

The AVCA History Commission was formed as a subgroup to the AVCA Diversity Development Team on December 1, 2020. The History Commission's purpose is to recognize, amplify, and celebrate the rich and diverse history of the sport of volleyball. The first phase of the Commission's work will explore the contributions of Black Americans to the sport of volleyball. Phase 1 is timed to coincide with the 40th Anniversary of the founding of the American Volleyball Coaches Association.

PHASE 1 | VOL. 1.37

RITA BUCK-CROCKETT



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ROCKET (n.) a cylindrical projectile that can be propelled to a great height or distance by the combustion of its contents.

A native of San Antonio, Texas, Rita Louise Crockett was a three-sport athlete at John Marshall High School. She ran track, played basketball, and played volleyball. She got started playing volleyball while attending Marshall and took a liking to the sport. Earning a scholarship in both basketball and volleyball, Rita would start off at the University of North Texas in Denton before transferring in the spring of 1977 to the University of Houston. The grind of playing the two sports was a lot to balance, so she chose to make volleyball her focus after her first year. Playing for 2014 AVCA Hall of Fame inductee Coach Ruth Nelson, Crockett would earn AIAW All-America honors while playing for the Cougars in 1977. During her junior year at the urging of Coach Nelson, Rita would try out for the U.S. junior national team. She ended up getting cut after the first day of tryouts because the coach said she was too small at 5'9". Within that same year, the national coach caught Rita playing in the USBVA Adult National Championships, where she would earn Rookie of the Year honors. Based on her play, the coach would personally invite her to play for the national team and that was the beginning of an illustrious international and professional playing career that would span three decades.

Starting in 1978, Crockett would train with the U.S. team in preparation for the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. Leading up to the Moscow Games, the group would go from "talented individuals" to "talented team". Coming off an unsuccessful international trip to Korea in the spring of 1978, national team coach Arie Selinger had the unenviable task of continuing to meld the legendary Flo Hyman, Patty Dowdell, and Diane McCormick who were considered veterans with a group of rising newcomers that included Crockett, Debbie Green, Debbie Landreth, and Sue Woodstra along with five others to round out the 12-women roster. In April of 1979 in a qualifying event in Havana, Cuba, it all came together on the court where the team was able to qualify for the 1980 Olympic Games. Later that year in a pre-Olympic tournament in Russia, the team would perform so well that by the end of 1979 they were ranked as a top-3 team in the world. All of the hard work and excellent play ended up being for naught as a political bomb would explode leading then President Jimmy Carter to boycott the Olympic Games due to Russia being at war with the country of Afghanistan. At the time, it was a devastating turn of events for young Rita and her teammates. Coming from San Antonio, Rita played volleyball for the love of the game. It was beyond her wildest dreams to represent the United States of America as an Olympic volleyball athlete. To have that all come crashing down was very hard to take. In a 2016 interview, Crockett said this, "Now, I can see that it was a dangerous situation and they were protecting us. I can step back and understand that now..."

For some of her 1980 teammates that would be the end of the road, but Rita was young enough to get another chance and in 1984, Crockett, Flo Hyman, Sue Woodstra, Laurie Flackmeier, Carolyn Becker, and Debbie Green (Vargas) along with six new teammates would claim the silver medal on U.S. soil at the Los Angeles Summer Games. At the time it was the highest finish for women's volleyball since it became an official Olympic sport in 1964. Leading up to those 1984 Games, Rita would solidify her place amongst the elite in women's volleyball. In 1981, she would help the U.S. capture the bronze medal at the World Cup in Osaka, Japan and in 1982, the team would bring home another bronze medal from the World Championships in Lima, Peru. From 1982-86, Crockett was a member of the Daiei Team in Kobe, Japan, and her 1986 Daiei squad was the champion of the Japan League. She played beach volleyball on the Women's Professional Volleyball Association Tour from 1988-96 and played Major League Volleyball from 1986-87. Crockett was also a Major League Volleyball champion in both 1986 and 1987 and earned league MVP honors in 1986. In 1986, she teamed with Jackie Silva of Brazil to win the World Beach Volleyball Championship, becoming the first African-American to win a beach volleyball World Championship.

From 1988 until 1993, Buck-Crockett was a player for Matera, a professional league team in Matera, Italy, and also played in Rome. In 1991, she was voted the MVP of the Italian League, and her 1993 Rome team won the European Championship. Then, from 1993-98, Crockett coached and played in Switzerland for RTV Basel. During her tenure, her squads won titles including the Swiss Cup (1994-1996) and the Swiss Championship (1995-1996), and participated in the European Cup of Champions (1995). Crockett was named most valuable player four times.

Since wrapping up professional playing career, Buck-Crockett has made it her mission to demonstrate her appreciation for volleyball by remaining closely connected to the game as a coach, administrator, and advocate. From 1998-2004, she served as head coach at the University of Iowa and spent time as an administrator and coach with the North Florida Volleyball Association. Currently she serves as the head women's indoor and women's beach coach at Florida International University (FIU), where she has been since 2013. Rita has been a huge contributor to the growth of collegiate beach volleyball since its emergence and growth as a collegiate championship sport in the late 2000s.

A 2011 International Volleyball Hall of Fame inductee, Rita has been known as the "Rocket" for many years based on her athleticism, her quickness, her powerful arm swing, and her jumping ability. She will admit that a lot of it is natural, but once she started training with the Olympic team she was able to fine tune her technique improving her vertical jump to 42 inches where "she was touching 10'9" on a good day". All the days may not have been good days, but Rita Buck-Crockett continues to soar among the stars. That's what "Rockets" do...



Rita Buck-Crockett

Head Women's Indoor &
Head Beach Volleyball Coach
FIU

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