

Only the Ball Was Orange

Early Barnstorming Teams, Ethnic and Otherwise

The early pro leagues were such a mess that the best teams in the country often bypassed them altogether, instead choosing to organize individual games themselves while traveling the nation's barnstorming circuit. Frequently playing more than a hundred games a year, the barnstormers were some of the era's best teams while at the same time blurring the boundaries between entertainment and sport. For some, barnstorming was a financial consideration, as teams like the Original Celtics could earn more money promoting their own matches than they could in regional leagues. But for other teams, generally those made up of minorities, nomadism was the only option available. Like much of America's society in the early twentieth century, these teams fell along ethnic and religious fault lines. But they simultaneously fell into and subverted stereotypes, working as marketing ploys and as means of asserting ethnic pride.

BUFFALO GERMANS

Shrouded in mystery, this team of creepy teenagers from Upstate New York was forced into barnstorming by geographic isolation. Founded in 1895 at the German YMCA in Buffalo, the team is legendary for having once won 111 consecutive games, though this accomplishment is somewhat diminished by the quality of its opponents: YMCA teams, college teams, and local yokels. (Their epic win streak was finally snapped when they ran up against another pro team, in 1911.) As a team, the Germans' defining trait was their sadism. In an era when teams commonly averaged 20 points a game, the Germans mercilessly crushed their overmatched competition, running up scores like 111–17, 104–8, and 104–13, and once eviscerated Hobart College 134–0.





ORIGINAL CELTICS

Founded in 1914 as the New York Celtics, the team first consisted of Irish teenagers from a Hell's Kitchen settlement house, but would soon drop both the New York from their name and their Irish bias, picking up local stars such as Joe Lapchick (Czech), Nat Holman (Jewish), and Henry "Dutch" Dehnert (Dutch, duh). The Celtics would go on to become the most famous pro team of the 1920s, playing in several leagues as well as barnstorming. In their prime, they are estimated to have won 90 percent of their games, one season finishing with the confounding record of 193–11–1. Known for their ball movement and tenacious defense, the team is often credited with developing the give-and-go, switching on defense, and formalizing the pivot play.

