

***Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport During World War II***

Stark, Douglas

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Media Mention

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Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport During World War II. By Douglas Stark. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 384 pages. Hardbound. \$34.95 (ISBN-13: 978-0-8032-4528-0).

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Douglas Stark writes about the sport he loves, basketball, in his second book, *Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport During World War II*. Focusing on professional basketball between 1941 and 1946, Stark provides ample historical background and context for the players, teams and leagues discussed within his narrative. Comprised of an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue, he incorporates both primary and secondary sources to tell the story. Numerous interviews from books, newspaper articles, and the author himself enhances the text and creates a sense of “being there” for readers.

In “Introduction: A New Game” Stark presents a thorough history of the birth of basketball, its creator, Dr. James Naismith, and the influence of Luther Gulick, followed by a short history of the professionalization of the game.

Chapter 1 - “America Goes to War: 1941-1942” begins with Ralph Kaplowitz of New York University being drafted into the Army Air Corp in August 1941, thereby ending his college basketball career. Kaplowitz played basketball for Chanute Field Team in Illinois for a time before spending five years traveling the country for training then flying 13 missions as a fighter pilot in the Pacific Theatre. Stark discusses the status of college and professional basketball as news of Pearl Harbor came about. He offers information on Ned Irish and college doubleheaders at Madison Square Garden and the beginning of intersectional games in the 1930s, as well as the beginning of the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) and National Collegiate Athletic Association

(NCAA) Tournament. Stark notes the importance of players and organizations such as Angelo “Hank” Luisetti, the American Basketball League (ABL), Eddie Gottlieb and the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association (SPHA), the Wilmington Blue Bombers, the National Basketball League (NBL), the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons, Oshkosh All-Stars and Bobby McDermott. He discusses the creation of the World Professional Basketball Tournament (WPBT) in 1939, by Harry Hannin and Harry Wilson, held in Chicago and reviews the first three years. This tournament served as the first to include black and integrated teams, with the New York Renaissance winning in 1939 and the Harlem Globetrotters the following year. In 1942, two service teams, Grumman Aircraft and Aberdeen Training Center, participated. Stark discusses the growth of the tournament and coverage by newspapers, including several quotes from players and coaches / owners. Other tournaments, such as one in Cleveland organized by Max Rosenblum, emerged as well.

Stark devotes a large portion of Chapter 2 - “The Color Line Falls: 1942-1943” to the integration of professional basketball. He notes that the first game between two integrated teams in a professional league occurred on Friday, December 11, 1942, and featured the Chicago Studebakers versus the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets. After a short discussion of the integration of professional sport, Stark delves into the history of Harry “Bucky” Lew, an African-American who played for a team in Lowell, MA in 1902. The author intertwines a brief history of the Chicago Studebakers with narrative on NBL games, noting that the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets were not as successful as Studebakers in integrating. He includes information about players such as Bill Jones, the second half of the NBL season with Fort Wayne and Sheboygan, and challenges of the ABL due to wartime restrictions, such as player shortages and the withdrawal of teams from the league for the season. Nonetheless, the ABL championship featured the Trenton Tigers vs Philly SPHAs for the title. Readers learn that the Washington Bears, a team made up of almost all Renaissance players, and coached by a former Ren, Tarzan Cooper, won 1943 World Professional Tournament. Interestingly, college players signed to play in the tournament due to the effects of the war on player availability.

Discussion about service teams, the NBL and ABL, and the World Professional Tournament dominate Chapter 3 - “Wartime Basketball: 1943-1944.” According to basketball historian, Bill Himmelman, service basketball promoted the integration of the game. Several top service teams emerged, such as the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois, under the leadership of Commander J. Russell Cook, and coached by Tony Hinkle, who spent his life involved in the game (a photo of the 1941-42 Great Lakes team graces the cover of the book). Over 1000 services teams played basketball, which promoted the game, boosted morale and provided a diversion during the war. Great Lakes defeated top Universities, such as Stanford, Notre Dame, and

Kentucky, and had seasons with less than five losses. Great Lakes boasted an all-black basketball team as well, that included Larry Doby. College coaches or professional players coached the service teams. For example, Everett Case, a University of Wisconsin player, directed the De Pauw Naval Pre-flight basketball program and then coached at North Carolina State University after the war. Stark tells the story of Wat Misaka, a Japanese American player for the University of Utah, in context of the Japanese Internment Camps. Misaka played for the University of Utah in 1943-44 and in 1946-47 after the war, and a few games for Knicks of the BAA in 1947 before being released. Fielding teams remained a challenge in 1943-44 for both the NBL and ABL, due to restrictions on travel and constant changes in player personnel. Wee Willie Smith signed to play the last four games of the season with Cleveland Chase Brassman, serving as the only African-American to integrate the NBL that year. Despite the consideration of more than 37 teams for the 1944 WPBT, midwestern teams dominated those chosen. A military team and three new teams from the east accepted invitations, including the Brooklyn Eagles. Jack "Dutch" Garfinkel normally played for the SPHAs but joined the Brooklyn Eagles for the tournament. A fight between the Globetrotter and Oshkosh teams in the quarterfinals, drew newspaper headlines, with different versions of the event in the black and white press. Stark attributes Fort Wayne's success in the NBL and WPBT to owner Fred Zollner, who worked hard to maintain a stable team. Zollner paid his players well, and purchased airplanes to transport the team. Zollner often assisted other teams financially to keep them in business, and gave back to the Fort Wayne community.

