

Mirna Raad: Sportswoman, Golf Champion

(Born in 1965, in Sierra Leone; originally from the Shouf; currently living in Beirut; recorded at the Golf Club. Language: French, with some English words.)

Mirna: Where do you want me to begin? With my date of birth? I was born on the 30th of September, 1965. Most of my childhood was spent in Sierra Leone, in Freetown, Africa. We came back to Lebanon finally in 1974. I have very good memories of Sierra Leone because it was at its very peak, life was all parties. Though we were young, I still remember my parents' parties, ladies in white and men in shorts, very impressive. The beaches in Sierra Leone were beautiful, coconut trees leaning over you while you swim. I still have images of Sierra Leone as vivid as if it were yesterday. I lived my first five years there and then when I grew older I was brought here to school. We children visited Sierra Leone only in summertime. Then, in 1974, we settled here for good. When the war started we had to move again, this time we went to Paris.



Picture Credit: Rouba Abou Zeid

I spent the first years in a boarding school with my brothers. I was a pupil at the Nazareth school; when it closed I had to move to the Champville school. I spent a year there - I was among boys, I was very happy, it was a nice year (laughs). It was the first year that they allowed girls into the boarding school at Champville. I had a good time there. Then my parents decided to leave Lebanon because of the situation, and we went to Paris. The funny part is that we decided to go by car, we went from here to Paris by car. It took us a month, but it was beautiful, we visited many countries. We spent a year there, then we came back by car.

While we were in Paris I started sports, I took up track and field. I was a good athlete but not as good as in the sports I choose now. Because I grew up with boys I went into sports, maybe if I had grown up with girls I would have gone into other domains, such as fashion or music. As to music, my mother always wanted me to be 'la fille portrait', she made me study piano and classical ballet. I used to cry every time I went to ballet lessons. Then I started athletics, I did many sports, but mainly it was long jump, high jump and running. When we came back from France, we spent a year here. Then the war started again and we had to go back for a second year. I still regret not having gone into sports while I was in Paris, I think if I'd gone into sports from then I would have been someone different. Here you feel sports

are a waste of time, you don't improve as you do in Europe, they don't appreciate your skills as they do there.

Dania: How old were you then?

Mirna: I think I was nine the first time we were in Paris. During the second time I was around twelve. It was the perfect age to start sports. Now when I think back I regret that I didn't. I used to play tennis I didn't take it seriously, maybe because our parents didn't guide us towards sports. Then I came back to Beirut, and I finished school, and went into university. At the beginning I took special education. I always wanted to work with deaf mute persons - up to now I would still like to work with them. I don't remember why, but it didn't work out; so I shifted into archaeology. When I finished university, I worked for a while in my field. I went to Petra and did some excavation there. I also did some excavation in downtown Beirut. But I don't remember a time when I wasn't doing some kind of sports. At the beginning I was in athletics, then a friend introduced me to basketball. I started basketball, then another friend introduced me to squash. I was playing basketball and squash, and at the same time doing skiing and fencing. I was good in all sports. The only problem was, as my father used to tell me, I used to reach a certain level in a sport and then shift to something else. But the problem was not me, it was them, my parents, because they never pushed me into sports. Alright, you can practise and give effort, but at a certain point you have to give more, and invest more money, you have to go out and be in touch with competitors. In my case, I was limited by Lebanese standards, I couldn't go further. My parents didn't encourage me to become more competitive, they always thought that I would shift to another sport. But I used to shift because it was the utmost I could give here in that specific field.

What else did I do? I was good at squash - at the Lebanese not the international level - maybe with a bit of practice I could reach a better level. I'm very serious in my practice, I don't joke, I don't like to do things half way. My father used to tell me, "Mirna, stop playing squash." I used to say, "I know someday I'll stop, but now I don't feel I like stopping because I can still do better." Now I'm playing golf, squash doesn't interest me as in the past. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday I used to play squash and basketball, on Tuesday and Thursday I did fencing and painting, and Saturdays skiing in the morning and basketball in the evening. My life was full of activities, I mean sports activities, not intellectual ones. I wasn't much interested in anything else except the cinema. I wanted to leave school after the Brevet class, and go into the cinema business. But my parents insisted that I should finish my education first. By the time I finished school, I didn't want to do this anymore. I was so

hooked on classical films that I used to spend a full day watching them. If I review my life up to now, I realize that in every period I had to be passionate about something, and I would take it from the beginning to a point where I could give no more; maybe somebody else could give more but these were my capacities.

Then I discovered golf and dropped everything and concentrated on that. I never thought golf could be so interesting. When I think about it, it's outstanding, it's a complete sport. Those who don't know it think that it's boring, there's no effort, you just walk and hit the ball. But if you want to play at the competitive level you have to have a high level of physical fitness, you have to walk for several hours and to have a certain consistency in your play. It takes a lot of time if you want to play at a competitive level. It's mentally and physically draining. It joins mind and body. You can't play golf and think about your night-life, or lunch with your friend, you can't, you are out of this world. You have to concentrate on the game, your target is the eighteen holes, and when you finish playing you feel a state of transcendence, as if you are floating. I started golf at a time when the lowest handicap for women was sixteen. The first time I saw the ladies' board, I went home and told my father, "Imagine! There's a sixteen handicap!" At that time sixteen was professional for me. When I started, I had a handicap of thirty one, and my aim was to reach a handicap below ten, my obsession was to reach a single figure. Then I began to find out what is a nine and a ten handicap. I started playing, and in six months I went from thirty one to nineteen. I knew that sixteen wasn't much of a handicap, but for me it was like zero. Now I have a handicap of 2.9.