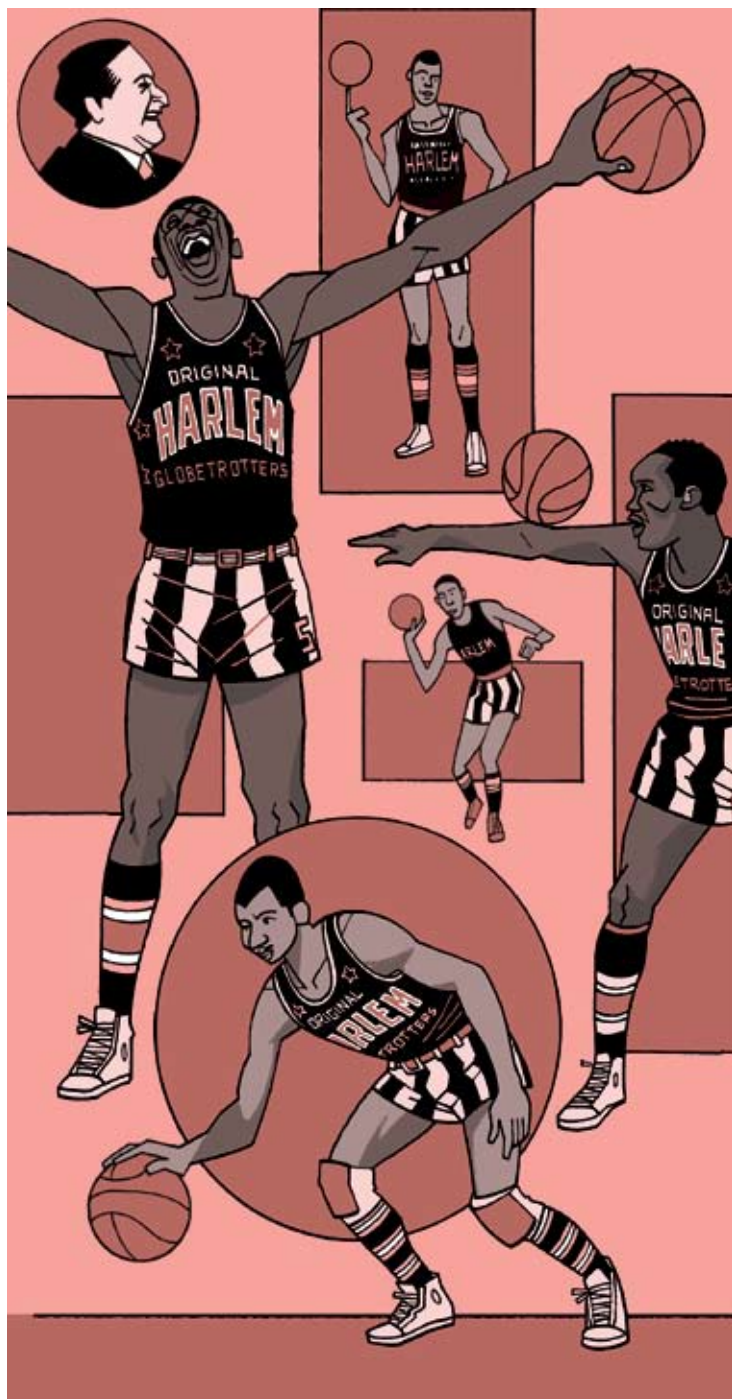


THE RENNS

There were many all-black pro teams during the early twentieth century, but the first and greatest was the New York Renaissance. They were also better than all the white teams. Founded in 1923, the Rens took their name from the Renaissance Ballroom in Harlem, where the team played on the dance floor between sets by the house orchestra. After the Depression shut down the ballrooms in the 1930s, the Rens—who were forbidden from joining the all-white pro leagues—were forced onto the barnstorming circuit. In 1933 they posted an 88-game win streak and from 1932 to 1936 had a 497–58 record. The Rens became the first all-black pro team to win a world title in any sport when they prevailed at the World Pro Tournament in 1939. They also won in 1943 as the Chicago Bears.

THE HARLEM GLOBETROTTERS

On one hand, the Globetrotters are a classic American success story. The operation started in the late 1920s as six men touring the Midwestern hinterlands in the dead of winter in a cramped, unheated Model-T Ford, often making just enough money to get to the next town. By the 1950s the team was a national institution, playing before record-setting crowds on multiple continents and starring in Hollywood movies. On the other hand, the relationship between black players, their white audience, and the Jewish owner-promoter Abe Saperstein is another sort of American story, a typically twisted tale of friendship, betrayal, and outright exploitation. But what's often buried beneath the rags-to-riches narrative, the racial politics, and the banana cream pies is that for over two decades the Globetrotters were a legitimately awesome basketball team. After years of playing second fiddle to the New York Renaissance, the Globetrotters would defeat the defending-champion Rens in the 1940 World Pro Tournament and, later, to much fanfare, would defeat George Mikan's reigning-champion Minneapolis Lakers in both 1948 and 1949. Stars like Runt Pullins and Marques Haynes were the best ball handlers of the era, and goofy big men Goose Tatum and Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton could pass and dribble like players half their size. After overtaking the Rens, Saperstein enjoyed a virtual monopoly on black talent until 1950, when the NBA finally broke his stranglehold by selecting Chuck Cooper and Earl Lloyd (both signed to the Trotters) in the NBA draft.





THE SPHAS

The Sphas—an acronym for South Philadelphia Hebrew Association—were organized in 1917 by a teenage Eddie “the Mogul” Gottlieb, the legendary promoter who would later own the Philadelphia Warriors. Gottlieb promised “a fight in every game, guaranteed,” and the rough-and-tumble Sphas defeated both the Celtics and the Rens in best-of-three exhibition series in 1926. Paul Gallico, sports editor of the *New York Daily News*, mused, “The reason . . . that basketball appeals to the Hebrew . . . is that the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart aleckness.” Though Jews soon faded from the courts as players, these traits continued to serve them well as they moved into coaching and managerial positions in later years.



HONG WAH KUES

A Chinese American team from San Francisco, the Hong Wah Kues burst onto the barnstorming circuit in 1939, only to disband two years later due to the start of World War II. Managed for a time by Abe Saperstein, the team was required to speak Cantonese on the court (although they could speak fluent English) and played at least one game a night and two on Sundays, often in Podunk towns such as Grangeville, Idaho, where the match was promoted with flyers announcing, “WAR! Grangeville to be attacked! These are the Chinese invaders!” With no player standing over six feet, the Kues played an up-tempo game marked by crisp passing.

