

# **Early Basketball**

## **(1891-1949)**

**By Brian Aldridge**

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## Now...

Basketball has come such a long, long way that you might not even recognize the very first game. Back in December 1891, 2 teams of 9 men squared off in a tiny Springfield (MA) gym. After two 15-minute halves of play, the final score was 1-0. No jump shots, no 3-point shots, no dunks, and, if played the way it was designed, no fouls. The players were young students at a YMCA and their top priority was to develop teamwork, not position themselves for an upcoming draft.

Bit by bit, changes came: backboards became standard, a lace-less basketball was introduced, and the jump shot was used more frequently than the 2-handed set shot. Early on, the college game drew more than the pros. While we could debate today what is more popular – NCAA's Final Four or the NBA Finals, it took a long, long time for pro basketball to find acceptance.

Changes were not limited just to the game - basketball caught on internationally as well. The first European stars joined the NBA in the late 1980s - several of whom now listed in the Hall of Fame, and 9 of the 12 players on the 2014 NBA Champion Antonio Spurs were foreign born.

In the 1976 Summer Olympics (Montreal, Canada), women's teams squared off for the first time. Two years later, the WBL formed and lasted 3 years. The current WNBA formed in the summer of 1997 and continues today.

The NBA season currently begins in late October and ends in mid-June – making it the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest pro sport behind hockey and baseball. As you might guess, pro basketball rosters list the fewest active players (12) as compared to baseball (25) and football (45). Since 1987, NBA's draft has been limited to 2 rounds, as compared to the NFL draft (7 rounds), and baseball (40 rounds). But unlike football and baseball, basketball teams that fared poorly can also end up with a lottery pick.

The pro stars are many, but who was the Michael Jordan or LeBron James of the 1950s-1980s? Was it George Mikan, Bill Russell, Wilt "The Stilt" Chamberlain, Oscar (the Big O) Robertson, Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, "Pistol" Pete Maravich, Nate "Tiny" Archibald, George "The Iceman" Gervin, Julius "Dr. J" Erving, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, or Larry Bird?

Basketball is not immune from bad press. Point-shaving scandals by colleges surfaced in the 1950s; drugs use (cocaine, marijuana) became more evident in the early 1980s; one referee in particular was banned for placing bets on games he officiated, and a long-time owner was forced to sell his team for making derogatory remarks towards blacks.

The game still has some drawbacks (too many fouls and timeouts near the game's end) but continues to improve. The game is faster, and players caught "flopping" are now subject to a fine.

## And then...

In 2010, **Dr. James Naismith's** 13 rules of *Basket Ball* were sold for \$4.3M. Why so much? For one thing, the document was 119 years old, but it also displayed the very origins of a sport that is now played world-wide. The rules, court dimensions, style of play, and uniforms used in 1891 might today appear primitive and even humorous. But Basket Ball's beginning was no less odd than early baseball and football. The 1876 brand of **baseball** did not include gloves and only 1 umpire was assigned. The American version of **football**, as played on college campuses in the 1880s, still resembled the English sport of rugby. Of the two, football was more popular. But after a rash of on-field deaths and catastrophic injuries, President Teddy Roosevelt considered banning the gridiron sport altogether.

In Naismith's eyes, something had to change. In December of 1891, while serving as the PE instructor at International YMCA (Springfield, MA), he was tasked to quickly find a different form of winter recreation for 18 men at YMCA's school for missionaries. The usual winter-time activities of calisthenics and gymnastic routines were considered boring, so Naismith devised a game that incorporated teamwork, the passing of a ball, and an object where to shoot that ball. Before students broke for Christmas break, Naismith's game of **Basket Ball** was born.

Naismith's YMCA floor was 35'x55' – less than a half-court by today's standards. And it was crowded – his class of 18 was split into 2 teams of 9. The objective was to toss soccer ball into a peach basket nailed to the base of a balcony/running track. Backboards were not considered until 3 years later. Each basket made was scored as a goal.

Early rules: No physical roughness was tolerated – one was banished if his foul was ruled intentional; players had to dribble with both hands; 3 fouls gave the opponent a goal, and there was no running with the ball. The game was divided into two 15-minute halves. Popularity grew quickly, spreading to other YMCAs and athletic clubs. An umpire supervised the game.

