

## CHAPTER TWO

THE HAMILTON SISTERS AND  
THE OPC CARDINALS

This story takes place in the worst of hard times, the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> It is the story of four dynamic Chickasaw women from a little, tiny town, who went to school in a little, tiny junior college, who served dinner and scrubbed floors in exchange for their room, board, and tuition, and who, together with other girls from little, tiny Oklahoma towns doing the same thing, came together as a team and performed a little, tiny miracle. The junior college was Oklahoma Presbyterian College (OPC) in Durant, Oklahoma, and the team was called the Cardinals.<sup>2</sup> They won two national championships and one international championship in basketball, and set a record—88 consecutive wins—which, though not widely known, remained unbroken in the United States for almost 80 years.

The Hamilton sisters—Hazel, Gwen, Alice, and Virginia—were born and raised in Colbert, Oklahoma. Colbert is an old town in the Chickasaw Nation near the Red River in south-central Oklahoma. The town is named after Benjamin Franklin Colbert, a Chickasaw descendant of Scottish trader James Logan Colbert and his Chickasaw wife *Minta Hoye*, who had five sons. These Colbert family men and their descendants were prominent leaders among the Chickasaws for most of the nineteenth century. Colbert, Oklahoma, showed a population of less than 1,100 in the most recent census, and during the Hamilton sisters' childhood, it was an even smaller town that did not incorporate until 1939.

In a 2010 interview, Alice Dailey, Alice Hamilton's daughter and a wellness and fitness counselor in Dallas, spoke in reverent tones of her mother and of her beloved aunts. "When Coach Samuel F. Babb felt the girls needed a break from their grueling practice schedule, he would sometimes take them to Colbert to relax. They had a basketball goal there, so they could practice, but the homey atmosphere did the team a lot



Bloomers were still in style at Colbert, Oklahoma, high school when the Hamilton sisters played there. This photo was taken ca. 1926, and left to right on the front row are Virginia, Alice, and Gwen. Their coach, Mrs. Rice, standing center in the second row, was a lifelong friend of the Hamilton family.

*Courtesy of the Hamilton Family Collection.*

of good." Mrs. Dailey went on to repeat her mother's stories of how Grandmother Cecil changed the Cardinals' bloomers to shorts. She remade Alice's, and her sisters' uniforms to include the shorts, which were much more in style in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Grandmother Cecil also helped other girls who couldn't go home to remake their uniforms as well.

"One of Mama's favorite memories was when they came home to Durant after winning, in March 1932, their first national championship in Shreveport, Louisiana," Mrs. Dailey said. Her mother remembered with great delight the thirty-five-piece Kiltie band that came from Oklahoma City, and how all the businesses in Durant had window decorations celebrating the Cardinals and were closed for the parade. A score of prominent Oklahoma City business leaders and politicians drove down from the state capital to enjoy the festivities and benefit from the publicity. The National Guard was there to control traffic and manage the crowd. Newsreel cameras rolled, and the cameramen told them they would be seen in thousands of theaters.

Fast-forwarding to the present day, the women's team from the University of Connecticut (UConn), under Coach Geno Auriemma, is often referred to as the "greatest women's basketball team ever," and probably this title is well deserved. The lady Huskies won 90 consecutive games, including two national championships, between the 2008 and 2010 seasons.<sup>3</sup> With 90 wins and no losses, they forged the longest winning streak in college basketball history, outdistancing Coach John Wooden's famous University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), men's basketball teams of 1971-74, who won 88 straight. The Huskies' streak ended at the hands of the Stanford Cardinal on December 30, 2010.<sup>4</sup>

When one lists excellent women's basketball teams currently playing in the Midwest, the feats of modern-era Coach Sherri Coale's University of Oklahoma teams are widely

known and applauded. Coale's Sooner women have tied for first or won outright six of the last dozen Big 12 conference titles, made the national tournament twelve years in a row, fought their way to three Final-Fours, and were runners-up to Connecticut for the 2002 national championship. Despite this resounding record of success, the women's national championship trophy has eluded the mighty Sooners.

Most sports enthusiasts are aware of women's basketball programs these days, and women's teams get regular coverage in sports news media. The first scholarships for women basketball players in American colleges and universities, however, were not offered until 1973, a year after Title IX<sup>5</sup> was enacted, requiring federally funded schools to fund women's sports equitably with collegiate men's athletic programs. Many sports analysts look back to 1973 and treat the 1970s as "the old days" in women's college basketball.

Women's basketball became an Olympic sport in 1976 (Soviet women won the gold; the U.S. women took home the silver). The Women's Basketball League (WBL), the first modern pro league, was founded in 1978, but played its last season three years later in 1981. A number of other women's professional hoops teams came and went before the National Basketball Association (NBA) established the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in 1996, which has enjoyed a measure of success.

What is less well known is that Oklahoma women from OPC in Durant were winning national collegiate championships during the thirties and playing pro ball in the thirties and forties. In an era when state legislatures had not yet begun to fund women's athletics, the OPC Cardinals began, in the fall of 1931, a flawless reign of competitive tyranny in women's college basketball that did not end until Christmas Eve, 1934. During this run, the Cardinals won two Amateur Athletic

Union (AAU) national championships, defeated the Canadian champions for the North American championship, ran up 88 straight victories, and represented the United States in the Women's Olympics in 1934 in London, England.

Before going any further, we should address some obvious doubts. Skeptics may scoff at comparing the Cardinals' feat with the 90-game win streak owned by Auriemma's mighty UConn Huskies or with John Wooden's legendary UCLA men's teams of the 1970s, whose longstanding National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)<sup>6</sup> record of 88 straight games stood untouched for 26 years. The impressive record of Wooden's teams, led by such superstars as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton, seemed unapproachable until the Huskies women started getting close at the end of the 2009 season.

