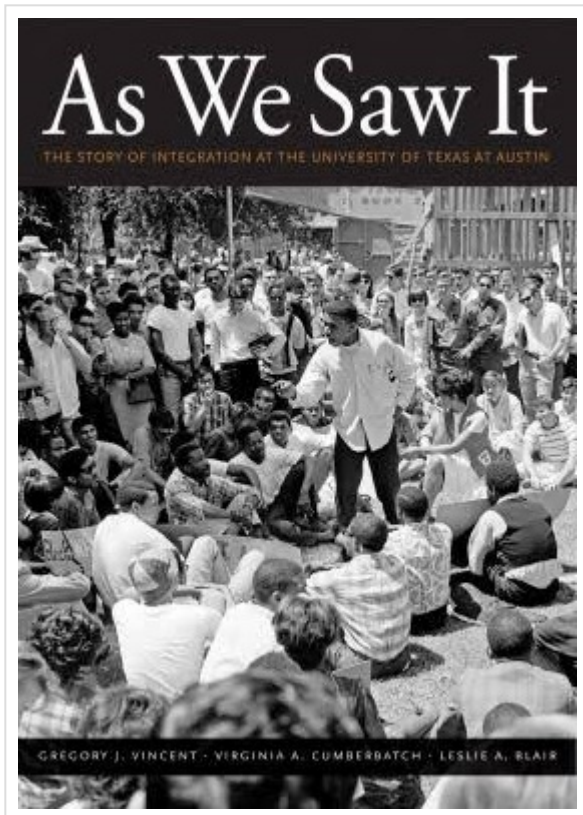


Celebrating Black History Month: Sneak Preview Into 'As We Saw It'

Posted on **February 9, 2018** by **Jessica Sinn**



In honor of Black History Month, we're turning back the pages of time to the mid-1970s—an era when women's sports programs were in the early stages of development on the Forty Acres. This pivotal point in UT Austin history is documented in the forthcoming book *"As We Saw It"* (UT Press). The collection of stories, co-edited by [Division of Diversity and Community Engagement](#) staff and faculty, gives readers a glimpse into the lives of the first Black undergraduate students to enroll at the university. Told against the backdrop of the Jim Crow South, this narrative is inextricably linked to current conversations about race, identity, access and equality in higher education.

Read this abridged chapter to learn more about the first Black female student athlete to receive an athletic scholarship at UT Austin. And be sure to pick up a copy when it hits bookshelves in Austin area bookstores on March 23!

Retha Swindell

The first athletic scholarship was not offered to a female athlete at UT until 1974. Women were thus faced with the complex task of navigating both the uncharted waters of racial integration and gender social politics. Sports as a pathway to educational opportunity and social mobility for women of color was less defined yet just as transformative. The experience of Retha Swindell, UT's first Black female athlete, who played basketball for Texas from 1970 to 1974, provides a look into an under-explored experience.

The gender parity between female athletes and male athletes, regardless of race, was ever present during Retha's ascension to college prestige.

"In high school we were always told we had to be better than our white counterparts," she explained. "We were always taught you have to work, work, work. I remember Bill Russell and Oscar Robertson. I remember watching that group on TV. I remember liking Johnny Roberts from Nebraska; I definitely knew Jesse Owens, and there was definitely pride in seeing them compete. You always wanted to see someone Black on TV. Those male trailblazers represented progress and opportunity for all Black Americans. There was little visible precedent for women of color; our path was less defined and less lauded."



- Swindell sits with teammates in her final season as a Longhorn.

That was the type of environment that female athletes faced. Black women were confronted with the challenge of advocating for more resources for female athletes while also pursuing more social

opportunities and administrative support for all Black students. Before the introduction of Title IX, the UT women's basketball team would hold bake sales and car washes to raise funds to travel to games and/or cut expenses by camping out in sleeping bags in the gym of the team they were playing.

The year Retha came to UT Austin, the women's basketball team transitioned from an intramural sport to a varsity sport, thanks to Title IX, which was signed into law in 1972. Coach Rodney Page had been hired to teach physical education in 1972 by Dr. Betty Thompson, who oversaw recreational sports. In the fall of 1973, she asked him to coach the women's basketball team.²⁵ He was the first Black coach in an official capacity at UT. Page told Texas Athletics writer Natalie England, "I can't say that there was much overt opposition, but at that time in the history of The University of Texas, there were no black head coaches and very few black faculty."

For Retha, Coach Page's position helped make possible her positive experience in a nominally integrated sports environment.

"Rodney drove the van to our out-of-town games, washed uniforms, and helped us mature as young women. He made sure we all knew each other. We learned to appreciate everybody's differences. He would even pick whom we roomed with when we the women's basketball program, seemed, at the very least insensitive to racial overtones. It was natural for her to want to put her own person in the job with so much at stake."

Michaelson says, however, that Retha, who had been recruited by Page, decided to give Conradt "the benefit of the doubt." In fact, Jody Conradt recalled in a 2007 Texas Monthly interview that only two team members decided to stay on the team after Coach Page was fired—Retha and Cathy Self.

Retha would go on to become team captain her final year and would become her team's first All-American. She also holds the Longhorn record for number of rebounds, 1,750.

"When journalists, historians, and students ask me about what the experience of being the first Black female basketball player at UT means, it's always puzzling because although I was aware that was my story, my circumstances were just a part of the journey to get me to college and to get me a life beyond my childhood," Retha reflected. "I did what I had to do, and I'm grateful if it has made a difference."

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