

Jennifer Azzi and Nikki Caldwell: Basketball greats from Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 19, 2022)

Carolyn Krause brings us the story of two of Oak Ridge's great basketball players. Las Vegas Aces won the Women's National Basketball finals on Sunday, September 18, 2022, by a score of 78 to 71 over the Connecticut Sun. https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/34619557/las-vegas-aces-win-their-first-wnba-title-beating-connecticut-sun-game-4-finals-chelsea-gray-named-mvp

ORHS basketball stars Nikki Caldwell (Fargas) and Jennifer Azzi are both top executives with the Las Vegas Aces.

Two of the best-known female basketball players and coaches who learned to play and win under Jill Prudden, girls' basketball coach at Oak Ridge High School for 31 years, are Jennifer Azzi (1987 ORHS graduate) and Nikki Caldwell (1990 ORHS graduate). The lives and careers of both outstanding athletes and sports leaders are described in Wikipedia.

In 2010, Prudden retired from her coaching career. Her achievements included a 908-161 overall win-and-loss record, three state championships, 25 district titles and 20 regional titles. She also wrote with Van Chancellor the 2005 book "Coaching Girls' Basketball Successfully." Azzi and Caldwell helped Prudden's ORHS team win the championships.

A year before Prudden retired, Azzi was elected to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, located in Knoxville. A point guard on championship high school, college and professional basketball teams, she was honored for her many accomplishments.

She played on the championship U.S. women's basketball team at the Winter Olympic Games of 1996, making her an Olympic Gold Medalist. She played five seasons in the Women's National Basketball Association. As a result of her game performances with the Detroit Shock (1999), Utah Starzz (2000-2002) and San Antonio Silver Stars (2002-2003), she retired as the All-Time WNBA leader in three-point field goal percentage. She became head coach of the women's basketball team at the University of San Francisco in 2010 and retired in 2016.

One of the original players of the American Basketball League, Azzi started for the San Jose Lasers and appeared in all three ABL all-star games (1996, 1997, 1998). She played on 13 U.S.A. Basketball teams that compiled a 114-14 record, and she led two teams that finished the season as world champions.

An economics major at Stanford University in California, Azzi scored numerous basketball achievements as an athlete on scholarship with the women's team there. She was named All-American guard, was recognized as the all-time three-point shooter and held Stanford's record for assists in a game, recording 16 against Brigham Young University in 1987-88. While at Stanford her team compiled a 101-23 record, and she led the Cardinal to the 1990 NCAA Women's Division Basketball National Championship in which Stanford defeated Auburn University.

In addition, as a Stanford Cardinal star point guard, she was awarded in 1990 the Wade Trophy and named Naismith Player of the Year. The team she led won two Pacific-10 Championships in the 1988-1989 and 1989-1990 seasons following which Azzi was named PAC-10 Player of the Year. She was the youngest inductee into the Stanford Hall of Fame.

Azzi, 54, had been living in Mill Valley, Calif., with her wife Blair Hardiek, and they have two children: a son, Macklin, and a daughter, Camden. Azzi is a motivational speaker who also has run summer youth basketball camps, called the Azzi Camp. In 2021 she became chief business development officer for the

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WNBA's Las Vegas Aces, and Hardiek was named the team's chief marketing and communications officer.

Nikki Caldwell (Yolanda Nicole Fargas), 50, a highly regarded basketball player at ORHS and the University of Tennessee, is the president of the Las Vegas Aces. She is the niece of Mike Caldwell, an Oak Ridger who played in the National Football League for 11 seasons and is now defense coordinator for the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars.

Born in Oak Ridge, she was raised by her mother. The ORHS girls' basketball team Caldwell played for won the Tennessee state championship in 1988. As of 2009, she still held the high school's single-season records for total points scored and for successful free throws.

According to Wikipedia, "Caldwell attended UT from 1990 to 1994, playing as a guard under coach Pat Summitt on the university's Lady Vols basketball team, which compiled a 118–13 won-loss record during her playing years. Caldwell was known for her strong defensive play and her three-point shooting.

"Her defensive play in the 1991 NCAA tournament final game, in which the Lady Vols defeated the University of Virginia in overtime, was considered a key factor in her team's victory. She was named to the Southeastern Conference (SEC) All-Freshman team that same year, and in both her junior and senior years she received the university's Gloria Ray Leadership Award.

"Although she missed portions of two seasons due to injuries, her four-year statistics as a three-point shooter, with 128 three-point field goals made out of 364 attempts, place her in the all-time top 10 at Tennessee."

After receiving a bachelor's degree in public relations in 1994 at UT, Caldwell served as a color analyst for Fox Sports Net South broadcasts of Lady Vol basketball games and later for Fox broadcasts of the SEC Game of the Week. In this position she provided expert analysis and background information, such as statistics, strategy and injury reports on the teams and athletes. In 1997 she became host for sports segments on the Shop at Home Network.

The next year she returned to basketball as a member of Pat Summitt's coaching staff. Then she became an assistant coach for the University of Virginia. She returned to UT as assistant coach for the 2002-03 season and recruiting director starting in the spring of 2003.

