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# ELEVATING THE GAME

## Black Men and Basketball

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LINCOLN

(1992)

he had the clout to make it work. And no one squawked when he asked each participating school to pay a nominal entrance fee and, in keeping with his interest in women's sports, included girls' teams in the event. Starting with twelve schools in 1935, by 1942 the SIB hosted forty-seven teams, a growth spurt aided by declining interest in the NIBA.

From 1937 to its end in 1942 the NIBA shifted from Roanoke, back to Gary, to Fayetteville, North Carolina, and then Durham, North Carolina, losing teams to Tuskegee and, in some cases, to integration. A sign of the changing times came in 1938, when Roosevelt—which had won six straight NIBA titles—finally lost to a West Virginia school, Garnet of Charleston, 20-14. It was Coach Smith's first loss in five years of tournament competition. In 1939 and 1940 Roosevelt returned to the NIBA, but by this time Abbott in Tuskegee was calling his tournament the National Invitational Basketball Tournament. When in 1941 Eleanor Roosevelt's on-campus speaking engagement coincided with the tournament and caused a respectful pause in all play, it confirmed for many the importance of having the event at Tuskegee. One of the humorous aspects of Tuskegee's 1941 tournament was that both finalist schools were from Oklahoma and each was named after Tuskegee's founder, Booker T. Washington: one was from Sand Springs, one from Seminole. Booker T. of Sand Springs beat Booker T. of Seminole 38-24, and featured a promising teenage guard named Marques Haynes.

The Tuskegee era of high school ball ended with World War II. Following the victory of yet another Oklahoma school named in honor of Booker T. Washington—this one from Tulsa—42-19, over Southern University High of Scotlandville, Louisiana, the *Chicago Defender* of March 27, 1942, ran the following press release: "The Annual National Interscholastic Basketball Tournament for boys and girls has been cancelled for

the duration ... Gasoline and tire rationing as well as other factors in the connection with the war efforts were reasons given by Mr. Abbott for the cancellation."

### **RUNNING RENS**

"It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."  
—Recorded by the Duke Ellington Orchestra, 1932

Harlem during the 1920s experienced an explosion of Black thought and expression dubbed "a Renaissance" by historians. Poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, musician-author James Weldon Johnson, bandleader Duke Ellington, author-folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, and their peers—a remarkable collection of painters, sculptors, party givers, and philosophers—resided in upper Manhattan. Street-corner orators addressed passersby on Lenox Avenue, selling religions, schemes, and always themselves. Many talked, but few swayed audiences like the Jamaican-born orator Marcus Garvey. Influenced by Booker T. Washington's advocacy of Black self-sufficiency ownership, Garvey raised funds for a back-to-Africa movement by telling Harlem's teeming masses, "Up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will." Under his leadership Garveyites published newspapers, held meetings, and even purchased ships for the back-to-Africa trip.

Though Garvey himself was deported in 1927, his Afrocentric vision wasn't easily suppressed. The Jamaica-based Rastafarian religion made Garvey a deity, and its focus on Africa inspired an interest that still endures in America. At his height Garvey was the most visible representative of the business-minded men who left their native Caribbean for New York and the Eastern Seaboard. From Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, and

START



Haiti they, like their celebrated European contemporaries, chased the American Dream through Ellis Island during the twenties. From the British and French colonies with a majority Black population, West Indians brought an aggressive entrepreneurial spark to America's cities and, in one special case, to Seventh Avenue between 133rd and 139th Streets in Harlem.

William Roche came from the island of Montserrat to Harlem, where he started Sares Realty Company. In 1922, Roche turned an empty lot into the Harlem Renaissance Casino, a two-story entertainment center, which in its spacious first-floor showroom presented first-run films, while upstairs there was a ballroom available for banquets, concerts, and, at the behest of another Caribbean immigrant, basketball games. That man, Robert L. "Bob" Douglas, is today considered the "Godfather of Black basketball" and a key entrepreneur in the growth of professional basketball. Among Douglas's many innovations were monthly contracts with his players, a custom-designed team bus, and tours in the South, which he began before the region was considered a significant market for the game.

In 1901 Douglas arrived in New York, seeking his fortune like so many immigrants. What the St. Kitts native found, initially, was a doorman's job at 84th Street and Columbus Avenue. For four dollars a week Douglas worked from eight to eight, getting thirty minutes for lunch, thirty for dinner, and the day off every third Thursday and every third Sunday. He lived on West 52nd Street in the San Juan Hill area, which then housed most Black Manhattanites.

It wasn't until his fourth year in America that Douglas encountered basketball. "Where I was working at the time, one of the boys took me to see a game on 59th Street where we had to walk up five flights of stairs to the gym," he told the *Amsterdam News*. "I thought it was the greatest thing in the world.

