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Layshia Clarendon : Basketball Star

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# Layshia Clarendon: Basketball Star

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In the handwriting of an 11-year-old girl, the back of a dogeared polaroid reads, “Keep this forever. One day you’ll see me on TV playing in the WNBA.” The photo is of Layshia Clarendon, one of the best Cal basketball players of the 21st century. At the time she gave that photo to her mother, professional athletics did not have a place for Black, queer, gender non-conforming women, but that didn’t stop Layshia from envisioning herself being a pioneer of the sport she loved. Few could have foreseen that the career that began on court of Haas Pavilion would forever reshape women’s basketball today.

As a high school senior deciding where she wanted to play college basketball, Clarendon was still in the closet and had much of her identity to discover. She knew deciding a school would impact her life greatly and serve as a place through which her identity could be explored. Beyond Cal’s academic rigor and esteemed faculty, the “dirtiness” of Berkeley drew Clarendon to the UC. After a walk down Telegraph Ave., Clarendon fell in love with Berkeley. Cal’s unique community complimented her misfit nature and style of play. The greatest fit was perhaps with head coach Joanne Boyle. Before Clarendon declared to Cal in 2009, they formed a special bond.

“So I was still in the closet and actually came out to Joanne on one of my recruiting calls. We had talked and built trust... [Boyle] was so loving and affirming... I knew I could go somewhere where I could really be myself 100% and be fully accepted.”

Along with Coach Boyle, Clarendon built deep connections with her teammates through long talks after practice about life, basketball, sexuality, and faith. Historically, heteronormativity has been coded in sports. Cal’s program, however, gave Clarendon and her teammates space to acknowledge each other’s different identities while simultaneously recognizing their shared goal of success on the court. This is not always common in women’s basketball programs, unfortunately. Penn State’s former head coach notoriously discriminated against LGBTQ athletes even going as far as removing players she thought to be queer. Coach Boyle, on the other hand, worked tirelessly to ensure that every player felt that they belonged.

“[Coach Boyle] really cared about me as a person, and really took the time to foster our relationship and be there for me. It’s something that changes your life, having mentors like that affirm you and allow you to be who you are.”

The support of Coach Boyle and the team nurtured Clarendon’s potential. Clarendon grew as a leader, earning All-Pac-10 Honorable Mentions in her first two years while leading the team in assists her second year.

Big changes came Clarendon’s junior year as Coach Boyle left Cal, opening the position to now-Cleveland Cavaliers assistant coach Lindsay Gottlieb. By the time Coach Boyle left, Clarendon’s blossoming identity paralleled her burgeoning talent and leadership displayed on and off the court. Clarendon’s transformation during these years manifested in a sense of self-expression that included dressing in a gender non-conforming fashion and standing out with a golden mohawk during her senior year. As Clarendon’s relationship with Coach Boyle helped build personal development off the court, Coach Gottlieb’s role was different.

“More affirmed in who I was as a person, I had more of a professional, adult-type relationship with Gottlieb...a lot like a working relationship, which prepared me to be a professional athlete.”

With Gottlieb coaching, Clarendon led the way as the team’s leading scorer, earning All-Pac-12 team selections her junior and senior year. Clarendon’s leadership role was integral to one of Cal women’s basketball’s best seasons ever. Aside from scoring, Clarendon’s dominant guard play ranked among the team leaders in assists, steals, and 3-pointers. The team had their first

30-win season and a Final Four berth sealed by stellar NCAA tournament performances by Clarendon, scoring 25 against Georgia and earning the Spokane Region Most Outstanding Player. Clarendon's other accolades included the Pac-12 Women's Basketball Scholar-Athlete of the Year as well as earning candidacy for the Naismith Award and the Wade Trophy.

Leaving UC Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in American Studies and the record for fourth all-time scorer (1,820 points), Clarendon realized her WNBA dream as the 9th overall pick to the Indiana Fever in the 2013 WNBA Draft. Bringing the lessons in leadership she learned at Cal to professional women's basketball, Clarendon became a WNBA All-Star in 2017. Currently playing on the New York Liberty, Clarendon's contributions to the league have extended far beyond the court. Beginning as a team representative, she now serves as Vice President to the WNBA Players Association (WNBPA). Clarendon uses her leadership in the WNBPA as a platform to advance economic justice by advocating for equity in wages, travel, and maternity policies, to name but a few areas of her activism. At the beginning of 2020, Clarendon and other leaders in the WNBPA passed a groundbreaking Collective Bargaining Agreement which laid out plans for the betterment of the league, highlighted by higher wages, better maternity benefits, and mental health resources.

Clarendon has also used her positions of influence to transform the conversation about sports, race, and gender. The discussions with her teammates at Cal about positionality became the foundation of dialogues Clarendon led within the league. Furthermore, as an athlete with an intersectional identity, Clarendon understands that her own progress in the WNBA is a form of symbolic activism in itself, inspiring young people across the country that they too have a place on the court. With that said, she still says that there's so much more that needs to change.

"Is it just me showing up a form of activism in itself? Or what things am I pushing for? I want to be more involved in policy and how that affects people."

Clarendon has been an outspoken thoughtleader on the topic of transgender participation in sports, underscoring the importance of sports for all individuals and their identities. Recently, Clarendon raised awareness around a piece of 2020 Idaho legislation, House Bill 500; a proposal to keep trans women out of high school and college athletics. Clarendon took a stand against the proposal, arguing that denying access to trans people was fundamentally unfair. Clarendon has also been an outspoken new voice for more equitable marketing and representation of women's basketball.

"We are still pushing and working on marketing [the WNBA]

authentically...we're starting to turn the corner and I haven't always felt that...I think that's on the cusp of changing."

In recent marketing campaigns for the league, Clarendon was featured to promote the spectrum of sexuality and race among intersectional athletes. These efforts counter mainstream marketing in sport that focus on western standards of beauty, valuing white, feminine, cis-gendered imagery. As Clarendon sees it, she does not represent a new face in the league. There are many intersectional athletes like her, past and present, resisting marginalization and pushing for authentic representation.

"That's literally what our league is, it's what our league has always been."

As Clarendon looks back on her time at Cal and the work she's done for women's basketball's future, she recognizes the work that still needs to be done for women of color in sports.

"It's really sad in a lot of ways that there aren't more Black female head coaches especially because an overwhelming percentage of the players are women of color. How are we giving players opportunities to get into coaching when they're done?"

While Clarendon recognizes the significance of Charmin Smith's hiring as Cal's new head coach, the fact remains that Smith is the first woman of color to take this role in the history of the women's basketball program. Progress at Berkeley cannot stop here.

"We can't rest on our laurels at UC Berkeley. We're inclusive, but what work are we actually doing to be on the forefront of inclusion and how are we breaking barriers for women of color?"

As Cal celebrates 150 years of Women at Cal and the history of women's Cal athletics, Clarendon stands out for her contributions, both on and off the court, during her time at Cal and beyond in her professional career in the WNBA. Her distinguished career speaks to the importance of embracing and empowering intersectional identities as they continue to transform the game of basketball and the endless possibilities that UC Berkeley offers all of the dreamers, fighters, and misfits who call Cal home.