AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Lydia Reeder, who regular listeners may recall has joined us previously to discuss the revolutionary Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi. Now she's back to tell us about the women from her first book, *Dust Bowl Girls: The Inspiring Story of the Team That Barnstormed Its Way to Basketball Glory*. So this is a story that I've never heard. And I grew up in Indiana, which is known for loving basketball. So tell me about the history I don't know.

Listen to Lydia Reeder on Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi or read the transcript.

LR: *Dust Bowl Girls*, you don't know about it because it takes place in the 1930s. And it tells an epic story about a team of poor farm girls led by a tough visionary basketball coach who, against all odds, become inspirational heroes. They played for a very small women's college in southern Oklahoma, and they were called the Oklahoma Presbyterian College Cardinals. Like I said, their story takes place in the 1930s during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, which was mainly in western Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. And basically in the Dust Bowl, the drought was so bad that the farm fields literally dried up and blew away. As a result, you had dust storms and poverty that reigns supreme in Oklahoma, where the story takes place. Their coach was named Sam Babb, and he traveled the countryside around Texas and Oklahoma recruiting talented high school players. Sam loved automobiles, and he drove this spiffy Ford Roadster with a rumble seat in the back. So when these teenage farm girls, he would go to visit their families. And when he drove up in the spiffy car, they thought that a rich man had come to call. So they were all excited. But he selected players who were bright and college-ready students, but were also really good at basketball. So in the fall of 1931, 35 freshmen recruits showed up for practice in this tiny women's college in southern Oklahoma. And even though the school provided financial aid, it didn't really have a decent court for the players to practice on. So for the first three weeks of practice, 35 girls found limited space to learn drills and shoot free throws in a small half-court gym that was located on the fourth floor of the college administration building. And the tiny gym had been nicknamed the Buzzard's Roost because the stinky pigeons that roosted on the eaves outside the large windows that they opened all the time because it was so hot would hop inside and leave their poop everywhere. And so the girls would chase them out. And the freshmen, of course, were the ones that had to sweep up the pigeon poop. But that was where they were practicing. And if they were to compete at all, they needed a better place to practice.
So Coach Babb negotiated with the men's coach at a nearby state teachers college and got the use of their field house when they weren't using it. And this was for the men's team. There were no other women's teams around. And it was the field house for the men's college basketball team. Well, the only time available for them to practice when they weren't in class and when the men weren't using it was from 4 a.m. until 6 a.m. every day. And so that's when they had to get up and go to practice. And they would ride over there in this 1920s crank-start bus that didn't have any heat and was always breaking down and needing a push. But they got up and they practiced every day. And actually, Coach Babb made them practice in the morning. And then in the afternoon, they had to make 100 free throws every day and run at least one mile a day. He worked them hard on purpose, as he would always say, no team is better than its poorest substitute. Of course, he was preparing them to be champions. Yet by the time the season started, out of those 35 new recruits, only 16 players remained. And the story that I tell is about these players' first year together, their struggles, their victories, and really the deep friendships that they formed during that time.

AT: Let's zoom out a bit because there's a lot of context that you've touched on in terms of what's going on in the country, attitudes around women's sports at this time, and the fact that a lot of these girls not only probably wouldn't have made it to college, but wouldn't even have occurred to them that they could go to college, much less connected to their athletic abilities.

LR: It was an attitude in the country. I had no idea that women played competitive basketball in the 1930s. But there was a lot going on during the Great Depression. The game of basketball, I talk a little bit about it, it was

invented by a Canadian named James Naismith in 1891. And surprisingly, more women took up the sport than men because it was indoors and they were just coming out of the Victorian era and were getting rid of their bustles and their corsets and their big hoop skirts and wearing their bloomers and everything. So they could play sports. But in America, that ghost of the Victorian lady who was obedient and graceful and never spoke out of turn and was really passive was still around. And so after watching the first official women's basketball game played in 1893 at Smith College, newspaper reporters flocked to that game and it shocked them. They had never seen women exercising in front of them. And so they filed stories containing horrific descriptions of young girls flailing about in a desperate fight, nearly fainting from overexertion, grunting and making horrible sounds. Totally unladylike. So in response to this public reproach, the female physical educators at Smith College and around America acted by restricting the players' movements up and down the court by dividing it into, at first, three equal parts where there were centers, guards and forwards and they each played in their own part. No one could leave the part of the court they were in and they also outlawed dribbling. So since they couldn't travel up and down the court and they couldn't dribble, they really learned how to pass with precision. And the games were divided into 15-minute halves.

