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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

I'm writing to tell you about *State: A Team, a Triumph, a Transformation* (August 13, 2019; Midway Books; 978-1-57284-266-3; \$27), a compelling first-person account of an unlikely group of high school girls who came together to win one of their state's first high school basketball championships after the passage of Title IX in 1972, as told by trailblazing sports journalist Melissa Isaacson. In this inspirational memoir, Isaacson shares what it was like in the 1970s for her and her teammates to live through both gender discrimination in sports and the joy of the very first days of equality—or at least the closest that one high school girls' basketball team ever came to it.

In 1975, freshman Melissa Isaacson—along with a group of other girls who'd spent summers with their noses pressed against the fences of Little League ball fields, unable to play—entered Niles West High School in suburban Chicago with one goal: make a team, any team. For Isaacson, that turned out to be the basketball team.

Title IX had passed just three years earlier, prohibiting gender discrimination in education programs or activities, including athletics. As a result, states like Illinois began implementing varsity competition—and state tournaments—for girls' high school sports.

At the time, Isaacson and her teammates didn't really understand the legislation. All they knew was that they finally had opportunities—to play, to learn, to sweat, to lose, to win—and an identity: they were athletes. They were a team.

And in 1979, they became state champions.

With the intimate insights of the girl who lived it, the pacing of a born storyteller, and the painstaking reporting of a veteran sports journalist, Isaacson chronicles one high school team's journey to the state championship. In doing so, Isaacson shows us how a group of “tomboys” found themselves and each other, how basketball rescued them from their collective frustrations and troubled homes, and how the experience forever altered the course of their lives.

It was a privilege to work on this book, a case study in how important access to opportunity (and role models) really is—especially when it comes to shaping an authentic identity. As you'll see when you read, there is a direct line between these girls' first practices on the court and the women they grew up to be. In the 1990s, Isaacson went on to become the *Chicago Tribune's* first woman beat writer assigned to cover the Bulls and Bears. But it began in high school, where she and her teammates started blazing trails that would lead them into adulthood and leave paths that younger girls—such as fellow Niles West alum and WNBA star Jewell Loyd—could follow to bigger opportunities.

I hope you will consider *State* for review or other feature. As an award-winning sportswriter, Melissa Isaacson has a wealth of media experience. She is available for interviews everywhere. For more information, please contact Jacqueline Jarik, Agate's associate manager of publicity, at 847-475-4457 ext. 4# or at jarik@agatepublishing.com.

Best,

Jessica Easto

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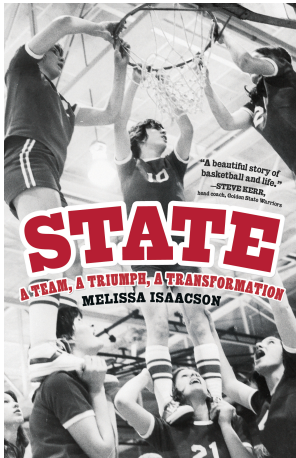
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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State
A Team, a Triumph, a Transformation
by **Melissa Isaacson**

Hook: An engaging and inspirational story of an unlikely group of high school girls who pull together to win their state's high school basketball championship just after the passage of Title IX, as told by trailblazing sports journalist Melissa Isaacson. *State's* release is timed to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the team's championship title.



A 2015 study showed that [80 percent of female Fortune 500 executives had played competitive sports](#) at some point in their lives. Studies show that participation in sports can help [raise girls' confidence and teach them teamwork and leadership](#). It's clear that participating in sports in childhood and young adulthood has lasting effects on girls beyond developing athletic skill. This was certainly the case for Melissa Isaacson and her Niles West High School basketball teammates.

When Title IX was signed into law in 1972 as part of the Education Amendments Act, girls and women across the country were finally allowed to form and join athletic teams at school. For one group of high school girls in suburban Chicago in the late 1970s, the joy of joining the high school girls' basketball team meant more than just the opportunity to play sports: it was the joy of putting on a first uniform, of seeing each of their names in tall letters next to the gym's scoreboard, and of the opportunity to play, to learn, to sweat, to lose, and to win together as a team.