In 2008 she was named the head coach at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) with a five-year contract valued at nearly \$1.5 million. During the 2009–2010 season, UCLA placed second in the Pacific Coast Conference (Pac-10) with a 25–9 record as the team lost to second-ranked Stanford in the Pac-10 tournament. Nevertheless, Caldwell was named 2010 Pac-10 Coach of the Year by the conference coaches and by the media in her second year of coaching at UCLA.

According to Wikipedia, "Her success was unprecedented at UCLA's women's basketball and she sought a large raise in her contract. Despite a reported offer of a generous increase by UCLA, the school could not match the \$900,000 annually that Louisiana State University offered so she returned to coach in the SEC at LSU."

She served as LSU Lady Tigers head coach for 10 years, from 2011 to 2021. In seven seasons leading the team, she posted a 131-90 record as the team advanced to the NCAA Tournament each of those years. She resigned from LSU in April 2021, and a month later, she landed a position as president of Las Vegas Aces, a WNBA team.

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In 2007 Caldwell and Holly Warlick, then a former assistant coach of the UT Lady Vols women's basketball team (and later head coach after Pat Summitt died of Alzheimer's disease), began taking three long-distance motorcycle road trips, called "Cruisin' for a Cause," to promote awareness of breast cancer and to raise money for research on this disease. In their first trip, in 2007, they rode their Harley-Davidson motorcycles from Berkeley, Calif., to Knoxville.

As of 2008, the two women's nonprofit organization, Champions for a Cause, had raised nearly \$100,000. The 2010 road trip took them through Washington, D.C., and New York to Niagara Falls and back. In May 2009 Caldwell received the Woman of Excellence Award from the Ladylike Foundation for her excellence as a coach and for fundraising activities for breast cancer awareness.

In March 2012, according to Wikipedia, Yolanda Nicole Fargas (aka Nikki Caldwell), now 50, "gave birth to a girl named Justice with her husband, former Oakland Raiders player Justin Fargas (coincidentally, the Raiders ownership acquired the Aces when she joined the team). Her father-in-law, Antonio Fargas, was an actor who played Huggy Bear in the 1970s TV series Starsky and Hutch.

So, Azzi and Caldwell both have much in common as distinguished players for ORHS and two university teams, as well as head coaches of university teams in California. Both have won numerous awards. Now, both have executive positions with the Las Vegas Aces. Jill Prudden must be very proud of their successes in the professional women's basketball world.

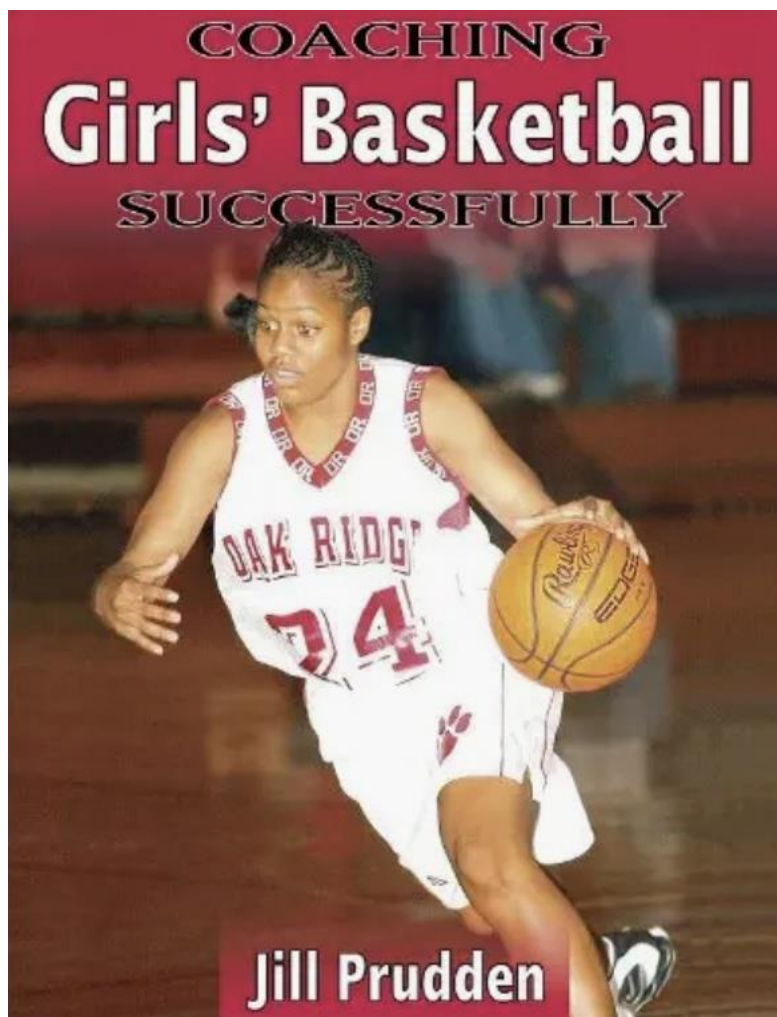
Thank you, Carolyn.



Jill Prudden

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Jill Prudden's book on coaching basketball

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Jennifer Azzi



Nikki Caldwell (Yolanda Nicole Fargas)