

Where would Toronto basketball be without a man named Ben Newman? His family wants you to know

Decades after a St. Catharines businessman helped bring Toronto its first professional team, his grandson is on a mission to get him wider recognition while Newman’s wife and daughter can still appreciate the honour

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Francine Williams and son Jordon hold a photo of Ms. Williams's father, Ben Newman, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. Mr. Newman is credited with bringing Toronto its first professional basketball team, the Huskies.

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Most Canadian sports fans have never heard of Ben Newman.

Canada Basketball can't tell you much about him. And his name draws a blank from Canadian sports historians.

But a long-time friend of Newman's, Archie Katzman, 93, remembers one of the men credited with bringing Toronto its first pro basketball team. "He was a very generous man, and he helped basketball in Ontario a great deal."

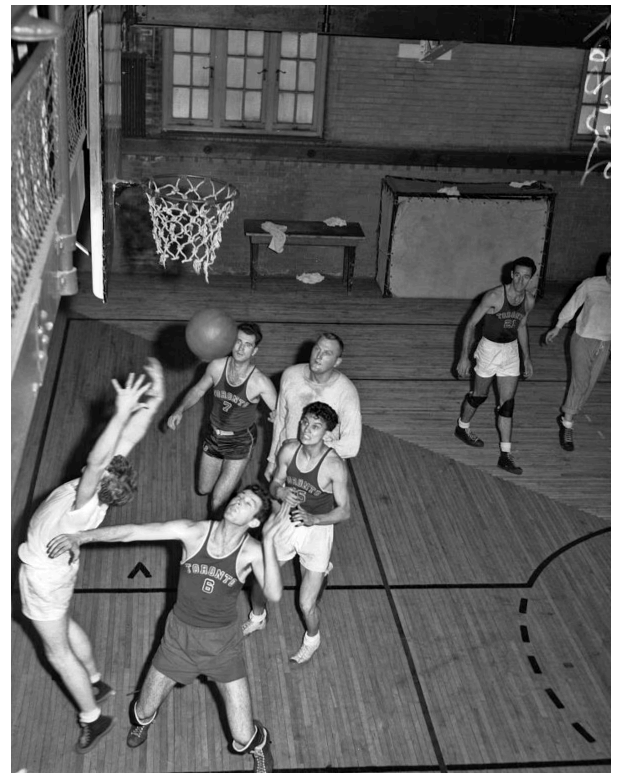
Newman died in 1991 at the age of 71. And his role in the Canadian basketball pantheon is significant, even if apparently forgotten.

Now his grandson, Jordon Williams, is reaching out to everyone from Canada Basketball to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, hoping Newman can be recognized as a builder of the sport.

Newman, a steel executive from St. Catharines, Ont., was only 26 when he attended meetings in New York with the Basketball Association of America – the forerunner of the NBA – to help secure a franchise in the pro league for Toronto. The team was the Huskies, which existed for just a single season.

Williams, 42, from Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., recalls his grandfather had a gift of the gab. He says the steel businessman was influential and generous, serving on boards for hospitals and Brock University, and paying sports registrations for kids from St. Catharine's who couldn't afford it.

Williams was only 11 when his grandfather died, and it's just recently that he's has been piecing together Newman's role in Canadian basketball in the 1940s. He is culling from a mixture of old family stories – corroborated by yellowed newspaper clippings from his mother's basement – including how Frank Selke of the



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to meet with some of the most influential executives in North American sports to land the city a pro hoops franchise.

The Huskies practice at a Toronto YMCA on Oct. 30, 1946, two days before their first league game.

JOHN BOYD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

“He was a 26-year-old Jewish kid from a small town, in the room with all these heavyweights,” Williams said. “He had chutzpah.”

Williams’s effort to thrust his grandfather’s story into the spotlight has some urgency behind it. His mother Francine – Newman’s daughter – was diagnosed with cancer earlier this year. His grandmother Sheila – the late Newman’s wife – is 97. He wants his grandfather recognized while they’re still here to see it. “It’s a gift to them,” Williams says.



Jordon Williams hopes to convince basketball institutions to honour his grandfather while his mother and grandmother, shown with Newman in an old photo, are still around.

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The St. Catharines Sports Hall of Fame inducted Newman posthumously in 1998. Williams is working to nominate him to the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame too. He has also reached out to Brock University's basketball program, hoping to recognize him there.

He has already nominated Newman to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, the 40,000-square-foot building of basketball history, located in Springfield, Mass., with more than 400 inductees across all levels of basketball from James Naismith to Michael Jordan.

The Hall confirmed that Newman will be on the ballot for the class of 2024 in the contributor category, but that's the easy part. Anyone can be nominated. Next, committees screen and purge candidates, so that list will get much smaller before the class of inductees is announced in April.

But how many of those decision makers will even know who Newman is, and will his contributions rise to the level of enshrinement? That's why Williams is working so hard now to tell his grandfather's story.

The challenge of making the case is that virtually no one is alive today who witnessed Newman's contributions to the Huskies. Even his wife met Newman after that season.

Ask around within the basketball community, and his name doesn't ring a bell, even among historians who authored books on the sport. A deep dive into newspaper clippings and museum archives provides some details.





Old newspaper articles chronicle Newman's prowess in sport and business over the years.

TARA WALTON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Newman was born in St. Catharines in 1920, the son of a Russian immigrant father. He grew up an all-round athlete but loved basketball especially.

“In those days, the kids didn’t know and didn’t care what your nationality or religion was,” Newman told the St. Catharines Standard newspaper in 1989. “On a Sunday I’d go to Hebrew School, the protestants and Roman Catholics would go to their churches or Sunday schools, then we’d all meet and play hockey behind the St. Nicholas School on Church Street or basketball at a gymnasium.”