From sports journalist Melissa Isaacson comes *State*, the story of the Niles West high school girls' basketball team, who would go on to defeat eventual Olympian Jackie Joyner-Kersey's East St. Louis team in the 1979 Illinois state final. In telling their story, Missy shows readers how a group of "tomboys" found themselves and each other, how basketball rescued them from their collective frustrations and troubled homes, and how the experience forever altered the course of their lives.

Melissa Isaacson is an award-winning sportswriter, author, and public speaker. In more than thirty years on the job, she has covered every major US sports championship as well as the Olympics. She has written for numerous publications, including long tenures at such institutions as ESPN and the *Chicago Tribune*. She was the *Tribune's* first woman beat writer assigned to cover the Bulls and Bears, and she covered the Michael Jordan–led Bulls over their six NBA titles. She is currently on the faculty of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and lives in the Chicago area.

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Praise for *State*

“I loved reading *State* by Melissa Isaacson. Melissa covered the Bulls for the *Chicago Tribune* when I played in the NBA, and we had many discussions about our love of basketball. The topic of her high school state title-winning team came up now and then, and I knew she was proud of it. But not until now, after reading her fantastic book, did I realize HOW much basketball meant to her. This is a beautiful story of basketball and life.”

—Steve Kerr, head coach, Golden State Warriors

“In *State*, Melissa Isaacson perfectly captures the birth of Title IX and a time when high school girls were starting to gain equality in sports and in the classroom, showing us how opportunities on the court can light a path for girls to become their authentic selves in all aspects of their lives.”

—Billie Jean King, founder of the Billie Jean King Leadership Initiative

“Melissa Isaacson has written a beautiful book about a time and place that is almost unfathomable to us now: when girls’ and women’s sports were not yet popular, widespread, or vital to our culture. And yet the pages of *State* come alive with the riveting story of a team of high school basketball players whose dreams took them to the place all athletes hope to go: a championship that lives with them to this day. This is their inspiring story. This is Title IX come to life.”

—Christine Brennan, *USA Today* columnist, CNN and ABC commentator, and author of *Best Seat in the House* and the bestseller *Inside Edge*

“Missy Isaacson takes us on a beautiful first-person journey we all should travel, showing us how a group of young women in the 70s changed the perception of women playing sports. And equally important, how they discovered the value of chasing a dream together. From fighting to play in the ‘boys’ gym’ to bonding together to winning a state basketball title, this was a story I couldn’t put down. I literally cheered out loud for these women as I read it.”

—Julie Foudy, Olympic medalist, FIFA Women’s World Cup champion, and founder of the Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy

“A labor of love, *State* is a book suffused with heart and humor. It’s a snapshot of a bygone era, a meditation on women’s sports, and a book that stays with you. Melissa Isaacson has put into words the power of our athletic experiences and the way they resonate in our lives.”

—Chris Ballard, senior writer at *Sports Illustrated* and author of *One Shot at Forever*

“The best sports stories aren’t actually sports stories—they’re stories about life, highs, lows, bonds, exceptionalism, tragedy. That’s what makes Melissa Isaacson’s *State* such a

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tremendous piece of work. You think you're reading about a girls' basketball team, only to discover you've been lifted to new emotional heights. What a terrific read."

—**Jeff Pearlman, author of *Sweetness: The Enigmatic Life of Walter Payton and Football for a Buck***

"*State* is storytelling at its finest. Melissa Isaacson will captivate readers with this long overdue memoir of heartache and triumph. Many will relate to the experiences Isaacson recaptures, and those who don't will gain a greater respect for trailblazers in women's sports. This book covers the scope and span of life as it can only be told by a daughter, a teammate, an athlete, and a friend. It is full of heart and history—a wonderful combination!"

—**Marjorie Herrera Lewis, author of *When the Men Were Gone***

"I do not believe I overstate when I say this book belongs in, among all the other places, the Smithsonian, for its evocative, edifying tour of the female mind during the first crucial wave of cultural appreciation for the female athlete."