That's when I started with basketball. You couldn't keep me off the court after that." Apparently more enthusiastic than skillful—Douglas cited swimming as his best sport—he began concentrating his energy on organizing athletic activities. He slipped away from his doorman's job to start a Caribbean athletic club that competed in cricket and basketball. Later he played on a team called the Spartans, which played other Black clubs from St. Philip's Church, the Alphas Club, and the Salem Church, whose boxing program later nurtured the brilliant middleweight Sugar Ray Robinson.

In the fall of 1923 Douglas approached Roche about allowing games in the ballroom Sunday evenings. As an inducement Douglas told Roche he'd call the team the Renaissance, making them a constant advertisement for the building. Roche agreed. The Harlem Renaissance, soon known locally as the Rens, debuted on November 30 of that year, beating the Chicago Collegians, 28-22. As was typical of the era, games were played right on the ballroom's dance floor with two portable baskets set up—one right in front of the bandstand—and portable wooden chairs on either side. Under a chandelier beneath which big bands usually played, the Rens took set shots and tried not to scuff up the floor too much. Douglas's original Rens were Leon Monde, Hy Monte, Zack Anderson, Clarence "Fats" Jenkins, and Frank Forbes. Years later Forbes was named the New York State Boxing Commission's first Black judge, while the six-foot Jenkins was an athletic wonder who would play professionally into his forties.

Under the direction of Douglas and coach-road manager Eric Illidge the Rens won an amazing 2,318 and lost only 381 contests in their history by utilizing a very team-oriented approach. "There is less team play because the big bucks are in high scoring and you have a more individualized game," Douglas said in the 1970s about the Rens style versus the NBA style. "Years

ago a man wouldn't dare try to take a ball up-court without passing to a fellow player. If a player had started that one-on-one stuff you see so much of today, I would have yanked him right away. We called that hogging the ball."

Ball movement was essential in that era because of this resistance to "hogging" and because in the twenties the standard basketball featured big fat laces that made fancy dribbling difficult. Defensively, the Rens utilized their quickness to deny cutters passing and drives to the hoop. "When we played you had to check your man," recalled Hall of Fame Ren star William "Pops" Gates. "Make him take two steps to get one. Nobody guards nobody now... If you watch close, you'll see guys actually get out of the way when a man's driving to the basket. When we played you had to earn your grits."

Attending a pro contest in the twenties and thirties was as much a social event as an athletic one. A game consisted of three fifteen-minute periods. Guys and gals showed up to see the Rens stomp some worthy opponent and afterward would dance to the big-band music of a Count Basie or Jimmy Lunceford.

"We had to have a dance afterwards or nobody would come to the damn thing... the Renaissance (Ballroom) was right across the street from the Red Rooster (nightclub)," Eyre Saitch, a Ren of the '30s, told Arthur Ashe rather ruefully. "If you didn't get there by 7 o'clock you didn't get in the damn door. The big game didn't start until 10 o'clock." "Many a fellow met his wife there," pioneering basketball promoter Eddie Gottlieb said of the ball game-dance presentations of the era. "And I guess many a fellow met somebody else's wife there, too!"

The Rens' rise coincided with profound changes in the game: the center jump after every basket was eliminated, and the basketball itself shrank, as did its laces, which made dribbling easier. These changes made speed and leaping ability more impor-

tant—factors that favored Douglas's all-Black squad. During their first years of existence the Rens only played in New York City, then they expanded to the rest of the state, the Northeast, and, by the late twenties, the South and Midwest. Integrated competition, as we've seen, wasn't prohibited in pro basketball, so it's not surprising that the Rens developed rivalries with two legendary white teams: the first was with the Original Celtics of New York, run by the city's first widely acclaimed basketball genius, future St. John's and Knicks coach Joe Lapchick. Their second rival was a team from the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association, whose owners included Eddie Gottlieb. Douglas, Lapchick, and Gottlieb supported and trusted each other. "We never had a telegram or written letter or anything as far as a guarantee," Gottlieb told *Black Sports*. "Everything was done over the phone and never any problems. I have been associated with basketball for over fifty years and I have never found a better businessman than Bob. My various teams have locked horns with the Rens over seventy times and I can tell you we lost more than we won; but those good pay days sometimes take the hurt out of losing, and that's what we had when we played Bob's team."

Once in the twenties, while playing a local team in Louisville, the Rens were surprised to see the Original Celtics in the stands. Douglas remembered, "Joe Lapchick, who knew our center Tarzan Cooper, ran out on the court and embraced Cooper because he was so glad to see him. There was a silence on the court. This was Jim Crow country, and the races were strictly separated. The Celtics were put out of their hotel and a riot was narrowly averted. Lapchick was a fine man. Once when we played the Celtics, they offered to pay my coach Eric Illidge with a check. Lapchick said, 'No sir, pay him in cash.' That's the kind of man Joe Lapchick was."

