

worked. Wayland went down, again. Her description is as if the game were yesterday.

Some of her richest if not entirely pleasant memories are of international play. In 1957, she led the U.S. women to a gold at the World Championships in Brazil. White survived dysentery and a lacerated upper lip to ignite a last-minute comeback against the Soviets in the final.

She was with an American contingent — men and women — venturing to the Soviet Union in 1958, at the height of the Cold War. Soviet women, nurtured by the state, were big and mean. They seemed to enjoy contact and driving a knee or elbow into an American rib. It was hard to sort out one Soviet from another. White recalls, because of 12 players, "seven were named Nina."

The Soviets were lousy hosts. "They tried to starve us to death," White says. "After the last game, they brought out the good food." Playing hungry, the American women won four of six games. White was their leader.

International play was full-court 5-on-5. White had little use for the Soviets because they played a physical game. She likens their style to today's college game, which she characterizes as physical, aggressive and lacking in finesse. Occasionally she watches "the girls" on television, but prefers watching college men. In White's eyes, the women's game has become a slam dance; the old AAU game, 4-on-4, was a ballet.

"Basketball is not necessarily a game of strength," she says. "You don't have to be physical to play it, but they're turning it into something

really physical. Take a small girl who is dainty, who can't take a beating. She has to take too much grief away from the ball. If I was coming out of high school today I don't think I could have fit in; I was too slender and light. If I was 25 or 30, yes.

"I don't think women ought to play the men's game. They aren't strong enough. You watch them. They can't run the court but 15 minutes before they're dragging. Most of them can't shoot a 3-point jump shot. They don't have the strength."

She acknowledges her views as unpopular. This is her oratory, churlish side, aggravated perhaps by an estrangement from the game. Her Theory of Daintiness seems oddly contradictory. Everything about White's life represents an independent and self-reliant ideal of women. She is adamant about equal pay, having suffered a double standard for years. Surely she would be sensitive to a negative message inherent in women playing 4-on-4.

Indeed, a recent Nike commercial featuring three women playing outdoor pickup against men, carried a slogan: "Basketball is basketball, athletes are athletes." The politically correct message is gender equality.

"Well, if that is so," White says, "then why do the women play with a smaller ball? It's good to have ball control, but if you're pawing and scratching for equal rights, why make the ball smaller? Now they're talking about lowering the goal six inches."

An anecdote she tells suggests she may not take her argument seriously. As a senior at Macon County High School, White asked the football coach if she could play.

"You need someone who can catch the ball and run with it," she said to him.

"You can't play, Nera," the coach said. "You're too thin. I'm afraid you would get hurt. But I bet you'd be a good one."

White tells the story with a chuckle.

"He didn't say I couldn't play because I was a girl," she says "I will always remember that."

Farmers congenitally "talk poor" while living comfortably. White's house is furnished with modern appliances, a color television and VCR. Her basement workshop is outfitted with tools. She eats fresh vegetables from her garden and pulls in extra income as a house painter.

White is 30 pounds above her playing weight, yet still trim at 185 pounds. Occasionally she smokes a cigar and sips a glass of wine. She cracked some ribs falling out of a barn and accidentally sprayed pesticide onto her face, but nothing has kept her down too long. She has a nervous stomach, but on balance, she has her health.

Nonetheless, last year was a bad one on the farm. Cattle prices fell, feed costs rose and the tobacco crop was assaulted by pests, fungus and two droughts. Foreign competition has reduced the amount of tobacco White is permitted to grow. Her tractor is prone to breakdowns, and her '84 pickup truck has 177,000 miles on it.

Margins are shrinking; she may have to plant soybeans and wheat to keep up. If not for the help of a 14-year-old nephew, she would be hard-pressed to tend her fields. "She worries a lot," says a sister, June Fisher, who lives in a Nashville suburb. "When you farm, you've got a lot of worries ... but she won't ever have to worry about having anything to live on. She's got her brothers and sisters."

But the worry does weigh heavily on White; she seems increasingly morose over what she has come to view as her misspent youth. While others were building wealth and security, White was playing a game. The depth of her recrimination is revealed in speaking of her son, Jeff, a Navy nuclear submarine specialist. He is the light of her life, but by her account he was not an easy child. She recalls him, at 14, shooting at a backyard hoop. Frustrated at his lack of skill, he shouted at her, "I know why you don't like me — because I'm not an athlete like you."

White's reaction, she recalls, was to laugh.

"Why did you laugh?" I ask.

"Look at me. What did it get me? Two worn out knees. All for nothing. Dusty trophies. Certificates that don't mean a thing."

"Unless you never win one," I say.

She mulls it over.

"Perhaps. But when I look at what it got me, economically, all that work and sweat, nothing. No job security. Nothing."

This she says sorrowfully, absent anger. Her pale eyes go someplace distant. Quiet settles over her small living room, she is still. Then she resumes. There were options, she concedes. She could have used her teaching degree to burrow comfortably into a school system. She could have coached basketball, possibly at a college, and ridden the rising tide of the women's game. She could have been born 40 years later and played professionally in Europe or in the new American pro league. She could have done any number of things. And I am thinking anybody 60 years of age could say the same. Choices must be made. She chose to be a translucent icon of an invisible era.

"I have nobody to blame but myself — I made the decision to continue playing," she says. "I can't say I believed it would get me anything of value. I didn't deep down. I played because I wanted to."

This is what I want to say to Nera White, sitting gloomily in her easy chair: Don't beat up on yourself. Playing the game for joy — and not money — is nothing to be ashamed of. You never huckstered shoes. Overexposure never rendered you mundane. You honored the game and your gift. You traveled the world and barnstormed Route 66 when it meant something. Maybe your life could be better, but it could have been worse. Not every woman brought Moscow to its knees in '58, and not every icon has the pleasure of calling in her cattle from the woods.

Sometimes words can't be found. Nera White, who attained genius virtually in silence, will understand.

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Hall of Famers: White and Lucy Harris were the first two women players inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. They were joined in the 1992 inductions by (from left) Jack Ramsey, Connie Hawkins and Lou Carnesecca.

Photo by AP/Wide World



A road less traveled: For all the play basketball, it is fitting that 1 to White's farm has been named