And the interesting thing is I think this only happened in America because Canadian women who played didn't have these ridiculous rules. So because the rules were so specific and they changed, the education leaders started publishing The official basketball guide for girls in 1901. And the players eventually nicknamed these rules for women "girls rules." And I almost named my book girls rules, but I thought, well, it sounds like maybe it's girls rules for dating. So I decided against it. But as time passed, girls became much better at playing basketball and the rules modified so that it wasn't three equal parts, it was just divided in half. And you had offense on one side and defense on the other and they couldn't cross the center line. The male school supervisors and coaches began to support women's basketball and help them form teams and to coach them. And even in the colleges and universities, the women form varsity teams. And by 1919, hundreds of women were showing up to play basketball. And in some cases, there was more women in college playing than men. And also in 1922, the Amateur Athletic Union, the AAU, started accepting qualified women's teams into its organization. So in this way, they had a formal way to compete.

Now the AAU at the time for both men and women, their teams came from industry. The companies and the corporations at the time, they talk about the Dr. Pepper girls and the oil companies and the shoe companies, all sponsored amateur sports teams, both men's and women's for publicity. And they hired talented athletes. Most of the ones who would be considered professional today played for the AAU and in the industrial league back in the '30s and '40s. And the competitive games became very popular and the women's games became very popular. And they became more aggressive and women became much better at playing. And the aggressive nature of these games angered the conservative women physical educators who oversaw these girls and women's sports. They would write nightmare papers about how the girls were grimacing and sweating and how their legs were sprawled apart and their eyes darted around like an animal. And they called it, and I quote, "a slaughter of innocence." (AT: What?!?) Yes, a slaughter of innocence.

So in response to this controversy, this was during the 1920s, Lou Henry Hoover, who was the wife of President Herbert Hoover, that popular president in America, helped establish the women's division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation. And she used her influence as First Lady to start publicly criticizing competitive athletics for women, especially basketball, as unhealthy and unladylike. They began promoting sports for health and outlined a plan for what they called gentle play days. Basically, they were intramural sports that excluded all spectators. No spectators were allowed when women played intramural sports. But at the time, nearly all women's college basketball was intramural, and they were prohibited from having an audience too. Girls were expected to enjoy sports, but never to become highly skilled. Mrs. Hoover was so confident that students and fans would lose interest in varsity and other competitive sports for women and men – they were really high on their own supply – that she believed within 10 or 20 years, sports stadiums would disappear. Eventually, most women's varsity teams did disappear from college campuses, and they were replaced by intramural sports, which had no audience. Many high school administrations across the country

got rid of the state basketball tournaments and installed play days, where the school girls got together from different schools, and they had some fun tossing around a ball, and then they all had milk and cookies. It was supposed to be just for fun. The women's division, sponsored by Mrs. Herbert Hoover, actively campaigned against even the possibility of women becoming top athletes. Because according to Mrs. Hoover, girls should strive to become not stars, but just average players, because they were not pioneers enough to discover their own possibilities. In other words, a girl shouldn't work too hard to become really good at anything, basically, because by her very nature, she didn't have and would never develop the power and the courage and the ability to succeed. And the interesting thing and tragic thing is Hoover's campaign against competitive women's sports was so successful in America that women's basketball, at least at the college level, would not become competitive again until the 1980s, when the NCAA took it over.
However, during this time in rural areas, like in Oklahoma and Indiana, and throughout the Midwest in the 1930s, girls continued to play competitive basketball organized by the AAU. And these were all rural girls. And back then, their friends and their teachers didn't give a second thought to girls working in the fields and helping their parents' farms, running, picking cotton or baling hay, so no one ever considered that it was unfeminine for them to play basketball. Basically, they practiced all the time. Their games were as important as boys' games, and it was literally life-changing for them. So this was the atmosphere of the time when *Dust Bowl Girls* takes place. And all the women on the team, they came up through these rural basketball games and these highly competitive times.

AT: I'd like to dig a bit more into the classism because I find that throughout women's history, a lot of these “feminine ideals” that conservatives are pushing are very race-based and class-based, right? We're talking about middle class and up white women, essentially, when we're talking about, “oh, we can't have them exerting themselves.”

LR: (laughter) No, that's very true. And most of the pushback was coming from the larger cities, New England, New York. And also the very conservative women physical educators who very rightly saw that young women during the time, this was after the Victorian age when being helpless and being frail and being sick was popular. They saw that women weren't surviving pregnancy or they weren't very healthy. And when the Victorian age was over and women started coming out, wearing looser clothes and being more active, the physical educators at colleges saw that they really needed to become physically better fit. And that's what they were going for. But they didn't want women who weren't used to sports being turned off by these women who were really good and really competitive. They were afraid that they would scare these other women away, but they went off the deep end in the other direction by not allowing it at all. So why not have the all-around sports play days for young women who just wanted to kick around the ball for a while, learn how to ride a bike or play some basketball? But they didn't allow the ones who were really good and wanted to become highly competitive to become competitive. So they kept it there. And it was very classist. And in the rural areas, which were not in the wealthier areas, Oklahoma was extremely poor back then. But that was a time when everybody worked. Everybody worked on the farm. Everybody pulled their weight. So when it came time to have some fun, then they did. And for young women like the girls in *Dust Bowl Girls*, that was how they got out of the rural areas. That's how they gained an education. That's how a lot of them went into the professions, especially teaching and other things, nursing, things for women. But there was a lot of classism involved. Yes.