—**Chuck Culpepper, sports reporter for the *Washington Post* and author of *Bloody Confused!***

"*State* delivers a lesson on masterful storytelling. It is part memoir, part oral history, seen through the prism of sports. Melissa Isaacson spent over a decade of research on this memorable high school basketball team of which she was a member—learning secrets about her teammates that she'd never before known. She deftly develops her characters, and perhaps the best indicator of the power of her narrative is that even though you know the outcome, it is still gripping to read about the adventures and accomplishments of the 1979 Niles West championship team."

—**Andrea Kremer, Emmy-winning sports journalist and member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame**

"A wonderful tale from a wonderful storyteller. Isaacson paints real people so richly, so authentically, you almost forget it's about basketball and realize it's about life, tragedy, yearning, and hope. I've known Missy for thirty-five years and I always knew she had a story like this in her. I'm so glad to finally see it in perfectly crafted prose."

—**Bob Wojnowski, sports columnist for the *Detroit News***

"I remember Niles West beating us like it was yesterday. They worked as a team, triumphed through hard times, and were able to transform into winners! Basketball helped Melissa and her teammates find something bigger than just the game—they found inner strength. Anyone picking up this book will be inspired and encouraged to also find their inner strength and, with the help of others, believe in themselves."

—**Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Olympic medalist and founder of the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation**

"I have known and admired Melissa Isaacson for three decades but never understood where her unending passion for sports was born until I had the opportunity to read *State*."

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In this interesting and insightful journey to a different time, Missy provides a wonderful reminder about the lessons these games provide and the unbreakable bonds they create.”

—**Mike Greenberg, ESPN host and *New York Times* bestselling author**

“Here’s the thing about a story whose ending is known: it needs to be told by a graceful writer, who can use humor in one sentence and tug heartstrings in the next. Melissa Isaacson’s tale of her Niles West girls’ basketball team capturing a state championship after years of hard work and heartbreak is a wonderful read about determination and dreams realized. But it’s bigger than that. It unflinchingly analyzes behaviors from a tricky time for anyone—high school—that is made trickier by the responsibilities of playing girls’ sports in a new world, the first few years after Title IX legislation. It captures the powerful bond of enduring relationships that stand the test of time, regardless of how much contact there has been in the years since. Perhaps most important, it reminds us all what can happen when individual desires are set aside for the greater good of a team. The power to create lasting memories is possible. What’s best: Isaacson’s words are merely the vehicle to speak for a transformative team.”

—**K.C. Johnson, Bulls beat writer, *Chicago Tribune***

“You’ve probably never heard of the 1975 Niles West High School girls’ basketball team. But theirs is a terrific story, and as fate would have it, one of their players, Missy Isaacson, went on to become a superb writer. If you love sports, you’ll love her fascinating, moving, funny, and richly reported account of how her team finally won state.”

—**Dave Barry, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and author**

“*State* is so much more than just another high school championship story. Melissa Isaacson brilliantly chronicles the individual and team backstory that created this special championship team. *State* also vividly captures the essence of why a young girl’s equal opportunity to be educated through sport is a civil right and NOT merely a matter of quotas.”

—**Doug Bruno, head coach of the DePaul University women’s basketball team**

“Every day walking into Niles West you were surrounded by greatness. Seeing the state champs’ picture on the wall motivated me to try to bring that same excitement and competitiveness back to West. That team helped put us on the map. It gave people something to talk about. I wanted to do the same thing. Having a connection to the pioneering women who played before us gave me a deep appreciation for what they stood for and what they overcame. They paved the way for all of us and I’m incredibly grateful to be part of such an important legacy.”

—**Jewell Loyd, professional basketball player for the WNBA’s Seattle Storm**

Q&A with Melissa Isaacson, author of *State*

What was the experience of writing this book like for you? What was the hardest part, and what was the easiest?

Even as someone who makes a living out of expressing myself, I find it nearly impossible to put into words what the experience of writing this book has meant to me. It began as a *Chicago Tribune* column on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of our state championship, and I feel it is almost fate that it is coming out now, on our fortieth anniversary and at a time when the awareness of women's issues has never been at a higher level.