### **It Wasn't Pretty:**

Uniforms varied from standard trousers, track suits, tights with velvet shorts or football pants. Forget sneakers - players wore high-top shoes, knee-high socks, and/or cushioned knee pads.

The soccer ball was eventually replaced by a version that featured laces that made the ball bounce awkwardly.

### **Growth spurt:**

Game was strongest in the northeast US: NY and Philadelphia. Contests were played at the local YMCA, the Masonic Hall, or where large dances were held.

- Spectators saw the following: the layup, 2-hand set shots, underhanded free throw attempts, no dribbling, and a jump ball that followed each basket.
- The use of **peach baskets** was not uncommon, but it required a person to fetch the ball following a basket. Before the decade was over, the baskets were replaced by iron hoops with braided netting.
- Those on the floor included the *Center*, the *Attack* (forwards), and the *Backs* (guards). The **Center** performed the jump ball and did the rebounding. **Forwards** were for scoring and **guards** were set in place to defend against fast-breaking opponents.
- **Physical game.** Teams vying for ball going out-of-bounds became wrestling matches.

## **1893-1900**

**1893:** Each half was increased to 20 minutes. Basketball eventually became too physical for the YMCA's liking. In response, teams and leagues began renting high school gyms, armories, and dance hall floors.

**1894:** The distance from the basket to free throw line was reduced from 20' to 15'.

**1895:** **Field Goal** was increased to 2 points. **Free Throws** were now 1 point/each. **Two officials** per game: visiting team chose the *umpire*, home team chose the *referee*. The center **jump ball** started each half and after each basket was made. Backboards were added. Those committing a foul were sent to the bench.

**Buffalo Germans**, a famous barnstorming team of the era, began playing teams from the northeast (NY & PA).

- 1896:** **First professional game** was played in Trenton, NJ. Players were paid from the proceeds, but no contracts were signed. Other accounts claim the first pro game took place three years earlier between 2 New York teams.
- 1897:** The number of players playing on *larger* courts was reduced from 9 to 7. On *standard* courts, it was 5 against 5.

### **Early Conditions:**

**No integration.** Two all-black teams – the **Renaissance Five** and Abe Saperstein's **Harlem Globetrotters** achieved great success both on and off the floor.

**Courts:** some were either slippery or made of hard cement. Players also had to contend with hot steam pipes or stoves positioned court-side to keep the gym warm. Arenas were often filled with cigarette smoke, and some fans were positioned close enough to pull the guy-wires connected to the backboards - causing them to sway and shift during the game.

**Backboards** were not created to aid the player but to prevent fans sitting or standing behind the hoop from re-directing the shot.

- 1898:** **National Basketball League (NBL):** First pro league lasted 6 years. Clubs were mostly from the east coast (Pennsylvania and New Jersey). The NBL dissolved when players jumped from one club to another or franchises left to join other leagues.

No more ball going out-of-bounds. Many venues encircled the playing area with chicken wire, steel mesh or ropes. Two reasons for this: It kept the ball from entering the stands and also separated the unruly fans from injuring or harassing referees and players. The dangling wires or ropes gave the court a cage-like appearance.

## **1901-1910**

- 1906:** **National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)** was founded and exerted a strong influence by setting national standards and rules that even the professional leagues adopted (see 1915 below). Prior to the NCAA, each region developed its own rules.
- 1908:** Players dribbling the ball were now allowed to shoot. The **playing floor** was 90' x 50' – just short of the current 94' x 50'.
- 1910:** **Troy Trojans** of NY was another successful barnstorming team. The squad made great use of the bounce pass, full-court pass, and the fast break.

## **1911-1920**

- 1911:** Referees used whistles instead of starter's pistols to signal the end of the half.
- 1913:** Ball going out-of-bounds was given to the team that *did not* last touch the ball.
- 1915:** **One-handed dribbling** was allowed. While the **New York State League** allowed the player fouled shoot free throws, the **Eastern League** had designated person shoot all his team's free throws. The Eastern League also did not require backboards.

