England Netball 90th Anniversary Oral History Project

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Interviewer: Brian Worrell

Interviewee: Anne Miles

BW: My name is Brian Worrell, an England Netball Honorary Life Member and I’m interviewing Anne Miles, ex-England captain on the 27th October 2016 at her home in Hertford for the England Netball history project. Could we perhaps start Anne by you introducing yourself with your name, where you’re from and what you are presently doing.

AM: My name is Anne Miles, I live in Hertford and I am retired although I am still doing a little bit of massage and reflexology. Since I stopped playing international netball, I then took up playing a bassoon which I really didn’t know to start off with what it looked like, but I’ve persevered and it’s taken me quite a long time to sort of play it reasonably enough but I’m very fortunate that I play in Stevenage symphony orchestra and I fill in at Hertford symphony orchestra playing the contrabassoon which is an enormous instrument and I play in a Hitchin concert band and several small groups. Other than that, I’ve got lots of friends and my family keep me busy as well.

BW: Great, thank you Anne. It’s really great meeting up with you again and for you to agree to be interviewed. This project is about capturing the experiences and stories of our netball history. This includes both oral as well as written and pictorial. I’m therefore very interested in your involvement in netball and in sport in general and how they may have helped you in your career. Perhaps we could start with you and your long career in netball. How did you actually get into it?

AM: Well at school I played netball, bit of hockey, and then we played lacrosse and I think I was in the lower sixth and our PE teacher was playing for Hertfordshire second team and they were playing in an indoor evening the first team and the second team and the team they were playing was Surrey, with Mary French playing and captain of Surrey, and she was playing Goal Defence and she seemed to appear on the court and do these fantastic interceptions and travelled down the court using a bounce to get on a bit further and I was just overwhelmed how spectacular she was. While we were watching this match one of the Hertfordshire girls came up to me and said ‘Oo we are short of someone in the second team Anne will you play?’ So of course I hadn’t got any kit but they managed to fit me up with a shirt that vaguely fitted and a skirt and shoes that didn’t quite fit and I just had to get on the court and play and of course I didn’t know any of the players and I did do one or two interceptions but I think I threw to the opposition probably more than to our team, Hertfordshire team. On the way home on the tube one of my friends said to me ‘Do you know Anne, you’ll be playing for England one day’ and I said ‘Oh no don’t be so stupid’. So that was really my first bit.

BW: Okay and what clubs did you play for and on your way to England?

AM: Well when I finished college I wasn’t sure really whether I was going to play lacrosse, which I loved or netball. We in fact formed a team called Barnet because I was living in Barnet at that time. It was made up of some of the staff at Queen Elizabeth’s where I was at school and some of us who had left school and one or two of our players from Hatfield Girls School where I was teaching. So that was my first club.

BW: And did you have any other clubs beyond that?

AM: Not in Hertfordshire, no I only played in one club in Hertfordshire because there wasn’t much time to play.

BW: Right, now we’ve heard about a team called The ROOS, perhaps you could give us an insight into that, what is or what are The ROOS, who plays in it and where do they play?

AM: Well The ROOS international club was formed after the 2nd world tournament in Perth in 1967 where we were all gathered I think in Mary French’s room after the tournament had finished and because we got on so well together she suggested that perhaps we could form this club called The ROOS International Netball Club of England players who had played abroad. They had to have played abroad to have experienced being on a tour which is different from playing just a match in England. This took off and we played in many venues around the country providing opposition for county teams and sometimes even an England team and we tried to draw the players from that area of the country but it did involve quite a lot of travelling I must say but it was absolutely great because whoever got on the court we all just gelled and so it was a good feeling and we were helping to take netball to areas of the country where they perhaps haven’t seen such a high standard of play and although we are actually a bit beyond playing two or three of our members are still very heavily involved in the game and we do meet regularly, usually my house and you can imagine there is tremendous laughter as we remember all the great times that we had and that is so special in netball that we’ve got to remember that it was great fun.

BW: Brilliant, lovely, okay. Now you made it to England Captain and what were the most exciting or challenging features of that role?