Newman played basketball at Queen’s University. Later, he formed a senior team in St. Catharines called the Merrittton Hayes Hellcats and was coach and manager. Using his contacts in nearby Buffalo and Niagara Falls, N.Y., he recruited American basketball talent, including multitalented star athlete Sal Maglie, an eventual major...

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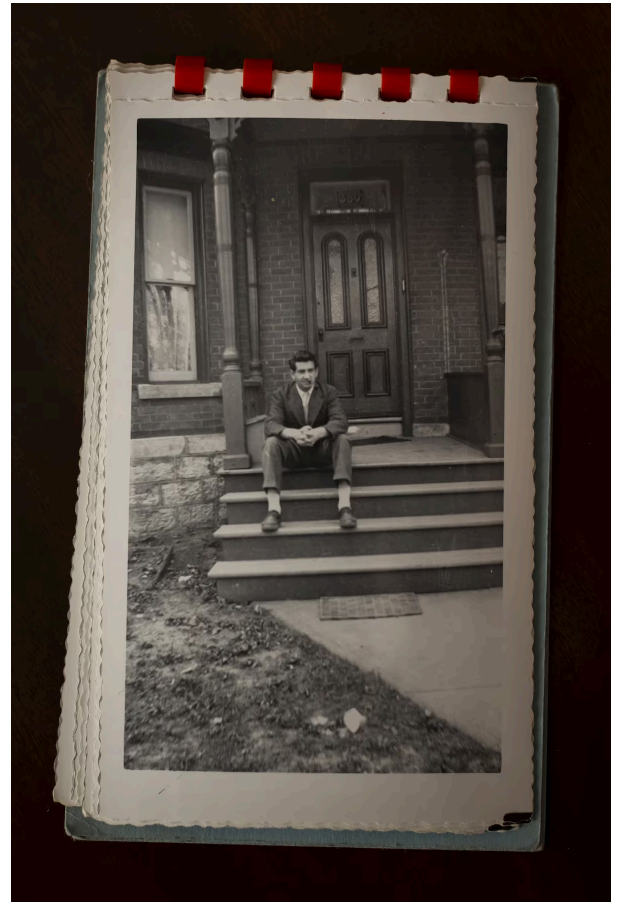
and 1945. Newman added a juvenile team – the Hellkittens – who were 1945 national champs.

Because of his basketball expertise, the Toronto Rotary Club called Newman in the 1945-46 season to stage a basketball series at Maple Leaf Gardens. It was a test of how the city, which loved Leafs hockey and Toronto Argonauts football, would like the roundball game. So Newman organized an exhibition event, featuring the Rochester Royals and Fort Wayne Pistons – then members of the Professional Basketball Association of America. The Gardens reportedly sold out 15,000 seats. A Globe and Mail article from 1946 said Newman was “considered one of the dominion’s greatest authorities on the sport.”

That success led Selke to call Newman again for his basketball knowledge, as managers from the major arenas in North America – including the Gardens – were set to meet in New York to discuss forming what was then called the Basketball Association of America. The managers wanted to fill dates in their arenas, when hockey teams weren’t playing, with basketball. The time seemed ripe for a league – travel restrictions were being lifted after the war, and military personnel were returning home. Newman was among the small group of men to represent Toronto at the meetings in New York, the only Canadian entry among the league’s 11 founding teams.

“So there I was, 26 years old, in New York City at a meeting of all the sport’s big wheels in North America,” Newman told the Standard. “And I had the contract for the Maple Leaf Gardens team in my pocket.”

Newman co-owned the team with Canadian businessmen Eric Cradock and Harold Shannon. Newman’s friend Lew Hayman, coach, general manager and part owner of



Newman, shown in 1978, would die in 1991.

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club signed centre Ed Sadowski as a player-coach. Except for two Canadians, the players were all American, with an average annual salary of \$4,000 each. Newman told the Standard that he made superstar Jackie Robinson an offer to play basketball for the Huskies, but he stuck with baseball.

The Gardens held the league's first game on Nov. 1, 1946, with the hometown Huskies facing the New York Knickerbockers. Tickets ranged from 75 cents to \$2.50. The Globe and Mail ran a large ad with a photo of Toronto's towering big man, 6-foot-8 George Nostrand, with the words 'Can you top this?', offering any fan taller than Nostrand a free ticket. It was not only Canada's first taste of pro basketball, but the history books count it as the NBA's first game.

"I strongly believe he played a big role in getting that basketball floor into the Gardens," said Katzman, still living in St. Catharines. Katzman wasn't sure if Newman helped build or finance that floor.

It was hardly a dream season for the Huskies – Sadowski quit after a couple of games, the crowds were small, and the Huskies won just 22 of their 60 games, tying for last place. Newman's father fell ill, and he had to spend most of his time at the family steel business, not on basketball. The club folded after the season, and it would be another 50 years before Toronto got an NBA team.

Does Newman's contribution rise to the level of Hall of Fame induction? The Huskies' two Canadian players, Hank Biasatti and Gino Sovran, are in the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame. Williams says he's had some conversations with Canada Basketball in recent months. He is going all out to get his grandfather honoured, but

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An ad for the Huskies-Knickerbockers game of Nov. 1, 1946, promises free admission to Maple Leaf Gardens for anyone taller than the Huskies' tallest player.

NBA

“My grandfather could walk up to anyone and start a conversation, he had no fear,” Williams said. “Every old story I find about him is a joy.”



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