**1918:** **The Spahs** (South Philadelphia Hebrew Association), a strong independent team formed by Eddie Gottlieb, began play. After achieving success in the Philadelphia League, the SPAHs later joined the Eastern League and the ABL in the 1930s.

**1919:** **The Original Celtics** formed and barnstormed northeast US. But this group formed a dynasty that lasted. Unlike most teams, this one stayed together. Star players such as Joe Lapchick, Dutch Dehnert, Nat Hickey and Nat Holman were expert at developing the pivot, the give-and-go, zone defense and switching on defense. Games were routs.

The Celtics' successes had disadvantages: dominating the opposition caused them to withdraw from the Metropolitan League.

## 1921-1930:

**Rules evolved** – during this period, some fouls were changed to simple violations (i.e. 1923: no free throws were awarded for double dribbling).

Barnstorming clubs played non-league games throughout region or country.

Professional games were still billed as a side attraction or added to other events.

A **lace-less basketball** was introduced.

**1922:** The **Renaissance Casino Ballroom** in Harlem sponsored **the Rens** – one of the most successful teams ever established. The all-black squad barnstormed around 1928 before folding in 1949. The Rens' overall record ranged from 2588-529 or 2318-381, including an 88-game winning streak in 1933 and a 473-49 record in 1936.

**1925:** Professional basketball was also known as **post-graduate basketball**.

**American Basketball League (ABL)** formed. Founded by **George Preston Marshall** (later owner of Boston/Washington Redskins) and was headed by current NFL Commissioner **Joe Carr**. League used AAU rules, eliminated the court's cage appearance the 2-handed dribble, required the use of backboards, and limited the player to 5 fouls.

For a short period of time, ABL teams were allowed to play exhibition games against the independent Celtics. Players signed contracts with 1 team, which barred them from jumping to another team mid-season.

**1926:** For the ABL to prosper – or at least survive, it needed the **Brooklyn Celtics** to join. To this point, ABL prohibited teams from playing the Celts, hoping that the latter would eventually commit to the league. They did, going 19-2 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the season and won the league championship.

Other teams that joined the ABL: Washington Palace Five, Cleveland Rosenblums (Max Rosenblum was the owner), Brooklyn Arcadians (featuring ML baseball player **Harry Heilmann**), Buffalo Germans, Rochester Generals, Ft. Wayne Caseys, Detroit Pulaski Post Five, Boston Whirlwinds, and George Halas's Chicago Bruins.

**1927:** **Harlem Globetrotters** formed and began their famous cross-country play. Team was coached and managed by **Abe Saperstein** and was originally known as the **Savoy Big Five**, named after the Savoy Dance Hall located in the Bronzeville section of Chicago. The Savoy sponsored the Trotters until management wanted to concentrate on using the site solely as a dance hall.

The Globetrotters had no true connection to Harlem, New York. Saperstein had added the **Harlem** name to give the club national appeal and to identify the team as a black team. Club did not actually play in Harlem until 1968.

1/7: Globetrotters played their 1<sup>st</sup> game in Hinckley, Illinois (40 miles west of Chicago).

Globetrotters “mixed success with competence.” To offset their incredible success (101-16), the club added its distinctive, crowd-pleasing showmanship without losing their on-court skills. Globetrotters went on to win the **World Professional Championship** in both 1940 and 1941.

The ABL, meanwhile, made changes to improve the quality of play: A player was disqualified if he committed a 5<sup>th</sup> foul and coaches or players could be fined \$10-\$25 for use of profanity or fighting. Changes or no changes, the Celtics’ dominance (team won 15 straight games) still made it a 1-team league.

The Celtics disbanded during the 1928-29 season after their promoter, **James Furey**, was indicted for embezzling \$187K. Some Celtics players signed on with the Cleveland Rosenblums who then went on to win the league championship vs. Ft. Wayne.

The Celtics regrouped then disbanded after 10 games in the 1929-30 season.

**1930:** ABL made it mandatory that each team include 2 rookies.

## 1931-1940

**1931:** With no competitive balance, the **ABL folded**.

**1933:** Through 1947: Three northeastern leagues combined to form another **American Basketball League (ABL)**.  
ABL changed the format from two 20-minute halves to (3) 15-minute periods.