The Rens prospered in the twenties, but it was in the thirties

that Douglas's team created its legend with a squad composed of some of the best players found anywhere between world wars. The Rens' hub during this golden age was Wee Willie Smith, a strong, aggressive 6'5" center from Cleveland recruited by Douglas after he played against them for Cleveland's Slaughter Brothers team. In November 1932 Smith relocated to New York, where his defense and rebounding catalyzed the 1932-1933 team to eighty-eight straight wins. Original Ren Fats Jenkins remained, joining forces with James Pappy Ricks, Eyre Saitch, Bill Yancey, Johnny Holt, and future Hall of Famer Charles "Tarzan" Cooper. From 1932 to 1936, this edition had a 473-49 record and was so imposing that teams considered beating the Rens a career highlight. In 1988 SPHA's center Joel "Shikey" Gorthoffer still fondly remembered defeating the Rens fifty-three years earlier in New York by winning a tap over Cooper in the game's waning seconds. "There were plenty of brawls in that game," Gorthoffer told *Philly Sports*, "but we made up afterwards."

As rough as the Rens were on court, their Black manager was equally tough-minded on and off the court. When he was on the road Illidge carried a tabulator to count the gate and a gun to make sure he took home what he counted. Douglas stipulated that the Rens would never take the floor until Illidge had the Rens' money in his hand. He used that same savvy to give his team a boost off the court, when he purchased a customized bus they called the Blue Goose (perhaps a jokey reference to Howard Hughes airplane, the *Spruce Goose*.) In the thirties a private bus with reclining seats capable of carrying food was a major luxury for any team, white or Black. It meant the members rested better on the road and, as often as humanly possible, could avoid the indignities that confronted any group of Blacks traveling around America. Duke Ellington employed a similar strategy during one long Southern tour;

his band traveled in two specially outfitted Pullman cars.

In fact, it was Southern prejudice that brought the Rens a key player who would one day enter the Hall of Fame with Cooper. William "Pops" Gates was a New York schoolboy star who learned the game at the Harlem YMCA on 135th Street, just two blocks down from the Seventh Avenue Renaissance. He got his nickname not for basketball wisdom but by impressing older men he played stickball with in the streets. At East Harlem's Benjamin Franklin High, Gates first displayed the devastating two-hand set shot that led the school to the public high school title. Upon graduation from Franklin, Gates and many of his Franklin teammates decided to go to a college together as a unit just as, for example, the Wendell Phillips High team of 1935 moved from Chicago to New Orleans' Xavier. "We saw that most of the Negro ballplayers in the New York area were not offered scholarships to go to various colleges in this area," says Gates, so he and his friends chose Clark College in Atlanta. But Gates, unable to adjust to a more overtly racist Southern environment, headed home after only a few months.

Once back in New York Gates hooked up with the Harlem Yankees, a semipro club that practiced against the Rens. Quick to spot talent, Douglas gave Gates a tryout, which he passed easily, and then offered him \$145 a month, plus \$3 a day in meal money on the road. Once Gates agreed Douglas gave a small speech: "We travel throughout the country. We are respected by all, black and white, and we want you to carry yourself as a gentleman at all times."

"Pops had a lot of ability," Douglas said years later. "But he was hotheaded. Didn't take nothing from nobody. Not even referees ... Nobody was better cutting to the basket and nothing could stop him. He could shift and he was strong as the dickens." Playing backcourt at what we today call shooting guard,

Gates added scoring punch to a veteran squad that included Cooper, Jenkins, Smith, and Saitch. Along with Gates, Douglas recruited Johnny Isaacs, who "had more natural ability than any man to have ever played for me," Douglas once noted. According to Gates this lineup played approximately 140 games his first season with them, losing only eighteen.

During the thirties Douglas felt the Rens were the best team in America, but it wasn't until a professional tournament was organized in Chicago that he could prove it. Playing in Chicago Stadium—currently Michael Jordan's home court—the Rens breezed through a field of eight teams to win the "world champion" title March 28, 1939, against the all-white Oshkosh (Wisconsin) All-Stars, 34-25. The title game was memorable for its fierce contact—both Cooper and Smith fouled out—and Gates's uncanny two-hand set shots. Joe E. Williams, writing in the *New York Evening Telegram*, said, "They are the champions of professional basketball in the whole world. It is time we dropped the 'colored' champions title."

The Rens' story testifies to two ideas. First, an African-American could run a successful athletic organization, handling both the game's financial and on-court aspects; second, it made clear a Black professional basketball operation could survive without exploiting white racism by demanding its players clown for white entertainment. An irony of the organizing by men like Charles Williams, John Smith, Cleve Abbott, and Bob Douglas is that they nurtured an audience and developed players that helped inspire one of the most popular (and stereotypical) entertainment entities in U.S. history, one whose prominence would overshadow the more noble efforts of these African-Americans.