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.
Nona Richardson

Being an upstate New York kid, Nona Richardson took a liking to sports early in life. As a youth she developed a passion for basketball that led to a spot on the basketball team at Albany High School in Albany, New York. In her junior year of high school, her physical education teacher, Mary Ann Kinnaird, who doubled as the volleyball coach talked her into trying out for the volleyball team. She made the team, but a battle ensued as she basically sat the bench. Sitting the bench was probably one of the best things that could have happened to Nona. This period allowed her to learn the sport of volleyball and the nuances and timing of the game. This period also allowed a passion for volleyball to be stoked in her. In her senior year, back problems would limit her on the volleyball court. She got through the volleyball season but had to give up her senior year of basketball due to those back issues. Nona would go on to play some club volleyball at a high enough level on the tail end of her scholastic career and that led to questions about the possibility of playing college volleyball.

Graduating from Albany in 1978, heading to the West coast to play volleyball was recommended given the level of competition and the popularity of the sport, but Nona settled with walking on at Michigan State University instead. MSU had built a respectable and competitive program under coach Annelies Knoppers, plus with relatives in Detroit, Michigan was definitely ‘far enough West for a kid from upstate New York’.

At 5’6...and a half, Richardson might have been the shortest middle blocker ever, but with her athleticism and the timing she had developed playing against older more skilled players Richardson became a ‘force at the net’. A 36-inch vertical jump and exceptional quickness and lateral movement dumbfounded opponents given her physical stature. Her passion and hard work would help her overcome a ‘relative late start in the sport’ as she become one of the best players in Spartan volleyball program history. Becoming a scholarship athlete, a four-year letterwinner and a team co-captain, Nona would lead the team in kills (379) and total blocks (84) in her senior season in 1981.

Inspired by her high school P.E. teacher and volleyball coach, Nona would graduate from Michigan State University earning a bachelor’s degree in Physical Education. With her stellar collegiate volleyball career in the rearview mirror, Nona would take her passion for sports into the coaching world joining fellow Spartan alum and then University of Kentucky head women’s volleyball coach Kathy DeBoer’s staff as an assistant coach in 1984. Nona would develop her coaching acumen under DeBoer’s tutelage with designs on becoming a head coach herself. After three seasons on the Wildcat bench in Lexington, Eastern Michigan University would give her that chance hiring Richardson as the head women’s volleyball coach in advance of the 1987 season. Nona would lead the Eagles from 1987 to 1995 before reaching a fork in the road when then EMU athletic director Gene Smith asked her about replacing the senior women’s administrator who was planning to retire. With a passion for coaching still burning, Nona retorted, “Can I coach at the same time?” The answer was no. Lo and behold, Valparaiso University offered her the opportunity to continue coaching and be an administrator. From 1996-1999, Nona was Valpo Athletics’ head women’s volleyball coach and compliance director. Three years into her dual role a stipulation resulting from an NCAA certification that deemed her dual role a conflict of interest, Richardson decided to move into athletic administration full-time. In the midst of all the transition, Nona would earn her Master’s degree from VU in Human Behavior & Society in 1999. Between 1999-2002, Nona would serve as an assistant AD and associate AD. After six years in northern Indiana, she relocated south to Muncie, Indiana and Ball State University to serve in student-athlete support services and as the Cardinals’ SWA from 2002-07. After five years in Muncie, Nona finally made it to the West coast becoming senior associate AD at UC-Davis in March of 2007. At Davis, she would oversee compliance, student services, and the sports medicine program as well as lead various programs as a sport supervisor. In 2011, Nona continued her upward trajectory in athletics administration being named executive senior associate athletics director and SWA even serving as the interim athletics director in 2011-12. In November of 2014, University of Utah AD Dr. Chris Hill would introduce Nona as the senior associate athletics director and SWA for Utes Athletics. From 2014-2021, Nona would serve the student-athletes at Utah with passion, commitment, and empathy belying a former D-I student-athlete and a coach who understands their needs. Nona would rise to executive senior associate athletics director before the end of her tenure in Salt Lake City.

With a distinguished career spanning close to 40 years, Nona has served in many capacities including two stints on the NCAA D-I Volleyball Committee (2000-02 & 2008-12). She has served on the board of directors for NACWAA/Women Leaders in College Sports and has been featured as a speaker at the NCAA Convention and as a panelist for the NCAA Women’s Leadership Symposium. In 2009, Richardson was inducted into the inaugural Albany Schools Hall of Fame and in 2017 was named the NCAA FBS Administrator of the Year by Women Leaders in College Sports.

If you look closely, you will notice a word sprinkled throughout Nona’s journey that started in Albany...that word is “PASSION”. “You have to be PASSIONATE about what you do” is what Nona would say. In Nona’s case, as you can clearly see, it isn’t just in the talk, it’s definitely in the walk...