The major objection that these critics will raise is that the comparison is "apples to oranges." First, they will say, the level of competition was much weaker in the thirties, when women's collegiate basketball competition was still in its infancy. Second, they will point out that it was not even the same game. Today, women and girls play five-on-five and full court, essentially the same game men play. Back in the Cardinals' day, they will say, women played six-on-six, two half-court games, with two forwards and a center on the offensive end of the court, and three "guards" on the defensive end. They will declare that women back then were believed too fragile for a full-court game, and will suppose it may have been true.

It is correct to say collegiate women's basketball was in its infancy. The OPC Cardinals took their name in 1925, and were the first serious women's team at the college that was founded in 1894 as a school for American Indian women. Girls in the Chickasaw Nation had begun playing competitive basketball at schools like Bloomfield Academy in the late 1890s, so the game was not exactly new.<sup>7</sup> And the claim that the athletic

competition was not as stiff in the early thirties when the Cardinals made their incredible run pales somewhat when one considers their immediate context.

In order to win their first national championship in March 1932, they had to knock off the perennial AAU powerhouse and defending national champion, the Dallas Golden Cyclones, whose star player during the 1931-32 season was none other than Babe Didrikson (Zaharias). Yes, this was the same Babe Didrikson who was voted by The Associated Press in 1951 as the greatest female athlete of the first half of the twentieth century. When her Dallas team went down (for the third time that season) to the Cardinals in the National Finals, Didrikson was right on the threshold of her fame. The diminutive but hot-shooting OPC guard Doll Harris, from Cement, Oklahoma, had stolen the show in all three games that season against the Cyclones.

Didrikson became more famous later for her domination of women's professional golf, but first captured the national spotlight representing the Dallas Golden Cyclones in the 1932 AAU Track and Field Championships. At that meet in Los Angeles, she competed in eight out of ten events, winning five outright and tying for first in a sixth. In the process, she set world records in the javelin throw, 80-meter hurdles, high jump, and baseball throw in a single afternoon. Didrikson's performances were enough to win the team championship, despite her being the only member of her team in the competition.<sup>8</sup>

Some sports writers condemned her for not being feminine. "It would be much better if she and her ilk stayed at home, got themselves prettied up and waited for the phone to ring," Joe Williams wrote in the *New York World-Telegram*. Others were enthralled by the 5-foot-5 Babe, who was muscular but never heavy. "She is beyond all belief until you see her perform," famed sportswriter Grantland Rice wrote. "Then you finally



understand that you are looking at the most flawless section of muscle harmony, of complete mental and physical coordination, the world of sport has ever seen."<sup>9</sup>

The stunning AAU wins qualified her to enter the 1932 Olympic Games, also in Los Angeles. Against the best athletes in the world, she won two gold medals and one silver (women were limited to entering only three events, although she qualified for five). Didrikson "was forced to give up playing basketball for the Cyclones in 1933 because of charges that Chrysler had paid her to promote a car," writes Joanne Lannin, in *A History of Basketball for Girls and Women*. "But she continued to play basketball, joining a barnstorming team of men and women that crisscrossed the country playing games in small town gyms."<sup>10</sup> She was present, nonetheless, in March 1933 for the rematch, when the Cardinals defeated the Dallas Cyclones once again to claim their second consecutive national title.

In the news media buildup to the '33 game, an interview with Didrikson was published by The Associated Press on February 13, 1933. In that dialogue, Didrikson declared that her greatest basketball disappointment was losing three times (two regular season games and the '32 national championship) to OPC star Doll Harris. The Cyclones fielded a starting six in the '33 championship who were all All-Americans, including Lucretia Thornsborough, who had earned All-American honors the previous year at OPC.

The skeptics' assertions that the six-on-six women's basketball is not as challenging as modern five-on-five games would seem harder to set aside. It certainly is true that the six-on-six game is different and not directly comparable. So this challenge to the quality of the women's game in the United States in the 1930s would be impossible to displace if not for the Cardinals' important postseason competition in 1933 against the Canadian Women's Champions, the Edmonton Grads.

The Edmonton women had been the perennial champions of women's basketball in Canada. During a 25-year span, 1915-40, the Grads' record would be 522 wins against only 20 losses. They won 14 consecutive Canadian championships, won the European championship in 1924, and were declared world champions after they won a tournament against the famous French women's champions.<sup>11</sup> Canadian fans were licking their lips, no doubt, believing the Edmonton women to be invincible. And, oh, yes, the Canadian women played men's rules: five-on-five, full court. And the opening game was to be played by men's rules, before a crowd of about 4,000 "rabid fans"<sup>12</sup> in the Edmonton arena.

Most analysts agreed that the Cardinals' win streak, 61 games at that point, was about to come to an end in a game that figured to be a six-on-six coach's worst nightmare—full-court basketball in front of a hostile home-court crowd, 3,000 miles from Durant, Oklahoma. The Cardinals trailed by four points at the end of the first quarter and by the same margin at halftime. Led by Lucille Thurman's 17 points, the Cards began to find weaknesses in the Grads' defenses and pulled ahead by one point right before the end of the third period. The Grads, on a two-year win streak of their own, succumbed to the Cardinals' "sizzling pace," and the Durant women won the game, 59-52.<sup>13</sup>

The competition turned out instead to be the Edmonton Grads' protracted nightmare. Predictably, the Grads had to play the next game in the Cardinals' style of six-on-six. Even with the frenzied support of a crowd that was on its way to a nervous breakdown, the previously invincible Edmonton women were handed a full serving of humble pie by the Cardinals, a 35-point flogging, to the tune of 83-48. The best-of-five series ended the next night, when the Cardinals beat the Grads for the second time at their men's style of basketball in a close one, 45-43.