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. 1.36

SALIMA DAVIDSON ROCKWELL
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is one of the most unique cities in the world. Tucked into the mountainous terrain of the Allegheny Mountains with three rivers – the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio – converging...Pittsburgh rose from the banks of those mighty waters. Just to the east of downtown Pittsburgh is the municipality of Penn Hills, the second largest community in Allegheny County behind Pittsburgh. Penn Hills is home to the Penn Hills High School Indians. Among its alumni are many notable sports figures including Coach George Karl, NFLer Bill Fralic, current L.A. Rams defensive superstar Aaron Donald, and one Salima Davidson.

In four years at Penn Hills, Salima Davidson established herself as one of the best athletes to come out of the school and Western Pennsylvania. A two-sport athlete in basketball and volleyball, Salima would be named all-state three times in volleyball. In 1990, she would play an integral role for the Indians girls basketball team that finished the season at 32-1, captured the WPIAL and PIAA girl’s basketball state championship, and ended the season ranked fifth in the nation. As a Volleyball Magazine “Fab 50” athlete, Salima was heavily recruited in volleyball.

She would ultimately take her volleyball skills just down the road to State College to play for legendary volleyball coach Russ Rose and the Penn State women’s volleyball program.

As a Nittany Lion setter, Salima would become one of this illustrious program’s all-time greats. In four years, Salima would be a four-time letterwinner, three-time first team All-Big Ten, 1993 Big Ten Conference Player of the Year, and a three-time All-American. The individual accolades go alongside helping lead Penn State women’s volleyball to four NCAA tournament appearances including back-to-back national semifinal appearances in 1993 and 1994; finishing the ’93 season as national runner up. In her four seasons, the Nittany Lions would go a combined 116-19 and claim two Big Ten Conference championships. Salima would complete her stellar collegiate career having played in 442 sets tallying 421 kills, 382 blocks, 1,278 digs, 5,455 assists while hitting a solid .301 on 12.34 assists per game.

Earning a bachelor of arts degree in Speech Communications from Penn State in 1994, Salima would transition to professional and international volleyball serving as a two-time team captain for the U.S. Women’s National Team from 1995-99. Considered one of the top setters in the world, Salima would serve as an alternate at the 1995 and 1996 Olympic Games team, be named MVP of the Montreaux VBC tournament in 1998, and would also be a part of the 1998 FIVB World Championships squad that played in Japan.

After her playing days, Salima spent a successful three years in the private sector before volleyball reeled her back in as an assistant coach at the University of Pittsburgh from 2001-03. While with Panthers women’s volleyball, Salima would work primarily with the program’s setters and serve as the lead recruiter. In 2005, Salima would join the staff at Oregon State University led by her former coach with the U.S. National Team Terry Liskevych. After one season in Corvallis, Salima would make her way back to State College joining the staff as Director of Volleyball Operations in 2006. Coach Russ Rose had this to say about the Nittany Lion volleyball great’s return to the program as a coach,

”Very few people in the country are as good at their job as Salima is at hers. She has a great feel for winning and has the ability to bridge the experience of playing at Penn State and interacting with me. The fact that she advanced to being the captain of the women’s national team speaks to her drive and leadership. Her energy is fabulous and the players really respond well to her, and we are very fortunate to have her back at Penn State.”

In 2007, she would be promoted to assistant coach helping lead the program to back-to-back national championships in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, Salima would become an assistant at the University of Texas. As associate head coach, Salima would be named the AVCA Assistant Coach of the Year in 2012 with the Longhorns claiming the program’s second national championship and coach Jerritt Elliott’s first. Returning to Penn State as associate head coach in 2014, Rockwell would have an immediate and lasting impact as the Nittany Lions would claim the program’s seventh national title in 2014. From 2014 to 2017, Salima’s primary duties included working with the setters and the offense, recruiting and match preparation. “Between her playing days at Penn State and coaching at Penn State and Texas, she has participated in 10 final fours and won four national titles and mentored and coached numerous All-Americans.”

In 2017, Salima would retire from coaching, but not from volleyball. Salima remains close to the game of volleyball as the Technical Director for Austin Juniors VBC and TV Volleyball Analyst for ESPN, LHN, FOX Sports and The Big Ten Network.

You can’t help but see Pittsburgh in Salima with the convergence as an athlete, coach, and volleyball voice in her 30+ year association with the great sport of volleyball. And like Pittsburgh rose from the banks of those mighty rivers, Salima Davidson Rockwell continues her rise as a leader, advocate, and voice in the volleyball community.
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Diversity Awards
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