



“I grew up in an apartment so small that when you did this,” said Marjorie John, while rotating her head, “you saw kitchen, dining room, bathroom, bedroom and everything! I was not rich, but the countries I have visited, I could only have seen on a map if it was not for sport.”

Marjorie John turned seventy-five last September, but her athletic figure, firm handshake and bubbly persona does not fit the mould of a pensioner. But then the inimitable John was never one to be tied down by another’s expectations. She made her own way.

“I was born and grew up in a small room on Buller Street, Woodbrook,” said John. “But I said to myself that I would make people come and look up to me.”

On November 4, John will have the distinction of starting the 2007 University of the West Indies International Half Marathon at its St Augustine Campus. “It is a great honour for me,” she said.

The feeling is mutual. The UWI SPEC half marathon is routinely started by sporting celebrities. John, Trinidad and Tobago’s “First Lady of Sport” easily fits the bill. John is a national sport Hall of Fame inductee and was listed, by the government, among the country’s top athletes of the last millennium.

She is a former Caribbean table tennis champion and also represented Trinidad and Tobago at netball, cricket and basketball.

Domestically, she was northern lawn tennis junior champ, represented Police at hockey, played with the Clico Ladies football team, won a cadets’ shooting competition, participated in fencing and chess and served as an administrator in a netball and hockey World Championship.

# Saluting the First Lady of Sport Marjorie John



Not bad for a little girl who never dreamt she could measure up to the sporting achievements of her father.

She is the daughter of George John senior, a talented Trinidad and Tobago fast bowler, and domestic worker, Violet Bonadie - both of Vincentian stock. John did not see much of her father, but his persona resonated around Port of Spain and she took great pride in his achievements and the respect he received.

"In those days, there was a great pride in representing your country," she said. "Not like today when so many sportsmen and women are only interested in what they can get for themselves."

Sport had a natural lure for the young girl and, almost as soon as she could run, she was racing the boys in her neighbourhood.

"I was almost always the only girl playing," she said. "I think that is why I became as good as I was." Her birthright must have helped too.

There was certainly natural talent,

days, it cost twenty dollars for a racket," she said, "where was I going to get that money?" "So the members pooled their money and bought me a racket."

"Then, when it was time to play in a tournament, they said I needed two in case one broke. So they put up again." Only south champion, Barbara Walters, defeated her that year as John finished as national runner-up.

The highlight of her tennis career though was an exhibition mixed doubles match in 1960 against Althea Gibson, the first black Wimbledon champion, in front of the Port of Spain Grand Stand.

"I was not overawed," she said, with a laugh, "because I already knew what was going to happen. I must have hit ten balls in the whole match!"

Another red letter day was the inaugural World Netball Championship, which was staged by Eastbourne, England in 1963. Trinidad and Tobago had only just become an independent nation and the netball squad was the first team to leave

how I could help my mother, who wasn't working at the time."

Typical of the feisty John, she was given the "Best Stick" for her batch - an award handed to the best all round recruit. She had dozens of anecdotes about her time in the police service from observing the infamous steelband riots to pounding the pavement in Belmont and Besson Street.

Her involvement in the police service only further strengthened her appreciation for discipline, national pride and integrity. "When you were told your shift started at 10:00 a.m." she said, "you were expected to show up at 9:45 a.m. and they were very serious about it too."

"I remember the commissioner said once that when a prisoner escaped and was running down the street that was your work going there. There was a real pride in everything we did."

John's whole life has been dedicated to service. Today, her schedule is often filled with talks at various schools including the neighbouring Belmont Junior Secondary



"...she was northern **LAWN TENNIS** junior champ, represented Police at **HOCKEY**, played with the Clico Ladies **FOOTBALL** team, won a cadets' **SHOOTING** competition, participated in **FENCING** and **CHES**s and served as an administrator in a **NETBALL** and **HOCKEY** World Championship."

but John also had a self-belief and determination to dominate opponents. Her mother objected to her passion for sport, but it was a losing battle.

By 15, John was national women's table tennis champion and selected for her first overseas tour, which was to British Guiana. Her love of a challenge, however, could never be sustained by just one sport. Her journey into different disciplines took varied paths.

One evening, John visited the Teachers' Training College to play table tennis against a friend only to discover that he was unavailable. She found a replacement, Alroy Nichols, but he was not pleased about losing to this cheeky young lady.

"After I beat him, he put down his racket and said 'come, come,' said John. "He said 'you are good in table tennis, but let's see how you make out in lawn tennis'. Of course, I accepted the challenge. I had never played before but I figured the principles were the same as table tennis."

She did not win; not that time, but she created enough of a stir by her natural athleticism and ability to be invited back.

John was adopted by the Tranquility Lawn Tennis Club within weeks. "Those

Port of Spain with the new coat of arms and national anthem. John was chosen to carry the flag at the opening ceremony.

"I was so proud," she said. "The national consciousness was very high then. I remember every team was supposed to put on a cultural show and Lystra Lewis, our head coach, needed someone to sing and I volunteered.

"You are looking at the former 'Lady Cocrico'... I sang 'Trinidad is my land'.

Trinidad and Tobago finished fourth in Eastbourne. John made sure to mention that their campaign included a win against regional rivals, Jamaica.

"I remember my netball captain once said that the only time Jamaica must come ahead of us is in the alphabet," she said.

By then, John had already made another huge life decision by joining the police service. On April 1, 1957, she was part of the third batch of female law enforcement agents. "At first, I didn't want to join because it sounded so restrictive," she said, "but I was working for just \$11.36 a week at the match factory."

"The police were paying \$100 and something a month and I thought about

about sport or the law.

"I feel I should make a contribution to the country I was born in and that nurtured me," said John. "Anything for the good of the country, I am for it."

This year, she lends her remarkable energy and contagious, upbeat personality to the UWI SPEC International Half Marathon.



*Lasana Liburd is an international freelancer with over ten years experience as a journalist. He writes for the Trinidad Express Newspaper after starting his career at the Trinidad Guardian Newspapers. He has been published by several newspapers and magazines in Europe including the British Guardian, Telegraph and Voice Newspapers, World Soccer Magazine and German national papers the Berliner Zeitung and the Frankfurter Allgemeine. His work was also featured on Danish international sport transparency organisation, Play The Game, while he was one of 23 international investigative journalists asked to contribute to a book entitled "Korruption im Sport", which was published in Germany this June.*