

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Luisa "Lucy" Harris

(February 10, 1955 – January 18, 2022)

"First Black Woman Drafted by the NBA"

Luisa "Lucy" Harris was born February 10, 1955, in Minter City, Mississippi. She was the 10th of eleven children born to Ethel and Willie Harris, a homemaker and vegetable farmer. Lucy attended Amanda Elzy High School in Greenwood, Mississippi, playing basketball, winning Most Valuable Player (MVP) three years in a row. She was team captain and made the All-Star Team. She once scored a record 46 points in one game, leading her team to the state tournament in Jackson, Mississippi.

Lucy graduated high school in 1973, planning to attend Alcorn University, an HBCU. Unfortunately, Alcorn didn't have a women's basketball team, so instead, she attended Delta State University. Before Title IX - a landmark federal civil rights law in the United States that was enacted as part (Title IX) of the Education Amendments of 1972 - there were no sports scholarships for women. So, Lucy attended college on an academic scholarship with work study funds. In her first year at Delta State, Lucy helped the Lady Statesmen to a 16-2 record.

In her sophomore year, her team challenged the Mighty Macs of Immaculata University in the finals. Lucy scored 32 points and recorded 16 rebounds to lead Delta State past Immaculata 90-81. The 1975 championship game was the first time a major television network nationally televised a women's basketball game. Lucy's team had an impressive 28-0 record - the only undefeated college season of the year, for men's or women's basketball.

Lucy scored an impressive 138 points and 63 rebounds in four games at the national tournament and was named the MVP. In the 1975-76 season, she scored 1,060 points and averaged 31.2 points per game, including a 58-point game against Tennessee Tech. In her senior season, Delta State played a game in the Madison Square Garden, where she scored 47 points. This was one of the first women's basketball games ever played there. Delta State then went to the national tournament final for the third year.

Lucy represented the United States national team and won the silver medal in the 1976 Olympic Games, the first women's basketball tournament in the Olympic Games. She played professional basketball with the Houston Angels of the Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL). In 1977, she won the inaugural Honda Sports Award for basketball and the Broderick Cup, for outstanding female athletes in college. Lucy graduated from Delta State University with a B.A. in health, physical education, and recreation in 1977. She finished her college basketball career with 2,981 points and 1,662 rebounds, averaging 25.9 points and 14.5 rebounds per game.

On June 10, 1977, history was made when the NBA held its annual draft at Madison Square Garden, where Lucy once dropped 47 points in a game during her college days. In the seventh round with the 137th overall pick, the New Orleans Jazz selected Lucy Harris, making her the first black woman drafted into the NBA. There were 33 male players drafted after Lucy's selection. The first woman drafted, Denise Long, was vetoed by the NBA Commissioner due to the fact that she was drafted out of high school. However, the commissioner did not veto Lucy, making her the first black woman to be drafted and the first woman to be fully accepted into the NBA.

Lucy declined to tryout for the New Orleans Jazz because she became pregnant with her first child, and could not participate in the team's training camp. After she had given birth, she was the No. 1 free agent in the Women's Professional Basketball League for their inaugural season. She played as a member of the Houston Angels for the 1979-80 season.

In 1992, Lucy was the first black woman and first female college player to be inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. She was later inducted into the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame and in 1999 was she inducted into the inaugural class of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

After basketball, Lucy worked in admissions and as an assistant basketball coach at Delta State. She later became the head coach of Texas Southern University's women's team before moving back to Mississippi to become a high school teacher and coach. On January 18, 2022, Lucy Harris died of unknown causes. She is buried Greenwood, Leflore County, Mississippi.

"The Queen of Basketball," a documentary about the life of Lucy Harris, was released in 2021.