AM: I think it’s trying to get the best out of people and feeling how people are reacting to certain situations because I can remember one of our players when she was nervous she just talked nonstop and you know some people found that a bit distracting and another player would sort of retire into her shell because she really wanted to get concentration up so you actually had to work out which was the best thing for everybody, so they could actually provide their best performance at that particular time. And it wasn’t just on the court, on the tours it was making sure that everybody was involved all the time and there wasn’t one person left by herself, unless for that particular reason she wanted to be by herself. Also you were obviously representing England so you had to make sure that your approach to people was always good and respectful as well and friendly, I think that was very important, and I think we did get a name for being a friendly group of people.

BW: Excellent, okay, now back then, netball had presumably a low profile and not much public awareness, so what was it like being in that sort of environment?

AM: Well it was quite interesting because when we were on tour we were actually quite a focal point and the West Indies we were in all the papers and some of our girls were very very stylish and appeared virtually like a page three girl but not quite, and we did make quite an impact I must say. This was the same in South Africa because I think we’ve got to remember that many many places hadn’t seen an international team, and we did go to quite way out for places and we went to in South Africa into some of the townships where they hadn’t actually had white people before so that was quite, you just felt so responsible that you were actually giving a very good image. Then Australia and New Zealand, netball is a very high profile game and still is and so you did get reported in the newspaper every time after a match and particularly the world tournament. In England, when I started playing there were hardly any sports halls and so you played at the back of the school on the netball courts so you actually weren’t visible to the public and I think so many people did regard it as a school girl game but certainly my local paper they were very good they always put a little bit in about when I was playing an international match and I have got some cuttings. Even the public newspapers you know like The Telegraph, we did get a little bit in occasionally.

BW: Okay, just remind me what years did you play England?

AM: Well I started as a further reserve my first year and I played for Hertfordshire, that must have been 63’/64’ and that really was just a further reserve because we didn’t have training or anything then. And so I think I got into the team in 65’ I think it was and then after the second world tournament in Perth, when I came home I actually said I wasn’t going to play for a year because I had played an awful lot out in Australia and New Zealand and I felt I needed break and then I came back and that was when I was made captain the first time and then I played until 1975.

BW: Excellent, a ten year career! Out of all the internationals that you’ve played around that time, which did you find the most exciting and memorable?

AM: It’s difficult to say, because you depending on where you were playing but I think probably the world tournaments gave the most exciting matches. For the Jamaican world tournament there was not much to choose I don’t think between Australia, New Zealand and us and we had a most exciting game against Australia just losing by one goal I think it was and that was very very good. In New Zealand when we beat New Zealand by one goal that was absolutely amazing. But then there are other matches where you might not remember the game so much but the actual fact that this team was playing and when we were in South Africa we actually played against the first coloured netball team because at that point we played the South African team but we also played this coloured team in Cape Town and they had been rooting for us when we played South Africa so it was very interesting when we actually played them and I felt well this is a breakthrough and now of course they are an integrated team.

BW: Excellent, yeah very good. Coming back to the England squads can you remember any of them, any of the players? Perhaps we could track some of them down.

AM: Yes, Marion Lofthouse, Cathy Hickey, Eunice Smith, Linda Allison, Maria Stewart, Colette who is still very involved I think, Judy Heath, Helen Crowest and unfortunately one or two have died since we were playing so there’s a whole group and as we still keep contact it’s lovely, Janice Bannister, even when I was playing in that first team in 1967 we still have contacts.

BW: I think that’s brilliant, it really is.

AM: Oh and Joyce Wheeler of course and Pat Green who played in 1967 as a shooter, we’ve made contact with her again so that’s great.

BW: That’s good to hear, yeah excellent, I’d never heard of Pat Green then so okay.

AM: Ahhh, played for Middlesex.

BW: And did you do that for Mary French’s book then?

AM: Yes we wrote to as many ROOS as we could so we got some very nice we actually asked them for what they remembered about playing for England and anything special and obviously they remembered Mary’s part in it all and then we asked for a picture of them playing when they were playing and a picture of them as now and we also tried to get as many of the team photographs as we could. It was Cathy Hickey was the person who put it all together and got it done properly. It is a marvellous record I think.