**1934:** Sports columnist **Ned Irish** began promoting college basketball double-headers at New York’s **Madison Square Garden**. Such events not only gave the game greater media attention and popularity, they helped standardized the rules since many of the teams came from other states.

**1936:** Stanford’s **Angelo “Hank” Luisetti** began showcasing his running 1-handed shot.

No more center jump following each basket.

Berlin, Germany: **US Olympic basketball** team defeated Canada 19-8 to win the gold medal.

**1937:** The **molded basketball** was introduced.

Prior to the 1950s, it was **college basketball**, especially NY City that drew large crowds. Professional basketball games were still used *as an addition to other events* that were booked at a dance hall or stadium. Owners used such games fill empty seats.

**National Basketball League (NBL or NL)** began. League lasted through 1949.

Led by 3 major corporations that sponsored individual teams (Firestone, General Electric, and Goodyear), the NBL attempted to make basketball cleaner and faster by copying the college-style game.

- Teams set their own schedules and home teams dictated what rules to follow.
- Large cities as well as smaller urban areas were represented.

**Large cities:** Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Minneapolis, Syracuse, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Cincinnati. Times were still tough: The Minneapolis Lakers were required to play their home games at 4 separate sites.

**Small cities:** Flint (MI), Ft. Wayne, Hammond, and Anderson (IN), Oshkosh and Sheboygan (WI); Akron, Warren, Youngstown, and Dayton (OH), Waterloo (IA), Tri-Cities and Kankakee (IL).

Hammond team included future MLB Hall of Fame player **Lou Boudreau**.

**1938:** The 1<sup>st</sup> **National Invitation Tournament (NIT)**. Six of the nation's top college teams sought to win the championship. Finals: Temple Owls beat the Colorado Buffaloes.

**1939:** **NCAA** began post-season play. Eight top college teams were invited to play. Oregon Beavers beat the Ohio State Buckeyes 46-33 in the Finals.

**World Championship Tournament** began. Sponsored by the *Chicago Herald American*, the tournament of professional teams lasted until 1949.

NY Renaissance Five won the 1<sup>st</sup> invitational by beating Oshkosh 34-25.

**Rule (NBL):** Ball must cross center court within 10 seconds or be awarded to the opponent.

## 1941-1949

**1942-43:** Professional basketball in war-time mode. Many **United Auto Workers**/industrial plants (Goodyear, Chevrolet, Firestone) purchased franchises and hired NBL several players to "work" in their factory.

Before joining the Navy, **George Halas** sold his Chicago Bruins (NBL) to the Studebaker Flyers. The Flyers signed Dick Evans, Paul Sokody, and former Harlem Globetrotters Sonny Boswell, Duke Cumberland, and Bernie Price. The Flyers (8-15) lasted 1 year.

**1945:** Post WWII: **College basketball** again rose in popularity. Big-city venues like Madison Square Garden continued to schedule double-headers featuring the nation's top teams.

The pro circuits, meanwhile, pursued college stars (former and current) plus returning war veterans to increase attendance.

**1946:** **Chicago American Gears** (NBL) signed 6'10" DePaul All-American **George Mikan** for \$60K/5 years. The NBL had other players equaling Mikan's height, but Mikan's skills in the pivot were considered advanced.

Believing the Gears trimmed his salary 20%, Mikan left the team for 6 weeks in a contract dispute but re-joined the club after **Bobby McDermott** was acquired from the Ft. Wayne Zollner Pistons.

**Basketball Association of America (BAA)** formed.

**Maurice Podoloff**, BAA's 1<sup>st</sup> president, also served as the president of the American Hockey League. Podoloff was later named the **National Basketball Association's** first president (see 1949-50).

Ten of the 11 BAA sites were associated in one form or another with professional hockey. **Entry fee** for each franchise was \$10,000. Several players from the ABL jumped to the new league.

The BAA mapped out a 60-game schedule and adopted NCAA's rules. League scheduled double-headers to increase the draw at the gate and often used the popular **Harlem Globetrotters** as the main attraction

**League lineup: Boston Celtics**, Chicago Stags, **New York Knicks**, Cleveland Rebels, **Philadelphia Warriors**, Washington Capitols, St. Louis Bombers, Detroit Falcons, Providence Steamrollers, Toronto Huskies, and the Pittsburgh Ironmen.

