

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Betty "Babs" Wingo, Ethel Wingo Johnson, Marva Scott & Kathleen Wimbley
"Pioneering Black Women Professional Wrestlers"

Betty "Babs" Wingo, Ethel Wingo Johnson, & Marva Wingo Scott were three sisters born in the early 1930's in Decatur, Georgia, to Gladys Chase and Clifford Wingo. To escape the Jim Crow South, the family moved north to Columbus, Ohio while the girls were still very young.

Ethel was about 12 years old when she began going to the gym with her older sister, Betty, lovingly known as "Babs." At the local YMCA, Babs and Ethel learned tumbling, judo, wrestling and strength training. Their younger sister, Marva, joined the girls later when she was old enough.

Columbus, Ohio was a hot spot for women wrestling due to the efforts of a man named Billy Wolfe. Wolfe managed at least thirty white women wrestlers, making many wrestling stars. He was also married to one of the better-known woman wrestlers, Mildred Burke, the first woman to win the original World Women's title. Wolfe, inspired by the integration of baseball by Jackie Robinson, went on a search for young black women to integrate women's professional wrestling. He discovered 16-year-old Babs and she became the first Wingo sister to turn pro. Soon after, Ethel, their childhood friend Kathleen Wimbley, and then Marva would become professional wrestlers, fully integrating the sport of "lady wrestlers." The three sisters and Kathleen represented strength, femininity and beauty (a requirement to draw a crowd). Since they were not allowed to wrestle white women, the four women would often fight each other in single matches or tag team fights.

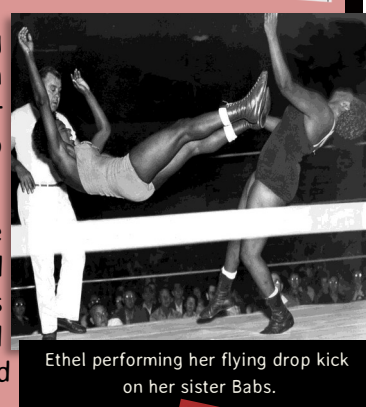
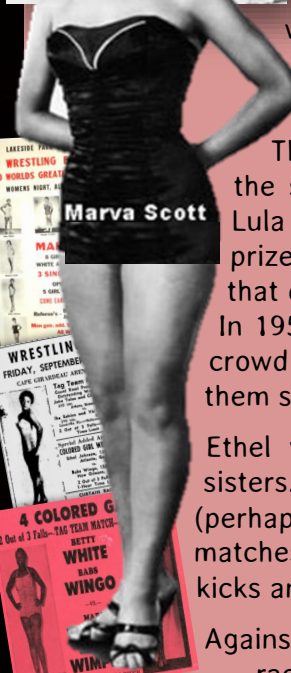
The sisters quickly gained popularity and the crowds grew, becoming more invested in the sport. The addition of other black women wrestlers (Ramona Isabell, Louise Greene, Lula Mae Provo, and Tina Cole) increased the size of the crowds and the demand for larger prizes. In 1952, Babs, Ethel, and Kathleen worked a tag team match in Baltimore, Maryland that drew a record 3,611 fans as the main event. The largest crowd the city's history. In 1953, Kansas City, Babs wrestled World Wrestling champion, Mildred Burke in front of a crowd of 9,000 fans. It was the first "Interracial Championship". The women's success made them some of the highest earning women's wrestlers of the times.

Ethel went on to be the most commercially successful of the wrestling sisters. She was small, but naturally athletic and was one of the first women (perhaps even wrestlers in general) to use a standing dropkick in her matches. She had great speed and quickness, along with the ability to use drop kicks and flying head scissors.

Against all odds, the pioneering black women wrestlers not only broke the race barrier, they also managed to succeed in the male-dominated world of pro-wrestling. The sisters, Babs, Ethel and Marva, all raised families while blazing a trail for female athletes long before the civil rights and feminist movements occurred. The women earned a living, traveled internationally, and left their mark on the sport of women's wrestling.

Babs' wrestling career ended in 1965. Ethel's wrestling career ended with her last match against her sister Marva in 1976. Marva retired three years later in 1979. Babs died unexpectedly in April of 2003 and Marva died of cancer in August of the same year. Ethel died of heart disease in September 2018, in Columbus, Ohio. She was 83 years old. Ethel was recently inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2021.

The video "Lady Wrestler: The Amazing, Untold Story of African American Women in the Ring" is available on video streaming.



Ethel performing her flying drop kick on her sister Babs.