BW: Excellent, okay. Now from the visiting teams, international teams point of view, Wembley Arena was always somewhere where they wanted to play, sort of like a kudos thing. Can you perhaps describe why that was or what is was like?

AM: Well I think it was the pinnacle of netball because rather like, I remember taking youngsters to the hockey international that was at Wembley Stadium and that was their pinnacle and Wembley Empire Pool was our pinnacle. Every year we knew that there would be an exciting match on so school girls came from all over the country to the Empire Pool.

BW: Okay, now coming back to your playing career again, what was it like the first time you went out onto the court representing England, the buzz, the butterflies, the enjoyment, the trepidation, or whatever?

AM: Well I think it actually was my first international match so it was rather mind blowing and we had to have a blazer made and you had to have your skirt and clean plimsolls because we didn’t have trainers at that particular time, we had to make sure they were spotless as you would for any match. I think one of the best things that I was told was when you walk out, smile and that does make so much difference because as soon as you smile you tend to relax and I think to hear the noise and the marching on music and then seeing all these faces you think (gasp) I’ve got to play netball, help, help, will I be able to catch the ball? You know you were a little bit worried to start off with. But then once you start playing you’re so concentrated on the game that it’s not until you’ve finished and hopefully you’ve won, then you can sort of relax a little bit. And the fact people wanted autographs! Well that was quite incredible, no one had asked for my autograph before!

BW: Quite right too, so they should! Again going back to those sorts of times what was the kit like, the training the camaraderie?

AM: Well, we were probably the first group that really began to take training, have the opportunity to take training more seriously because from what I gather from when I first started, we had one person came and did a training session and then someone else would come and do a training session so there wasn’t a sort of unified training, but then Mary French became the coach and she realised that netball is a very physical game and you have to be fit to play. So she got Norman to come, who was a rowing coach fitness person to come and actually give us fitness training and we were monitored very carefully and if you didn’t improve that was a bit difficult because at the beginning of the training session we would be tested and it was of course when you didn’t have gymnasiums or you wouldn’t you know you didn’t just go to the gym we had to do most of our training at home. Some of us had access to a gym if you were a teacher of physical education but some of our members of the team were young mums with children so you know it was quite interesting and we had to go and fill our little bags with sand from the sand pit so that we could do our weight training and telephone directories or bags of sugar, and I always remember I was living at home at that particular time and I was doing my step ups and the next-door neighbour came running banging on the back door saying ‘I can see this body going up and down up and down, is everything alright?’ and we assured him it was. And also obviously some of it involved running and interval training and it was difficult because you really weren’t seen on the streets running and I had to do it sort of early in the morning or late at night and it was amazing, I think it did really help us tremendously.

BW: Okay, now in the whole of your playing career, what was your most memorable moment and what made it memorable?

AM: I think this is very difficult, it’s like when I go on holiday someone said ‘Oo what was the best part of your holiday?’ and I said ‘Well there was so many best parts’ I find it very difficult to actually say that’s the best part. I mean if I think of netball it’s not just playing the game, it’s having everyone round you and all the support from not only your coach and your umpire, when we had a manager, the whole of England Netball, the support of your county, the support of your team and your friends and the support of the whole you know your team and I think that’s why we formed The ROOS, we’ve actually continued our friendships, so friendship is a big big highlight I think. I think also, I was very lucky to go on these tours to the West Indies twice, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand because when we went we did stay occasionally in hotels but quite often we were staying in people’s houses homes, and that gave us an insight of actually the people of the country. Also we were taken to sugar cane factories, breweries and all sorts of different things so we were very fortunate in having all these different experiences so that’s another highlight of being able to have all these experiences in different countries. And then of course playing the game and do you know what I said the highlight was the game in the West Indies and then the New Zealand game as well, so different highlights but one outstanding one is very very difficult to say.