The Cleveland, Toronto, Pittsburgh, and Detroit franchises folded after 1 season.

### **The New League:**

The jump shot was still the exception, not the norm.

BAA's featured player was Philadelphia Warriors' 6'5" **Joe Fulks**.

Fulks' jump shots were a departure from the normal 2-handed set shots.

The games and the fans were still rowdy, and coaches continued to bait or insult the referee without reprisal from league.

The playing ball was larger.

January: To speed the game up, **league banned zone defenses** and replaced it with **man-to-man** defense.

Washington televised some games. Capitols played well at home, going 29-1.

Club was coached by **Red Auerbach** (1946-49).

11/1: **New York Knicks** beat Toronto 68-66. First game for the storied franchise.

12/11: Chicago Stags beat Cleveland Rebels 88-70.  
League experimented with (4) 15-minute quarters.

**Rookie Class:** Harold "Bones" McKinney.

**1947:** In an attempt to form a 24-team league (**Professional Basketball League of America**), Chicago American Gears owner **Maurice White** pulled his team out of the NBL. The new league lasted all of 2 weeks.

Fallout: After the Gears & PBLA folded, the players, including George Mikan were placed in a NBL dispersal draft. Mikan signed on with Minneapolis Lakers and became the marquee player for the NBL, the BAA, and finally the NBA.

Mikan was later called **Mr. Basketball** for the 1st half of the century.

**BAA** schedule was reduced to 48 games.

- Each team played their divisional opponent 8 times, and 6 times against teams in the other division.
- To cut costs, squads were reduced to 10 players.
- BAA began the **college draft** and added the "**territorial draft choice**," where a team could choose college player who played in its geographical territory.
- The ABL champion Baltimore Bullets joined the BAA.  
The Detroit Gems dropped out, reformed, moved to Minneapolis where they became the Lakers (now currently the Los Angeles Lakers).
- **Joe Lapchick**, one of the Original Celtics, began coaching the NY Knicks.

NBL's Rochester's home record was 3-21.

**World Professional Tournament** in Chicago:

NBL's **Minneapolis Lakers** beat the NY Renaissance Five 75-71.  
Lakers' George Mikan scored 40 points.

London England: **US Olympic basketball team** beat France 65-21 to win the gold medal.

2/19: **Harlem Globetrotters** beat NBL's Minneapolis Lakers 61-59 at the Chicago Stadium.  
Trotters held Lakers C Mikan to 24 points.

**1948-49: National Basketball League's final year.**

League featured marquee players but were not located in the major cities.  
NBL's small-town feel did not help their cause.

Meanwhile, the BAA successfully lured two NBL teams away (Minneapolis Lakers and the Rochester Royals. Two more NBL teams later followed (Ft. Wayne Zollner Pistons and the Indianapolis Kautskys).

League schedule was increased to 60 games.

**Washington** began season 15-0; **Rochester** had winning streaks of 13- and 10 games.

The Minneapolis Laker's **George Mikan** became the BAA's greatest draw.

- Last year for Chicago's **World Professional Tournament**.  
Harlem Globetrotters defeated the Minneapolis Lakers 49-45 at the Chicago Stadium.  
Approximately 22,000 attended.

**Noteworthy games:**

11/25: Philadelphia Warriors' **Howie Dallmar** shot NBA-record 0-15 from field vs. Washington.

2/10: **Philadelphia** beat Indianapolis 108-81.  
Warrior's **Joe Fulks**' 63 points was a record that lasted 11 years.

2/26: **Minneapolis** vs. Baltimore. **George Mikan** scored 53 points.

3/13: **Minneapolis** vs. New York. **George Mikan** scored 51 points.

3/16: **Baltimore Bullets** committed 53 fouls. Six players fouled out (Jack Toomey totaled 8 fouls).

3/21: Final game for the storied **NY Rens**. Rens played final season in the NBL as Dayton Rens.  
The all-black team replaced the Detroit Kings mid-season.

**Rookie Class:** Harry Gallatin, Dolph Schayes