

"WHEN THE JEWS HELD COURT"

The History of Jewish Basketball in Philadelphia

By

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There were two organizations that promoted Jewish basketball in Philadelphia. They were the Jewish Basketball League and the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association (SPHAS). At one time basketball was very much a Jewish sport in Philadelphia. There was a book written reflecting this heritage titled, When the Jews Held Court. It was a “play” on words expressing Jewish participation in this great sport.

The Jewish Basketball League

The Jewish Basketball League was founded in 1902 consisting of five teams: one from South Philadelphia, one from North Philadelphia, one from Germantown and two from Center city. You had to be Jewish to play in the league. The chance of getting a scholarship to college was great if you played in the league. The team from South Philadelphia was the best. Winning was a major criterion, but other values were an exciting experience and there were friends to be made.

Basketball was extremely popular among the Jews in South Philadelphia. The large influx of Jews into this particular area during the late 1800s and early 1900s ignited participation in the sports of boxing and basketball. Dave Dabrow and Petey Rosenberg were two of the early, well-known basketball players. It was a tough game that used to be played inside a metal cage. Elbows were as important as the two-hand set shot. Scoring was quite different in those days. For example, Petey Rosenberg played at Southern High School from 1932-1936. He was the high scorer averaging seven points per game.

In most communities, especially in the downtown area, kids played in the school yard day and night. There was little outside of school activities to occupy their time. To quote Petey Rosenberg, who lived around 9th and Shunk Streets, "I would leave Thomas

Junior High School, goes home, get some garlic bread and go back to the school yard to play basketball until dark." Many kids would not even go home when dismissed from public school but would stay in the school yard or go to Hebrew school and, after Hebrew school, make their way to the school yard.

As a point of interest the Mount Sinai Hospital (5th and Reed Streets) had a women's basketball team that competed in the nurses' basketball league. Today, female basketball has entered the sports field very successfully on all levels: high school, college and professionally.

South Philadelphia Hebrew Association

The SPHAS started in 1918 with Eddie Gotlieb, Hughie Black and Harry Passon being the originators. It was originally financed by the YMHA. Each player earned \$5.00 per game. Three years later, in 1921, it was under the auspices of the social club of South Philadelphia Hebrew Association. The original letters on the basketball shirts were in Hebrew.

In the early '20s, the SPHAS prospered playing eighty games a year. Each player received \$35.00-\$50.00 per game a year. Their best season was when they won 32 out of 36 games. Because of this record, they joined the newly organized Philadelphia League. The league consisted of teams from the Philadelphia area. The SPHAS took a non-Jew on the team, named Charley Tetmner from Trenton. Winning became a very important goal; therefore, the team had to become ecumenical, though they were still known as the "South Philadelphia Hebs."

The next year they played an outstanding, professional team from Kingston, Pennsylvania -- one of the best pro-teams in the area. The SPHAS won both games scheduled, which convinced the "Hebs" they could play big time basketball. They joined

the Eastern League. After a few years, the Eastern League ceased operation. Eddie Gotlieb, owner of the SPHAS recruited players from other defunct teams of the Eastern League. The SPHAS played against teams in the National Basketball League such as the Boston Celtics and the New York Rens, until 1928.

In 1929 "Gotty" began to build the SPHAS with younger talent relying upon college players. Between 1933-1948 the SPHAS played in the American Basketball League. During that time they won seven championships. After 1948, the SPHAS faded out of professional basketball. For a few of the following years they traveled with the Harlem Globetrotters. For thirty-one years they were a powerful force in professional basketball.

My purpose in providing this historical time line is to emphasize the contribution that these wonderful organizations made to athletics in Philadelphia in general and specifically to the image of the Jewish community. Unfortunately, currently basketball doesn't have the Jewish youth participation it used to have. Today young people find alternative means to spend their time instead of being on the court.

Thank heavens there is still a Jewish Basketball League, though limited in participation, a Jewish Basketball League Alumni and the Philadelphia Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. Recognition should be given to three individuals who helped to maintain the history of Jewish basketball in our area: Simcha Gersh, Sandy Wizov and Billy Esher.

Some of the above information was derived from the following sources:

- South Philadelphia by Murray Dubin
- From Peach Baskets to Slamdunks by Robert D. Bole and Alfred C. Lawrence