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 | FEATURE 4
“TEAM”

1989
LONG BEACH STATE UNIVERSITY
WOMEN’S VOLLEYBALL
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM
TEAM.

Noun:

a group of players forming one side in a competitive game or sport;
a group of individuals working together to achieve their goal;
a number of persons associated together in work or activity

The 1989 Long Beach State University Women’s Volleyball NCAA Division I National Championship Team
A team roster is more than jersey numbers, names, heights, positions…it’s the PEOPLE, the personalities, their backgrounds, and their experiences. PEOPLE whose lives have intersected and come together as a TEAM. From the #1 Recruit to the walk-on. From the Seniors to the Freshmen. Caring for one another. Representing something greater than any one member. Focused on bringing out the best in each other with the realization that we have more things in common than things that divide us.

“THE PEOPLE”

Merrilee Conway, 5-9, So, S, Madera, CA
Tara Cross, 5-foot-11, Sr, OH, Irvine, CA
Theresa Dahlberg, 6-2, Fr, MB, Sacramento, CA
Sabrina Hernandez, 5-7, Fr, S, Cerritos, CA
Alicia Mills, 6-2, Fr, MB, Houston, TX
Vicki Pullins, 6-3, Jr, MB, Las Vegas, NV
Christine Romero, 5-9, Fr, OH, Monrovia, CA
Sheri Sanders, 5-2, Sr, S, Riverside, CA
Krissee Sether, 5-11, Fr, RS, Grand Terrace, CA
Terri Smith, 5-8, Fr, DS, Cerritos, CA
Debbie Steele, 6-1, So, MB, Kent, WA
Cheryl Stephens, 5-11, Sr, Los Angeles, CA
Trisonya Thompson, 6-0, Sr, MB, Cerritos, CA
Sherri Thormahlen, 5-7, So, OH, Coeur d’Alene, CA
Antoinette White, 5-9, So, OH, Lynwood, CA
Head Coach: Brian Gimmillaro (LBSU ’70)
Assistant Coaches: Debbie Green-Vargas, Linda Chishom-Carrilo
A Team Leader isn’t always made or chosen, sometimes they are just born. That transcendent person or talent that motivates and guides the team toward its goal. Leading by example. Caring. Hardworking. Loyal. Trustworthy. Strength in the face of adversity.

Tara Cross (Battle) was born September 16, 1968 in Houston, Texas. Relocating to California, she played interscholastically at Gahr High School in Cerritos her junior season and then transferred to Southern California Christian for her senior campaign in 1985. Coached by Ed Grover at SCCHS, she led the team to the CIF 1-A title and was named all-league, CIF MVP, and MVP of the state tournament. Upon graduation, Cross was listed on the 1986 Volleyball Monthly Fab 50 roster and was considered one of, if not the top women’s volleyball recruit in the country for the Class of ’86. Joining the 49ers women’s volleyball program in 1986, Tara would build on her standing as one of the top amateur women’s indoor players in the sport.

Cross would go on to be named a two-time American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) NCAA Division I Player of the Year and a four-time AVCA All-America selection at Long Beach State University. She was named to the All-Decade team for the 1980s and of course she led Long Beach State women’s volleyball team to the school’s first-ever national title in 1989 as the 49ers finished 31-5 overall. Cross-Battle set records in the NCAA for career kills with 2,767, which included a personal-best and school-record 47 kills in a single match. Her senior year (1990), she received the Honda Award for volleyball, an award given to the most outstanding collegiate female athletes.

Her dominance continued on the U.S. Women’s National Team where she was an all-around skilled passer and world-class hitter. She became the United States’ first four-time volleyball Olympian, competing in the Games in 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004.

In her Olympic debut, she helped the United States to the bronze medal in Barcelona. She competed in three FIVB World Championships (1990, 1994, 2002), winning the bronze medal in 1990 and the silver medal in 2002. She was instrumental in the United States winning gold medals in the 1995 and 2001 FIVB World Grand Prix, along with bronze medals in the 2003 FIVB World Cup and World Grand Prix. She was named Best Scorer and Most Valuable Player of the 1995 FIVB World Grand Prix. In 2001, Cross-Battle led the U.S. to the NORCECA Continental Championship and was named most valuable player in the tournament.

Cross-Battle played professionally overseas in Italy and Brazil from 1992 to 2003. After her retirement from playing professional/international volleyball, she became a juniors coach back in her home state of Texas. She currently serves as head training coach for Houston Juniors Volleyball Club, which captured the 17 National Division silver medal in the 2014 USA Volleyball Girls’ Junior National Championships.

For her dominant volleyball skill and sustained international success, Tara Cross-Battle was induced into the International Volleyball Hall of Fame in 2014.
Volleyball is the ultimate of team sports. Ask any athlete on a team or coach of a team. How did our team; how did this team end up hoisting the championship trophy? It was TEAMWORK. It was collaboration. It was coordination. It was cooperation.

Adversity was no match for teamwork. Volleyball Magazine pegged Long Beach women’s volleyball as the #1 team in its 1989 preseason poll. Long Beach had some prior success, but not the reputation amongst the volleyball experts.

Maybe the critics were right. They started 9-0, then lost the next 4 out of 5. They practiced hard. Hawaii won two straight against them. They practiced harder. Coach Brian Gimmillaro and the staff evaluated the team and they also evaluated themselves and each other. They held each other accountable. The starting lineup was tweaked. They won 13 straight and 17 of their final 18 to close out the season. They held each other accountable.

They opened tournament play with a win over San Diego State. They vanquished Big West rival Pacific on their home court in four sets. And now another Big West rival loomed, the team that swept them in the regular season, Hawaii. Down 2 sets to 1, they stormed back to take the fourth set 15-8 and then 15-10 in the fifth and final set to make it to the D-I volleyball national semifinals. They took down UT-Arlington 3 set to 1 setting up a championship match with the University of Nebraska.

The team wasn’t concerned what the other team thought, what others thought. That they had a rotation dominated by Black student-athletes. As a team, they practiced harder, they held each other accountable, they knew they were faster, more skilled. They cared for each other. They cared for Long Beach State University. They knew how much it would mean to the university and the city of Long Beach.

No one can be sure if the team, Coach G, or anyone knew how much it would mean to college volleyball.

Down 1-9 in the first set to Nebraska, the 49ers would win 44 out of the next 53 points including a 15-0 second set to sweep the Cornhuskers and bring home the 1989 NCAA D-I women’s volleyball national championship.

It was a TEAM that developed as TEAMMATES led by their talented, trusted and transcendent leader, Tara Cross; and that produced excellent TEAMWORK and a championship team that changed collegiate volleyball forever.

Almost 32 years later, we still have an opportunity to learn more from the 1989 Long Beach State University women’s volleyball national championship team. What can we learn, TEAM?
AVCA DDT HISTORY COMMISSION

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2008 AVCA HALL OF FAMER

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HEAD WOMEN’S VOLLEYBALL COACH
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

MAGGIE COUTURE
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JACKSONVILLE UNIVERSITY

SARAH GRAVES

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NICKIE SANLIN, AVCA DIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT TEAM CHAIR

KENNEDY D. WELLS, AVCA STAFF LIAISON

AVCA

DIVERSITY AWARDS

Live It, Love It, Coach It!

40 ANNIVERSARY

1977 – 2017