

# A Sun Devil 'sisterhood': 50 years of ASU women's basketball

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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As Kym Hampton talked, history kept walking by.

There was legendary Arizona State women's basketball coach Charli Turner Thorne, who led the program for 25 seasons.

And former point guard Promise Amukamara; and all-time program assists leader Ryneldi Becenti; and Juliene Simpson, who coached the team from 1979 to 1987.

Hampton looked around. In every direction were women who had come to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of the ASU women's basketball program.

Hampton, who played center for the Sun Devils from 1980 to 1984 and had her No. 32 retired, wore a smile that wouldn't leave her face during the entirety of the celebratory luncheon, held on Sept. 26 at the Student Pavilion on ASU's Tempe campus.

"This feels great," Hampton said. "I think every school should always be engaged with the past. You have to stay engaged in the history to make people buy into the program."

Hosted by the ASU Alumni Association, the event honored a program that started modestly — it took six years before the Sun Devils had their first winning season — but since that time has made 18 NCAA Tournament appearances.

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## Celebrating 50 years ...

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The author of 15 of those seasons, of course, was Turner Thorne, who coached ASU from 1997 to 2022, led the Sun Devils to the Elite Eight twice and the Sweet 16 three times, and ended her coaching career in Tempe with 488 wins.

Turner Thorne recalled how she promoted the program, including an outdoor game at Chase Field in 2000 against national powerhouse University of Tennessee called "Hoops for the Cure Classic," a fundraiser for breast cancer research, treatment and education.

The game drew a crowd of 16,282, the highest attendance recorded by ASU and the then Pac-10 for a women's basketball game.

"We worked hard on that game," Turner Thorne said. "It took about three years to get going but it worked beautifully. We had about as many credentialed media as the Final Four, and it helped us build our program in the community."

ASU Athletics Director Graham Rossini said it was "so cool" that the anniversary luncheon served as sort of a hand off to first-year coach Molly Miller.

"It's a really good testament to the momentum that's building our women's basketball program," Rossini said. "What a fitting celebration."

Miller, who led Grand Canyon University to a 32-3 record last season, already has been compared to Turner Thorne, so much so that Amukamara called her a "mini Charli" at the event.

"I think the hiring of Molly Miller is absolutely incredible," said Karen Self, who has coached Chandler's Seton High School to 12 state championships and played for the Sun Devils from 1988 to 1991. "That's a great get for the university. I think she really is a tremendous coach in terms of the defensive intensity that she gets her players to bring and the pace and passion that they play with. I think this is a big opportunity for the program to kind of claw its way back to the top."

Miller doesn't mind being compared to Turner Thorne. In fact, Turner Thorne has become a sounding board for her since she was hired in March.

"We are wired very similarly," Miller said. "Very competitive. Hate to lose. She was known to be feisty but then love her players. I think that's the biggest thing. You can only push them as far as they know you love them."

"There's an old saying: Players don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. I feel like Charli exemplified that, and that's my goal as well."

The luncheon wasn't so much about the promise of the future, however, as it was a chance to recognize the past. Players like Hampton, Self and Amukamara spoke fondly about the bonds they shared and the friends they made.

"ASU is like a sisterhood," said Amukamara, who became so close to Turner Thorne that the two still talk every day. "The relationships go way beyond the basketball court. I remember the fun we had on the road trips, in the locker room, just being together through the highs and the lows. All the times we would make up dances and post them on our social media. It was just great."

The event featured a coaches' panel with Turner Thorne, Simpson and Maura McHugh, who coached the Sun Devils from 1987 to 1993.

Simpson got a big laugh from the crowd when she talked about her coaching methods.

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“If I was coaching right now, I would be arrested,” she joked. “My favorite story is that I would have them run the canals. And I would be in my air-conditioned car with the window rolled down. Whoever was last, I would yell at them to get up to the front. I’d be yelling at the centers to get up there with the guards.”

Simpson also poked fun at Hampton, saying that when the team had its Christmas party at her house, Hampton would bring her own paper snowflake ornament adorned with her picture and then move other ornaments so hers was centered in the tree.

McHugh recalled her first few years as coach were “really, really tough” as she tried to build administrative support for the program.

“I was called into the budget office quite often,” she said. “It was tough to get the money to recruit. But then I got smart and decided, ‘OK, you know what, California is not very far, and they’re loaded with talent over there. So that’s what we started to do, and we improved our team a lot.’”

Near the end of the luncheon, Turner Thorne implored the audience to support Miller as the program moves forward.

“If Molly and her staff and her team are going to get to a Final Four, the number one footprint for a championship team is your fan base,” she said. “So anything and everything you guys can do is huge.

“I’m super excited to be a part of it, and I just hope everybody is so excited to just support Molly, her incredible staff and make ASU a national force in women’s basketball again.”

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## **Main image**



ASU women's basketball memorabilia was on display during a luncheon celebrating the 50th anniversary of the program on Sept. 26 at the Student Pavilion on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

**Text image(s)**





No caption

**Gallery**



Sun Devil women's basketball was officially founded in 1975 with Mary Littlewood serving as its first head coach. The university celebrated 50 years of the program during an anniversary luncheon on Sept. 26.





Former point guard Promise Amukamara speaks to the media at the 50th anniversary luncheon. She spoke at the event about the bonds the team had when she was playing. "ASU is like a sisterhood," she said. "The relationships go way beyond the basketball court."



Kym Hampton, who played center for the Sun Devils from 1980 to 1984, looks at some of the old team memorabilia during the luncheon.





An article dated from 2007 about the team was on display alongside other ASU women's basketball memorabilia during the luncheon.



Former Sun Devil Kianna Ibis signs the autograph poster during the luncheon.





Molly Miller, the new head coach of ASU women's basketball, greets guests at the anniversary luncheon.





From left: Former ASU women's basketball head coaches Juliene Brazinski Simpson (1979–87), Maura McHugh (1987–93) and Charli Turner Thorne (1996–2022) speak at the luncheon celebrating 50 years of women's basketball on Sept. 26.