

A good

BY STEVE MARANTZ

Nera White lives alone amid hill and hollow of middle Tennessee, with five dogs, three guns and a temperamental tractor. Her brick house on Oak Knob Ridge is a short piece from the farm on which she grew up, the oldest of seven children, in an unpainted bungalow that burned down years ago. A few miles south is the town of Lafayette, where she took a first dribble toward becoming the dominant women's basketball player of her era. Here, among her cattle and tobacco fields, ramrod straight in blue jeans and flannel shirt, hat pulled over wispy gray hair, she passes for an everyday farmer. But no Tennessee farmer ever brought forth a harvest of musty trophies such as those that line her shelves.

Hers is quiet legend by today's amplified standards. She played for Nashville Business College from 1955 through 1969, an era when women were governed by the Amateur Athletic Union and had unlimited eligibility. They played a different game — six to a side, two in the offensive zone, two in the defensive, and two free to roam the court. Nobody played it better than White, 6 feet 1, slope-shouldered, slender and fast. Nashville won 10 national titles with White; eight straight from 1962 through 1969.

Contemporaneous was the NBA dynasty of the Boston Celtics, who won titles in 10 of 11 years from 1959 through '69. Indeed, White meant as much to Nashville as Bill Russell did to the Celtics. An explosive leaper, she positioned under the basket on defense. Her speed enabled her to snatch a rebound, trigger a fast break and catch up with the play before it reached the other end. As point guard, she was equally deft potting perimeter shots and dribbling the lane for layups. A defense collapsing on White was rent by a canny bounce or shovel pass to an unguarded woman. She was named AAU Tournament MVP 10 times.

A former teammate, Sue Gunter, now coach of Louisiana State University's women, characterizes her as "a Babe Didrikson type" whose athleticism elevated her to the highest level of women's softball as well as basketball.

"She was the first woman I ever saw dunk it. She was one of a few women with hands able to hold the ball and get up over the rim," Gunter says. "She was incredibly quick and fast. You saw guys do things she did, but not women. She could shoot the 3, go in and post up, lead the team in steals, and 'D' up. The thing setting her apart from athletes in her era was her physical ability to run and dunk.

"If she played today, she would still be a superstar, no question in my mind. The Good Lord only blesses a few people with that kind of skill. She could have been a world-class sprinter or high jumper. But she only had access to basketball and softball, so she became amazing at that."

It seems archaic now, but White played for pleasure. She received room and board while playing for Nashville and attending Peabody College for Teachers. After graduating, she was hired in a printing shop by Nashville's sponsor, H.O. Balls, a wealthy businessman. The job was no facade, demanding long hours at low wages — \$1 an hour in the late 1950s. But playing brought one tangible bonus — she stayed on the printing-shop clock even while practicing and traveling to road games.

Games were played in high school gyms before a couple thousand fans, and revenues were meager. Coverage was minimal, too. A two-paragraph newspaper mention was the most they could expect until the national tournament. Nashville's team traveled in cars, crossing midwestern and southern states on two-lane roads, sleeping four to a room at Howard Johnsons. White enjoyed driving. Nothing she liked better than pointing a car down a sun-drenched Route 66 and cranking Patsy Cline on the radio. She experienced freedom and joy on basketball's blue highways, but her enrichment was purely sensory. After adopting a son in 1969, she left the game just as it was lurching into the modern five-player era. She was 33 and, some say, at her peak.

In the years since, White, 60, became something of a recluse. She always had wanted to go back to farming. She left Nashville and narrowed her world to Oak Knob Ridge, where she inherited land and



She has been called the greatest women's basketball player who ever lived. But Nera White's greatness is equaled only by her relative anonymity.

Associate Editor Leslie Gibson McCarthy first learned of White from the pages of "At the Rim: A Celebration of Women's Collegiate Basketball." Last year while at the Women's Final Four in Minneapolis, McCarthy, enamored of the legend of White, asked other reporters what they knew of her. Sadly, most outside of Tennessee never had heard of her. McCarthy was puzzled. How could this Michael Jordan of women's basketball be so unknown?

With the women's game gaining in popularity, McCarthy felt it was time to unravel the mystery of Nera White, and Senior Writer Steve Marantz was dispatched to Tennessee.

What he found was a poignant story.