AT: So would you like to tell us about any of the individual players?

LR: Yes, they were all really good. By the time the 1932 season was over at the national championships, four of the players from the OPC Cardinals became All Americans. But most of them, like we were talking about, were from rural western Oklahoma. Most of them were really poor, but they were all really smart. And the team captain, Doll Harris, grew up on a farm near what was called, and this is how you pronounce it, Cement,

Oklahoma. It's still there. A little bit of it was still there. I'm not sure if it's still there now. But her father was a poor tenant farmer. He did not own his land. He leased it and grew crops when he could. But she was what everybody called a spitfire. She was the star player for her high school basketball team called the Cement Lady Bulldogs. But she was only five foot two. She was tiny but powerful and what she lacked in height, she made up in talent. She was also part Cherokee and part Irish. Oklahoma Presbyterian College was part of the Presbyterian schools that educated Native Americans at the time and gave full scholarships to Native Americans who went to college there. So she would have gotten a scholarship anyway. But she was really fast and so she brought speed and bravado to the Cardinals. She would brag about herself incessantly but she averaged 20 points per game. She always wore ribbons in her hair to emphasize her femininity because literally people thought that women would turn into men if they were really talented at sports. She was a sophomore at the time and older than most of the other girls, who were freshmen. So she kept her distance from them. She had to boss them around because she was the team captain and so all the other girls thought she was aloof and conceited because she never joined in their after school fun and all their gossip. Doll's real name was Velma Bell Harris, which she hated with a passion. Her older sister had nicknamed her Baby Doll and that name stuck and she actually officially changed her name later on when she could to Doll Harris and that was much better than Velma Bell, I have to say.
Another player that I focus on in the book is named Lucille Thurman. She's at the opposite end of Doll. She was 16 years old and she was the youngest person on the team but she was nearly six feet tall so she helped give the Cardinals an edge on height. She was also a sharpshooter but she was very, very shy and she was from a really tiny dot on the map called Cookie Town, near a place called Union City. Until she lived in the dorms at college she never had experienced indoor plumbing and when Sam Babb recruited her she told him that she couldn't accept because she wanted to be a teacher and he told her that she could be a teacher and play basketball and she was just overcome with unbelievable joy and over the next 10 years she would become one of the greatest women's basketball players of her time and her family was very generous. When I spoke to her family, she had passed away.
But *Dust Bowl Girls* features many other fascinating characters including the famous 1930s Olympic champion and eventually in 1940s and ‘50s she became an international golf star, but her name was Babe Didrikson and she was a teenager then too just like them and she played for the Cardinals’ fiercest opponent, the Dallas Golden Cyclones and they were last year's national championship and at the time she and Doll formed this rivalry, mainly for publicity but it was popular among sports writers to to talk about that rivalry. So it was good for team publicity. But those are some of the players that are in the book.

AT: Yeah I think Babe Didrikson was in part known for how good she always was at publicity (LR: Yes.) regardless of which sport she was in, even when when she played golf for example in the precursor to the LPGA, that was one of her attributes and probably one of the reasons that people still know who she is honestly in addition to her incredible talent.

LR: Yes. She was smart and she grew up very poor just like Doll and she would send money back to her family. She played for one of the industrial teams and she would send money back and after basketball, in between the time she was playing basketball and golf, she got a little scared so she did vaudeville (AT: As you do.) for a while. (laughter) As you do. As you do. But yes that is exactly correct. I quite admired her.

AT: Now I'm not a sports person in any way, so for someone like me, what do you want readers to get out of this story if they're not here for the basketball?

LR: What I loved about it is that it's a piece of lost history about an epic team of girls and and their underdog coach. So it's an inspirational story and and they also became individual heroes for their town during a time when people needed heroes. So in that way it is an epic sports story, but it's also about fulfilling your dreams

and finding out that you're bigger than you thought you were, you could do more than you thought you could. And frankly when I started writing this story, like you, I really wasn't interested in basketball. I didn't play basketball, I played tennis I liked to run I did individual sports and not team sports. But as I researched the story and the broader picture began to emerge and the fact that we don't hear about women's sports at all in the 1930s. Who knew that women played competitive basketball back then? I never knew. *Dust Bowl Girls* basically chronicles the emergence and the popularization of the strong, capable women who learned valuable life lessons by playing sports. In fact a few years after *Dust Bowl Girls* took place Lucille Thurman, she was married by then, she had become a famous player herself and she received a letter from a school principal who insisted that basketball was too strenuous for growing girls. And so Lucille replied that, on the contrary, it helped girls develop clean habits, the know-how of taking a loss and the thrills of winning, the stamina and stick-to-itiveness necessary to become a success at any job. It taught them how to control their temper and it gave them the ability to think and to plan it taught them empathy and it basically saved their live. Because for Lucille and her teammates and all the other young women who challenged society's norms, they were going right up against these society norms. But they didn't know that, they were just pursuing their dream of playing basketball and going to college. And at the time these were farm girls who never thought they could do anything besides working in the cotton fields and sure enough they got to be heroes and for me that's the story that I just loved telling.

