

# Former ESPN commentator and Lancaster Catholic alum Mimi Griffin headed to Women's Basketball Hall of Fame



By **KEVIN FREEMAN** | Sports Writer | Posted: Thursday, June 12, 2014 12:43 am

Mimi Griffin went right to her roots.

When it comes to appreciation, her biggest thanks were directed to her sister, Barbara, and her high school basketball coach, Pat Wallace.

Had she been going into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame — as she will, formally, on Saturday in Knoxville, Tennessee — as a star basketball player or successful coach, her thanks would naturally lean toward an older sister and a former coach.

Griffin is being recognized for her contributions to the sport as a broadcaster, having been at the forefront of televising women's basketball games. But it was the fundamentals she learned while watching her sister and learning the game that made her a pioneer broadcaster.

“It's overwhelming,” said Griffin, a former Lancaster Catholic star. “It's hard to get my arms around it.”

Griffin was ESPN's top women's basketball analyst from 1983-99 and was also seen on CBS from 1985-91. In addition to providing courtside color commentary, she worked as a studio analyst along with Robin Roberts for for the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament from 1996-99.

She will be one of six inductees into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame Saturday, entering as a “contributor.” Former Texas coach Jody Conradt will be her presenter.

Griffin successfully transferred the skills she learned on the basketball court to her broadcasting career. Her knowledge of the game, its players and coaches came through in each broadcast.

She gave much of the credit for her success to Wallace, the former Lancaster Catholic girls' basketball coach.

“She taught me more about basketball than anybody else in my life,” Griffin said.

The Crusaders lost just four games in Griffin's four years on the team. They won a state title in 1974, with Griffin, who was Mimi Senkowski then, as the team's senior shooting guard. They had a 62-game winning streak that stretched from her older sister Barbara's sophomore year to Griffin's sophomore year.

“Pat taught us not only how to do things but she showed us why we did things the way we did,” Griffin said. “As a result, it allowed us to think through the process and the game. She laid the groundwork for me ever being able to go in front of a TV camera and talk about basketball.”

Griffin and her three sisters were third-generation basketball players. Her grandmothers and mother played. Her mother, Anne, played in the Philadelphia Catholic League and would play championship games in front of thousands of fans.

Griffin called her sister Barbara her idol, although Barbara characterized it as “unconscious mentoring.”

“My teammates and I were pretty successful, and Mimi grew up coming to games and watching a group of people who did very well and took pride in what they did and worked hard,” said Barbara Stengel, a professor at Vanderbilt University.

Perhaps one of the things Griffin learned from her sister was competitiveness. At Lancaster Catholic, Stengel set the single-game scoring record (39 points).

Several years later, Stengel was a junior at Bucknell and was in Europe when she received a telegram. All the telegram stated was, “39 is not the number, 43 is.” Griffin had eclipsed her sister’s record.

“I thought somebody died,” said Stengel, on receiving the telegram. “Here I was in Europe for six weeks. I didn’t expect to hear from anybody, and you didn’t at that time. So I had created that target. I guess that’s the influence.”

Funny thing: Griffin is going into the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame for her broadcasting work, but doing on-camera work was a job she never intended to have. It wasn’t even really a job.

Griffin, who lives in the Lehigh Valley area with her husband, Bill, has had her own business since 1983. It’s called MSG Productions, an events management company, which in addition to other functions has run the corporate hospitality for nearly every men’s U.S. Open golf tournament since 1995 and has a contract to do so until 2018.

But it was Converse, the company that makes athletic shoes, that was Griffin’s portal into the world of basketball broadcasting.

As the national director of promotions for women’s athletics for Converse, Griffin had input into where to direct her budget. Some of it went to coaches for shoe deals, for instance.

In 1981, she and a colleague decided to use some of the money to televise a women’s game of the week. They produced six games (independently) but never got them on air. She got to do color commentary because she played college basketball at the University of Pittsburgh and knew the game.

“They just threw me in front of the camera,” Griffin said.

Alongside her for those games that never aired was Leandra Reilly, who did the play-by-play.

“That was the lucky part,” Griffin said. “Having worked with her, she recommended me to ESPN.”

The first event Griffin did for ESPN was the national high school cheerleading competition. She was a bit out of her element.

“I think the most insightful thing I said was that they were in a triple pyramid and the girl at the top jumped down into a split,” Griffin said. “I said, ‘Wow, that’s gotta hurt.’ That was about the extent to what I added to that telecast.”

Soon, though, Griffin did analysis for basketball, at the Division II women’s national championship game on ESPN.

“It kind of grew from there,” she said.

Mind you, she was still working for Converse. The broadcasting work was like a side job.

Soon, ESPN began to broadcast more women’s games. And Griffin didn’t just fall back on knowledge of the game but was prepared to talk about every player who got into the game she was broadcasting.

But remember, this was an era before widespread use of computers. There was no Internet. She relied on faxes from sports information directors and conversations with media who covered that particular night’s teams. She also interviewed coaches and players for information.

“The thing that made her a good broadcaster was that she was so well-prepared,” Wallace said from her home in Florida. “She knew the players’ backgrounds and why the players were doing what they were doing.”

Griffin gathered the information and made her own team and strategy boards.

“It wasn’t about me trying to be cute or funny or having a shtick,” she said. “I wasn’t like a Dick Vitale. I just told the story, and I tried not to get in the way of what was occurring on the screen.”

Maybe it was her preparation or analysis, but in 1991, Griffin got a call from NCAA producer Jim Marchiony, who asked her if she would consider doing color on a men’s basketball game.

“He wanted to show everybody that a woman can do color on a men’s game broadcast,” Griffin said. “He was ahead of his time. He never told ESPN that I was doing the game. He sprung it on everybody at the last minute, and so I did a first-round NCAA game on a Friday night, and the crazy thing is, he put me on the best game of the first two rounds. It was Notre Dame vs. Virginia in prime time.”

So she became the first woman to serve as a color analyst in a men’s game.

Although removed from broadcasting games, she remains in touch with coaches throughout the nation and attends the women’s Final Four every year.

“In my mind, I still believe I could play as well as I did back in the day,” she said. “My son, Kyle, played basketball at Siena College and is now an assistant coach at Lehigh. I live vicariously through his experiences.”

It was through Griffin’s experiences that many were not only introduced to women’s basketball but knew the story behind the players and the intricacies of game. Her induction into the Hall of Fame is a slam dunk.