The experience, even at its toughest moments of struggling for the right perspective and an interested publisher, has been a sincere joy. Reliving some of the happiest moments of my young life while uncovering and examining some of the darkest of mine and my teammates' has consumed a chunk of my adult life. In the process, it has fulfilled a powerful obligation I have felt to tell our story, a story I believe is an incredibly important one to tell.

You've said that this is not just a basketball story, it's a people story. Can you tell us a little bit about what you mean? Did you set out to write the story as just a basketball story? When during the process did you feel like the book became a people story?

In the beginning, I was contracted to write a young adult book that would eventually be turned into a screenplay. I never really connected with that version, which placed a bigger emphasis on the basketball side of our story. What it eventually became—after the death of my parents following a long decline from Alzheimer's—was what it was always meant to be.

During one prolonged writer's block, a writer friend convinced me that it was my story to tell and that I should just tell it. In doing so, I discovered that what basketball did for us went well beyond a state championship. As an adult, I was able to go back and see clearly the heroes that Arlene Mulder and Billy Schnurr and other adults were on this journey. As a reporter, I was able to find that I was far from alone in needing the game to rescue me.

While you were writing the book, you reconnected with several of your teammates and borrowed some of their scrapbooks and memorabilia to help tell your team's story. What was that experience like? Did you uncover anything surprising or unexpected during this process?

I discovered, for starters, that my mother, who was one of the handiest and craftiest women around in her prime, was not physically or mentally able to collect and assemble

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my memorabilia with the care and efficiency that my teammates' moms did. I didn't get that at first, and as an adult, the realization made me sad.

I also found a treasure trove as a reporter: a journalistic map of our four-year journey as well as a wondrous 1970s teenage girl's diary. To read those stories, touch that magical flannel varsity "N," see the black strip of cardboard with my name and number that stared down at us from the scoreboard in the big gym, slip the state championship gold medal over my head again, and even squeeze into the old red satin jacket was an incredible part of this experience for me.

In your epilogue, you mention your daughter and her park district soccer team. Can you talk about what it was like to see your daughter grow up playing sports in such a different environment than the one in which you and your team were playing?

It was almost a joke when my daughter Amanda would come home each season with a new, seemingly better, cooler, more dazzling uniform in soccer, basketball, and softball! Of course, she had zero appreciation for just how special it was to even have a uniform, and one that was not too tight, too girly, or shared with other teams!

It is not at all difficult for me or my teammates to flash back to the thrill we had in putting on our first school athletic uniforms and our first leather basketball shoes because it was such a huge part of the experience for us. To be allowed into this world in which we had special equipment and represented Niles West by wearing our school colors like real athletes was as memorable as winning the state title.

In the book, you talk about your first coach, Mrs. Mulder, and her policy not to single out any one of her players to reporters writing stories about the team. You eventually became a sports journalist and covered the Bulls through their NBA title runs. Do you think the way Mrs. Mulder treated stories about your team affected the way you'd eventually approach reporting on teams like the Bulls?

That's a really interesting question, and actually, it was relevant to my observations and coverage of the Bulls dynasty and of Michael Jordan, who I believe is the greatest player of all time. Bulls coach Phil Jackson's breakthrough with his team was a direct result of convincing his superstar—Jordan—to subjugate his own game for the good of the team. The Bulls' innovative "triangle offense" (the brainchild of assistant coach and Hall of Famer Tex Winter) was really a celebration of team play in which the ball touched the hands of every player on nearly every possession. Mrs. Mulder did not have the sophistication of a Phil Jackson or a Tex Winter, of course, but her philosophies and the devices she employed to emphasize the team concept—from her mental imagery to keeping us from knowing who were the high scorers to playing every player on her roster—were not unlike what the greatest NBA coaches of their time did to achieve success.

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What do you hope readers will take away from *State*?

I hope that the victories we enjoyed forty years ago, both on the court and off, will resonate with readers today because so many of our experiences are eerily similar to those that girls and women are still going through. Ultimately, I hope they will be as inspired in reading it as I was in writing it.

What's next for you?

I will continue teaching journalism and the art, craft, and joy of storytelling at Northwestern University. I will continue writing a blog for my website, which is an exercise I missed much more than I realized I would when I paused several years ago. And I will always be receptive to any great reporting or writing opportunities that may come my way.