AT: You've described repeatedly that they became these national heroes. What was it about them that you think captured the public's interest at this time in particular?

LR: Part of it was they they won game after game. They never lost a game that first season. They kept winning. Sam Babb, the coach, was really good at promotion. They had to be self-sufficient because the school didn't have any money to really pay for their games so they drove this crank start bus until Sam made a deal with the car salesman in town to loan them cars for publicity. And so they actually got these really nice. large automobiles to drive to games. But they were actually so good that people couldn't bet, but they came to games just to see if they would lose. But that was part of the experience, I think, part of it was that they were young and they were fun to be around. They were attractive girls who loved to play and they would go to the clubs around town and sing their school songs. But also at the time, it's very interesting back then, sports writers covered women in sports. And so I got a lot of my research from these sports articles and there were pictures of them and papers when newspapers rarely published photos. And so they they promoted these competitive women's sports and part of it was because it was kind of unique. Women didn't play sports like that ever before. But that that was part of the reason that they were so popular

AT: Now we haven't mentioned this yet but you actually have a personal connection to the story, but not any of the women

LR: Sam Babb, the coach, was my great uncle. He actually died quite young, so I never knew him. But he was my grandmother's favorite brother and I was very close to my grandmother. In the late 1970s she campaigned to have Sam inducted into the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame, inducted posthumously. His coaching achievements had never been acknowledged and the OPC Cardinals' truly great successes, they kept winning after the years of my books. So any information about what he had done had been lost to history and so she started gathering information and proof and she found newspaper articles and she wrote letters to his players and really gathered a lot of information about him and was successful in getting him inducted. At the time, I was doing other things, I was young, I wasn't that interested in it. But later on, she handed me that folder and she said, "you need to look at this. You might want to tell their story someday." And she knew me pretty well, so I took that and I stuck it away until I figured out that it was a really good story. But I was fascinated and inspired by Sam Babb because he was really stubborn and really strong, like my grandmother. And he also coached

women like he would coach men. He coached them to win. But he had his own issues. He was missing one of his lower legs and had to walk with a wooden prosthetic, so he had this stiff hip swagger that he never talked about. My mother said that that he would never talk about it with anyone. So people just kind of ignored it even though it was obvious.

He grew up with six sisters. There were 12 kids in their family, six boys and six girls, so he had six sisters that he loved to teach and coach. So he understood how to coach women. He was very steady and very strategic He liked coaching women because they understood more about teamwork than men. They weren't always trying to one-up each other. Everyone participated, even the team's weakest player. As Sam always said, no team is better than its poorest substitute. He also taught psychology at the teachers college, so he brought a lot of that to his coaching. And when I interviewed a few of the players, all of them complained about Sam's strict rules and his serious demeanor. He wouldn't let them eat sweets during the season at all. He wouldn't let them eat bananas because he thought back then that it did something to their digestion, I'm not sure.

But during my research I did speak with six living players. They were all in their later 80s. And I also talked to other players', who had passed away, I talked to their family members and they all generously shared scrapbooks and diaries and memories. I never had the chance to meet Lucille Thurman because she had passed away, but her family sent me a really thick copy of a memoir she had started about her life, and most of it was all about her time playing basketball. And I learned about a lot about the rules of women's basketball from Lucille and her book and other information. And it was really just through the kindness of these people's hearts that they sent me this information. So it was easy to get inspired to write about these women, even though I didn't know anything about basketball history when I started out. But it was just such a unique time and it was like going back in time doing the research and talking to these players. They remembered their time playing basketball even though, oh my gosh, it had been 60, 70 years before. They were so young. But they had all saved their memorabilia. I couldn't believe it, they had saved uniforms, they had saved ticket stubs. I received all this information. So it was a really, really important time in their lives. And after the book came out, I got emails from people whose mothers or grandmothers had played basketball during that time and it had been important to them just with the life lessons that they learned and the friends that they made. They had gotten to be part of something bigger than themselves and it was still very real to them even though it was 75 years ago. So I truly understood how important this time was for them and I tried to bring that out in their book. There's a man in New York City that teaches a class, how basketball will save your life, and he found this book and emailed me and and talked about it with his class because really and truly, basketball changed these women's lives.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember: well-behaved women rarely make history.