There is something that marked me a lot in this game, my aim was never to win but to lower my handicap. My instructor always used to tell me to keep my handicap high in order to be able to win competitions and trophies, but I refused, I wanted to lower my handicap, that was my aim.

I remember one day I was playing with a man, he lives in France, he plays well but he has his own point of view about golf. While we were playing, he told me - I had a handicap of fourteen then and had been playing for a year and a half - he told me that if in two years I didn't reach a handicap of nine, I would never be

able to become a good player. I worked hard for it. My first contest was in July 1991, and by July 1993 I had a handicap of nine. I was so happy, I wanted to see this person and tell him about the level I had reached. Years later this same person came to Lebanon and asked about my handicap. They told him what it was. He said, "I always knew she's going to be a good player."

At the time when I started golf women weren't allowed to travel for matches because their lowest handicap was sixteen, women would never reach a handicap of nine. So it was always men who travelled for contests. I remember someone told me, "When you get to nine, we will send you to play golf abroad." It was kind of a challenge, as if I would never reach a handicap of nine, it was too difficult. To get to ten is easy but to get to nine you have to record six games in competitions below your handicap. I felt as if they were just talking. So I started, nine was the figure for them. I worked hard for it and I reached a handicap of nine. I pointed out my handicap to them. "Now I am nine," I said, "What are you going to do now? You should send me." The first match that was coming up was the Greek Open [Amateur International Greek Open]. I pointed out to them that in September we would have the Open. I nagged a lot, and finally they agreed, they said, "Alright, we'll send you there." We formed a team and went there. But it was a mess. I was very intimidated by the other players, they had more experience than me, they had played lots of contests during the summer, whereas we have only one course to play on. I was a bit disappointed by my performance but I came back and started working on my play, and now whenever there is a match they send me to play. Last year I went to the Mediterranean Games. Every year I see

that my game is improving, year by year, it's strange, you feel a certain maturity in your game. Every year I travel, I change my concept of the game, I learn new things, I learn a new attitude on the course. I have gained maturity, from last winter to this summer I feel the change in my performance. Since 1992 until 1998, I always won the Lebanese Ladies Championship. Three years ago they started the Lebanese Open and I have been winning it. Hopefully in November we shall have the Asian Games, and women will go. I'm preparing myself now. This is everything about my life, what else do you want to know?

Dania: Tell me more about the important landmarks in your life. Were there turning points?

Mirna: I think that at the beginning, when I was a student of Collège Notre Dame de Nazareth, I was very reserved, a very quiet person. The main turning point in my life was when I went to the Saint-Coeur and made friends with a girl who changed my life. We began to skip school, go to the beach during school days, hitchhike all day long. We used to go to the Tam Tam beach (Jbeil). At Nazareth, I never, never used to do these things. She taught me how to relax and enjoy life, how to enjoy simple things. She was a tomboy. I was a tomboy too, but she was more courageous, she would face a person and tell him the truth to his face. I learned a lot from her, how to fight for my rights, and to continue with what I want to do. I think this



Picture Credit: Rouba Abou Zeid

was the major turning point in my life, it did me good because before I was very shy. After I met her I became more daring and outgoing - maybe she gave me confidence in myself - she was very self-confident, and she taught me that. There have been things in my life that I wanted to do. I knew that I couldn't do them straightaway, but that a time would come when it would be possible. But I always keep on trying, like if I want something maybe it will take me ten years but I will end up doing it. (pause) This is my life.

Dania: How is Lebanon as a place for women to live in?

Mirna: Lebanon? Listen I should tell you something, I grew up in a very easygoing family, I didn't experience what others feel who have conservative families, where girls can't go out, or can't do things their brothers can. My family is relaxed - for example at fifteen I travelled alone to a country where I had no relatives or friends. Maybe this helped in building my personality, not to worry. They let me do whatever I wanted, for example flying - I just came one day to my father and told him, "I want to learn how to fly." He said, "Fine, go ahead." If we wanted to do anything, it was, "Go ahead, do it." In addition we have this thing in our family that bad news travel faster than good news, so we never worry, we can stay for three days without calling our parents, it's fine. As for the Lebanese woman, she is trying to liberate herself, but I think she still needs to do a lot to be completely liberated. Women are trying to work and to become more independent, but we remain in a fairly conservative milieu. I think we need one or two more generations for men to accept that women can have similar rights to them. When it comes to the point, you feel that Lebanese men like to be above women. No matter that men consider themselves to be European in their way of thinking, I think this isn't true. We have to fight a lot for our rights, and we always have to challenge them. You really have to face up to men otherwise, they won't acknowledge you. You need to prove yourself, not once but many times. This is my experience in sports, this is how I feel - I have no experience in work - I had to prove myself a lot to be allowed to travel and represent Lebanon abroad.

Dania: Would your life be different had you lived elsewhere?

Mirna: Yes and no. Yes, because in the sports field I know that if I were in Europe or in the States, they would have taken advantage of my capacities. This is the only reason, they would have appreciated me more. Now when it comes to family ties, hospitality, friends, social life, no, I don't like to be elsewhere. I like it here, it's warm, you can rely on people, I'm proud of being Lebanese. I like our mentality, I like family ties, friends. In Europe or elsewhere, you don't find this. You'll be living by yourself. Even if you have family and friends, it's a different concept. No, socially, I like to be in Lebanon. (pause)

Dania: is there anything you would like to add?

Mirna: I told you all my life, I may have forgotten a few details but this is it in general. I think I've had a good life, up to now I'm very happy with it.

Recorded and translated by Dania Sinno