In Chapter 4 - "The Big Man Cometh: 1944-1945" Stark focuses on the change in the center position with the addition of Bob Kurland and George Mikan. Formerly a position that was somewhat stagnant, centers now served as all around players. Kurland and Mikan stood at 7'0" and 6'9" and played for Oklahoma A & M and De Paul respectively. Then they faced each other in the Third Annual Red Cross match, featuring the NIT champion, DePaul, versus the NCAA champion, Oklahoma A & M in 1945. With an abundance of professional players after the war a new team, the Chicago Gears owned by Maurice White, joined the NBL led by Dick Triptow and Sean Patrick. Stark presents a brief history of the dominance of the SPHAs since the 1930s. The SPHAs won the 1945 ABL title in a best of three game series against Baltimore. Stark notes several interesting facts about the 1945 WPBT to conclude the chapter. With Fort Wayne considered the team to beat, Midland Dow Chemical entered as an amateur team. The Long Island Grumman Hellcats entered an integrated team with former Renaissance players, John Isaacs and Pop Gates, and Dolly King as coach, but played poorly and lost in the first round to the Dayton Acmes. The Rens defeated the Indianapolis Oilers, 67-59, attaining the highest winning and losing points to date in the tournament, serving as evidence of an increase in scoring during the war. After defeating the Pittsburgh Raiders the Rens faced Fort Wayne, but lost

68-45. Setting another high scoring tournament record, Fort Wayne defeated the Dayton Acmes, 78-52, to win the 1945 WPBT title.

Stark describes teams, games, and events within the NBL, ABL and at the WPBT in Chapter 5 - "Looking Toward the Future: 1945-1946." Following Germany's surrender in May 1945 and Japan's a few months later, an economic boom positively affected sports, such as basketball. The NBL expanded under commissioner Ward "Piggy" Lambert, former Purdue coach. Under the direction of owner, Les Harrison, the Rochester Royals recruited top players such as William "Red" Holzman, Al Cervi, Bob Davis and Andrew "Fuzzy" Lavane. While Rochester defeated Fort Wayne, and then SheyboGAN to win the 1946 NBL championship, Baltimore faced the SPHAs for the ABL title and won. Stark devotes the remainder of the chapter to discussion of the 1946 WPBT, discussing several of the players and different aspects of the teams in the tournament, as well as each game. With a large percentage of war veterans playing, the champion was determined in a best of three games. George Mikan made his professional debut playing for the Chicago Gears. Mikan signed with Maurice White, owner of the Gears for \$60,000 over five years, a record salary for professional basketball. Though Mikan fouled out in the Gears win over Pittsburgh, he earned 17 points, a game high for the tournament. The Youngstown Bears withdrew from the tournament when one of their players, Pierre "Huck" Hartman, passed away from pneumonia and so the Toledo Jeeps took their place. Facing Fort Wayne in the best of three games, Oshkosh won the first game but Fort Wayne took the next two and won the 1946 WPBT. George Mikan was named the tournament MVP, setting records for field goals and free throws.

In Epilogue - "Basketball Arrives," Stark notes the organization of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) by Hockey team and arena owners on June 6, 1946 at the Hotel Commodore in New York City. While the BAA vied with the NBL for top players, the NBL expanded and two teams added black players: Pop Gates with Buffalo/Tri-Cities, and Dolly King with Rochester. Bobby McDermott joined the Gears and along with George Mikan, who sat out for six weeks in a salary dispute, the Gears won the 1947 NBL title. The ABL continued but took a back seat to the BAA and struggled financially. The 1947 WPBT featured a west coast team for the first time, the Portland, Oregon Indians. The Indianapolis Kautsky's defeated Toledo for the 1947 title. In conclusion, the World War II years laid the ground work for tremendous growth in basketball in the following decade.

Stark uses quotes frequently to serve as narrative versus as an enhancement of the text in Wartime Basketball. Paraphrasing quotes could provide for a shorter text, one less redundant at times. In addition to the use of "last years" versus "the previous year" and "last season" versus "the previous season" in several places, infrequent comma

placement makes the text confusing at times. Finally, Stark states that the Washington Bears were the Rens “reconstituted.” He would find disagreement from former Rens and Bear player, John Isaacs. When asked, Isaacs was adamant about the Bears being a different team than the Rens, with a different owner, albeit with nearly the same players. The Rens did not participate in the WPBT all ten years. Owner, Bob Douglas withdrew his Rens in 1943 when a handful of his top players chose to play for the Bears for greater pay, as noted in the New York Amsterdam News.

Despite these few concerns, *Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport During World War II* serves as a tremendous addition to the history of professional basketball, specifically during World War II. Stark has done his homework, and then some. Beginning each chapter with a story that draws reader attention, his detailing of scores, dates, player, coach, team, and league information is admirable. Stark artfully mixes primary and secondary sources from prominent basketball writers and historians in the narrative, inserting numerous quotes from players, coaches and team owners...a goldmine for researchers. Five Appendices include NBL and ABL yearly standings, WPBT results, Red Cross Charity Matches, and Service Team records during World War II serve as an excellent resource, in addition to well organized endnotes and an index. Stark’s efforts are to be applauded. *Wartime Basketball* will be enjoyed by fans and researchers of professional basketball alike, and it lays a basis for further research of amateur, professional, and service basketball during World War II.