



Sheryl Swoopes in 2001.

Swoopes, Sheryl (b. 1971)

by Linda Rapp

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Basketball star Sheryl Swoopes has been a champion in college, Olympic, and professional competition. In 2005 she publicly came out as a lesbian and acknowledged her committed relationship with another woman.

Swoopes is a native of Brownfield, Texas, a small town some forty miles southwest of Lubbock. Her father, Billy Ray Swoopes, abandoned the family only months after Swoopes's birth on March 25, 1971. Father and daughter were not reunited until 2003, when Sheryl Swoopes learned that her father was living in Houston and had attended some of her professional basketball games. After the two reconnected, she stated that seeing him in the stands, supporting her with pride, gave her "a great feeling."

In her early years, however, life was difficult. Her mother, Louise Swoopes, eked out a living to support Swoopes and her two older brothers.

At the age of seven Swoopes began playing competitive basketball in a children's league called the Little Dribblers. By the time she was in high school she had become extraordinarily proficient. In her junior year she was the star player on the Brownfield team that won the Texas Class 3A championship. As a senior her prowess earned her a place on three All-American teams.

Swoopes was offered athletic scholarships from colleges throughout the country. She chose the University of Texas and enrolled there in the fall of 1989. After only a week, however, she was so homesick that she dropped out and returned to Brownfield.

Rather than sit out a year in order to be eligible to play at another NCAA Division I school, Swoopes transferred to South Plains Junior College in nearby Levelland. She continued to excel and was named Junior College Player of the Year in 1991.

As Swoopes prepared to transfer to a four-year college, she was once again heavily recruited by leading women's basketball programs, but once again she chose to stay close to home and enrolled at Texas Tech in Lubbock in 1991.

Accolades continued to pour in for Swoopes during her career at Texas Tech. In both of her seasons there she was named a Kodak All-American, and in her senior year *Sports Illustrated* and *USA Today* selected her as the National Player of the Year. The high point of her collegiate career, though, was leading the Texas Tech Lady Red Raiders to their first (and, so far, only) NCAA championship. Swoopes was honored as the Outstanding Player in the 1993 tournament and was also named the National Player of the Year.

The following winter Swoopes briefly played professionally for the Bari, Italy team before returning to the United States. In 1994 she played in both the Goodwill Games and the World Championship, at which the United States won the bronze medal.

Swoopes married Eric Jackson, her high school sweetheart, in 1995. The same year she signed an endorsement contract with the sports equipment and apparel company Nike. Nike subsequently introduced the Air Swoopes shoe, the first shoe model that it had named after a woman.

Swoopes became an Olympian in 1996 and was a key player on the United States women's basketball team that won the gold medal at the Atlanta games.

When the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) formed in 1997, Swoopes was the first player drafted. She joined the Houston Comets but missed much of the season after giving birth to her son, Jordan, in June. She was able to return for the last third of the games that year and, after the lay-off, amazed observers with her high level of play as the Comets won the first championship of the WNBA.

Swoopes and the Comets continued their dominance of the league, winning the next three titles as well. In 2000 Swoopes led the WNBA in scoring and was honored as both Defensive Player of the Year and Player of the Year.

Chosen for the United States Olympic team in 2000, Swoopes initially declined, not wanting to be away from her son for the duration of the Sydney games, but eventually she decided to participate and was instrumental in securing the American women's victory over the home-team Australians in the gold-medal match.

While Swoopes was enjoying unprecedented success in women's basketball, she was facing challenges in her personal life. Her marriage began disintegrating in 1998. Swoopes found a sympathetic ear in newly-arrived Houston Comets assistant coach Alisa Scott, with whom she soon fell in love.

The attraction was something of a puzzlement to Swoopes, who had never before been in a lesbian relationship but found that she could not deny the depth of her feelings for Scott. Upon coming out, she told a reporter for *People Weekly*, "finally I just said, 'I'm not going to try to fight this.'"

Swoopes filed for divorce in 1999 and established a chosen family consisting of her son, Scott, and herself. Young Jordan calls Swoopes "Mommy 1" and Scott "Mommy 2."

Sports fans had no inkling of the new turn in Swoopes's life. Her off-court image remained one of a conventional heterosexual mother, *dévotée* of shopping malls, and an aficionada of red nail polish.

Swoopes became the national spokesperson for the RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) Public Service Campaign in 1999. Although her own son did not suffer from the virus, Swoopes empathized with mothers whose children did, and she embraced the opportunity to educate people about the disease and its treatment.

A knee injury sidelined Swoopes for the entire 2001 season, but upon her return to play in 2002, her superlative performance earned her both Defensive Player of the Year and Most Valuable Player awards. She was also named Defensive Player of the Year in 2003.

Swoopes won her third Olympic gold medal at the Athens games in 2004 and continued as a dominating force in the WNBA, earning Most Valuable Player honors again in 2005. Sports reporter W. H. Stickney, Jr. wrote that Swoopes was "playing like a woman possessed" that year, calling her performance "a tribute to the mental part of the game." Indeed, Swoopes has always approached basketball analytically, stressing the importance of being a complete player, working on fundamentals, and being in good condition.

Swoopes's announcement of her lesbianism in 2005 was a bold step. Although lesbians are strong supporters of the WNBA and some teams recognize them with dedicated games, only two players, Sue Wicks and Michele Van Gorp, had previously acknowledged publicly that they were lesbians.

Swoopes had been out to her family for several years before making her public statement. Her mother, to whom Swoopes has always been extremely close, was troubled by the news.

Swoopes reported that her mother "cried and wondered why and what she did wrong," but Swoopes reassured her that "she raised me to be a very good kid, a very strong, independent, powerful black woman, and I just happen to be in love with another woman, and it had nothing to do with anything she did wrong."

Despite her initial dismay, Louise Swoopes has maintained her close relationship with her daughter.

Sheryl Swoopes stated that she had discussed her impending coming-out announcement with WNBA headquarters and received their support. Her principal sponsor, Nike, also responded positively; a representative said that "the company was happy to have Swoopes as one of its athletes."

Swoopes's public announcement of her lesbianism coincided with her endorsement contract with the San Francisco-based lesbian travel agency Olivia.

"We had wanted to endorse a WNBA athlete for some time," said Olivia's CEO, Amy Errett. The opportunity arose when Swoopes booked an Olivia cruise. Errett quickly commenced negotiations for Swoopes to join the impressive roster of celebrities who take part in Olivia cruises, including tennis great Martina Navratilova, golfer Rosie Jones, and musicians the Indigo Girls and Meg/Shambhavi Christian.

Swoopes's relationship with Scott was, stated Lori Riley of the *Hartford Courant*, "not a secret in the WNBA." Disclosing it to the nation, however, required an act of courage. Pat Griffin, professor emerita at the University of Massachusetts and author of *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, stated, "There's such a big leap, people knowing in a big way, having it be public We know there are lesbians in women's sports, but there is still a lot of prejudice. It's still a potentially dangerous piece of information to give out."

Sheryl Swoopes has shown the courage to present this piece of information. Her heroics on the basketball court have earned her numerous awards, including most recently being voted a member of the WNBA's "all-decade team" in 2006. Her coming out is equally worthy of accolades.

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