus shifted to basketball, where she would go on to a successful professional and international career that would result in being named a two-time, All-ABL First Team, ABL MVP in 1998, four-time WNBA All-Star, and three-time All-WNBA First Team in nine professional seasons. In international play she would win three gold medals with the 2000 U.S. women’s national basketball team, and the 1998 and 2002 U.S. FIBA World Cup teams. She was inducted into the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame in 2016.

After retirement, Natalie became Coach Williams. Having coached basketball on the high school level, Williams is now the Director and Coach at the Natalie Williams Basketball Academy where she dedicates herself to sharing important life lessons that playing competitive sports at every level taught her.

Thanks to USA Volleyball, UCLA Athletics, espn.com, washingtonpost.com, and NatalieWilliamsBasketballAcademy.com for contributing to this article.