BW: Okay, we’ll leave it there then because we’re going to change track now. You’ve had a very demanding and successful career. How do you think netball might have helped you in that?

AM: I think that the fact is that you actually have to go out and meet people so I think that is very important and I worked first of all in a secondary school teaching physical education and the school was very supportive to me and then I worked as an advisory teacher mainly in primary schools promoting physical education and of course netball was one of the things and I think we did a lot to try and bring netball into primary schools and then developing First Step Netball and High 5 netball which was very interesting. Then I worked as an adviser again meeting people and be able to sort of make a relationship very quickly to find out what their interests were, I think that was very important because when we were on tour you were meeting all these different people and again you had to connect with them and Judy Heath was marvellous at this and she always went up to the Mayor and say ‘You’ve got a lovely chain’ and of course that broke the ice completely.

BW: Yeah lovely okay, but how did you manage the demands of international netball along with a career in education?

AM: Yes well I think nowadays you probably couldn’t because your demands of playing and training are much higher now. I mean it was quite difficult because your training had to be fitted in and I’d be seen running round the track every now and then you know and in the gym. You had to be very careful I think of balancing your life so it wasn’t just netball and work, you had to have other things going on as well and I think that’s very important to remember. I think one of the things was the county was so supportive, you know if I was asking for leave to perhaps be off for two weeks because I was on tour and they were very good and they gave it to me so I was very lucky, whereas some of the girls didn’t have that. And the support of my parents as well, they were very good.

BW: Of course yes, that leads very nicely, and we have already touched upon it to some extent, today England players have access to a support structure which includes elite training facilities, health professionals, physio’s etcetera. What was is like back then and what was your training regime? In a way you have covered some of that but I think the comparison between then and now would be helpful.

AM: Right, well we didn’t have any physiotherapists and in fact if someone got a bad muscle I was asked to massage it and actually I have trained as a massage therapist and reflexologist since I left my job in education so that might have been helpful. As regards eating I do remember on one occasion where we kept on having little buffets and we didn’t actually sit down to a main meal and Mary French said ‘You must eat some protein! Make sure you’ve got some protein’. I think we took responsibilities for ourselves to keep ourselves as fit as we could. Training, I think, I can’t remember, it was about once every six weeks we’d have a training weekend or a training day and for some of them you know coming down from Birmingham or Lancashire or coming up from perhaps somewhere like Gloucestershire it was jolly hard for some of the people and I know Judy Heath they used to come on the milk train I think from Birmingham sometimes and my parents were very good at putting them up. So that was different and I suppose we didn’t have the pressures which the England team have got now because they are now well I suppose because of the different way things are organised, they are given time to go out and promote netball aren’t they whereas we actually promoted it through playing for clubs and playing for our counties basically.

BW: So it’s quite a difference then in other words.

AM: Oh it is, I think very very different. I think we all feel that we were very fortunate to have been playing when we did because we had these opportunities for touring which perhaps they don’t get so much now, I think it’s more probably going to a hotel, playing their match and coming back again which happened in some of the cases but mainly it was either, I mean I remember going to Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales and we stayed in people’s houses, which is fine, I suppose perhaps being in a hotel altogether you get the feel, but I think we still had that feel of being a team.

BW: And of course learnt a bit about the local people as well.

AM: Yes and you know how different people train I think that’s very interesting because when we were in New Zealand I stayed with Shirley Langrope (?) who was a fantastic wing attack from New Zealand and you know we could talk about ways of training and you pick up things from them and hopefully we support them and one reason we beat New Zealand, she was injured so she couldn’t play so I said ‘Come on! We’re gonna get this game’. And we did.

BW: Changing track again slightly, I’d just welcome your views on this. We just had a very successful Olympics in Rio, what’s your view on whether netball should become a playing Olympic sport?

AM: Well I think we’ve been working on this ever since I was playing netball actually to try and get netball into the Olympics. If it could be in the Olympics that would be great. I think the world tournament and the Commonwealth tournaments, I mean we didn’t actually play in the Commonwealth tournaments, that happened after I finished. It’s all for promoting the game and illustrating that you know it’s a game for everyone which I think is most important, it’s not just the elite but you know grass roots netball is very important as well. I think if it was in the Olympics it would perhaps just give that a little bit more highlight of the importance of the game, but I don’t like some of the way the Olympics are going in the fact it is just the top people who win the gold that are the ones that are praised whereas I think just getting to the Olympics is a tremendous achievement and I feel quite strongly about that.

BW: I like your strong views Anne, yes, okay. Back to your career in education as a PE adviser. What do you see as the crucial elements to attract girls and women into netball? You must have some insight into that.

AM: Now I think you’ve got to, I think when looking back on it I probably put some youngsters off the game because they had to out without tracksuits in cold weather because that was the thing we didn’t have tracksuits then. I think now because you’ve got more indoor facilities it’s more accessible for youngsters but I think also the way it’s taught that in fact it’s fun to take part is very very important and I think sometime we perhaps get a little bit too serious and you’ve got to know what you do for which people, you know what I mean? So, and I think now there are so many different sports that its actually more difficult to actually just concentrate on netball, but I know in some schools it’s the teams who get extra support because they might have outside coaches coming in and I think this has happened in primary schools now they have someone who comes in to take the netball but I just hope that it’s inclusive.

BW: Okay, and turning in a sense to yourself Anne, what would Anne Miles say to the young Anne Miles of today who would want to succeed in netball?

AM: Set your sights high but realise that it does mean quite a lot of work, it means a bit of sacrifices as well but it’s challenging and I think if you want to challenge yourself it’s a very good sport to be able to play and also if you want to make friends and play as a team I think that’s very important because some people prefer team sports, some people prefer individual sports.

BW: Okay, and as an afterthought, do you have any anecdotes or stories about netball that you would like to share with us?

AM: Well I don’t know whether I could dare share some of them.

BW: Try me.

AM: Well I don’t think I better, no I won’t tell you that one. Anecdotes, well there was the time in South Africa that if you said you liked something they would provide it all, well wherever we went actually so someone mentioned they liked pineapples and so what did we do is we went along to the next place where we were playing we stopped at a wayside store and the boot was full of pineapples. And in Australia someone mentioned they liked prawns so we had this huge packet of prawns delivered to us and of the course the room was quite full of a delightful smell by the end. And then in South Africa someone, milk tart is one of their dishes, right milk tart, so when we got to this little hotel by side each bedside on each bedside table there was a milk tart which was quite big, wasn’t just a little milk tart, it was a big one and of course it was quite difficult to know what to do with this milk tart because in no way were we going to eat it all and one girl, I won’t tell you her name, decided to put hers down the loo which of course blocked the loo which was rather sad so that was a bit embarrassing but I don’t know whether the staff actually found out what was blocking the loo but still never mind. I think we set all the drainage system completely wrong. Little incident, again in South Africa, I can remember we went, no it was in Namibia, which wasn’t it was South West Africa then and we went to a township school to just coach and this township school had never had white people in and that was amazing. They had all bought plimsolls, now they never played in plimsolls so they must have spent I don’t know how much money on these plimsolls you just felt so awful that they had done that for us particularly as they really didn’t like playing in plimsolls and they took them off because they couldn’t play in plimsolls. That really made you think hard and another occasion there where we went to a Bantu reserve and we went to one of their high schools it was a boarding school and it was incredible because they all wore berets and hats and things but they wanted to show us their netball obviously because that’s why we were there and they played on this court which they made themselves and again they’d manufactured the netball goals and the actual layout was quite funny, well it wasn’t funny but it was unusual and they played slightly different rules but they were so enthusiastic and you thought you know it’s absolutely great their enthusiasm and I think we all felt quite humble and they were so pleased that we’d come to see them and there were several many occasions when you really thought well I’m just Anne Miles you know and here these people treating us like royalty in a way and I think that really made us quite humble.

BW: Lovely Anne, lovely. Well that’s it actually, so many thanks for your time this evening, really appreciated that. I found it interesting and fascinating, some things there that I didn’t know about you.

End of interview