CHAPTER

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	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	
NBA FINALS CHAMPION	LOS ANGELES LAKERS	BOSTON CELTICS	LOS ANGELES LAKERS	PHILADELPHIA 76ERS	BOSTON CELTICS	
FINALS LOSER	76ERS	ROCKETS	76ERS	LAKERS		
MOST VALUABLE PLAYER	K. ABDUL-JABBAR	JULIUS ERVING	MOSES MALONE	MOSES MALONE	LARRY BIRD	
POINTS per game leader	George Gervin 33.1	Adrian Dantley 30.7	George Gervin 32.3	Alex English 28.4	Adrian Dantley 30.6	
REBOUNDS per game leader	Swen Nater 15.0	Moses Malone 14.8	Moses Malone 14.7	Moses Malone 15.3	Moses Malone 13.4	
ASSISTS per game leader	M. Ray Richardson 10.1	Kevin Porter 9.1	Johnny Moore 9.6	Magic Johnson 10.5	Magic Johnson 13.1	

THE GOLD STANDARD

1980-1990

After finishing out the seventies with a swirl of discomfort, the NBA got the makeover to end all makeovers. Magic Johnson and Larry Bird entered the league in 1980, bringing their NCAA rivalry to the pros and setting off the Lakers-Celtics battles that would begin to bring back fans. These two franchises would pass the title back and forth for much of the decade, but it would be with the draft class of 1984 that the league really got back to full strength, and then some. That June, Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Akeem Olajuwon, and John Stockton heard their names called by David Stern—who had become commissioner that February. This cohort, along with Magic, Bird, Isiah Thomas, Dominique Wilkins, and later additions Scottie Pippen, Karl Malone, and Patrick Ewing, gave the NBA a crop of stars unseen since the sixties—except this time they got the ratings, paychecks, and worldwide popularity they so deserved. And at the same time, international players slowly but surely left their mark, including one taken too soon.

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
	LOS ANGELES LAKERS	BOSTON CELTICS	LOS ANGELES LAKERS		DETROIT PISTONS	
	CELTICS	ROCKETS	CELTICS	PISTONS	LAKERS	BLAZERS
	LARRY BIRD	LARRY BIRD	MAGIC JOHNSON	MICHAEL JORDAN	MAGIC JOHNSON	MAGIC JOHNSON
	Bernard King 32.9 Moses Malone 13.1 Isiah Thomas 13.9	D. Wilkins 30.3 Bill Laimbeer 13.1 Magic Johnson 12.6	Michael Jordan 37.1 Charles Barkley 14.6 Magic Johnson 12.2	Michael Jordan 35.0 Michael Cage 13.0 John Stockton 13.8	Michael Jordan 32.5 H. Olajuwon 13.5 John Stockton 13.6	Michael Jordan 33.6 H. Olajuwon 14.0 John Stockton 14.5



CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON

Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, and the Real Merger

When Magic Johnson and Larry Bird went pro in 1979, the NBA was a dark, forbidding place. Clouded by the Punch and with Bill Walton sitting out the season, the NBA saw its audience withering away, both in the arenas and on television. Important playoff games, even the NBA Finals, were still broadcast on tape delay in most of the country, often not airing until late at night. The league was also still having difficulties assimilating (in every sense of the word) the players, teams, and styles from the ABA. The two leagues had merged only three seasons earlier and were still trying to figure out how to coexist. In a way, the two leagues fit together like puzzle pieces, with the ABA's rangy and athletic forwards filling in the middle spaces between the NBA's crafty guards, such as Paul Westphal and Dennis Johnson, and dominating big men, such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Walton. But the frustrating thing about puzzles is figuring out exactly what pieces go where.

It would not be until the arrival of Magic and Bird that the NBA would finally accept the ABA. Stylistically, Magic and Bird were sons of the ABA, but they had been rendered palatable (or comprehensible) to mainstream fans. They would become the face of the NBA, laying the groundwork for its eighties success by bringing together a house divided. The bitter Lakers-Celtics feud may have split the nation along race lines, but it only mattered enough to do so because Magic and Bird had healed the league.

The only teams other than Magic's Lakers and Bird's Celtics that ever made it to the Finals from 1980 to 1988, when Magic and Bird were at their peak, were the Sixers and the Rockets, and only the Sixers won. During the eighties, Magic and Bird won a combined eight championships and faced off against each other three times between 1984 and 1987. They had a well-documented rivalry dating back to their college days, when they faced each other in the most-watched NCAA championship game in the history of the tournament, drawing forty million viewers

CONS MEN: Both Magic and Bird had endorsement deals with Converse, although they paled in comparison to the deals that NBA superstars have today. A Converse exec reportedly explained to Magic that "a player will never sell shoes," words that were soon made ridiculous after the immense popularity of Nike's Air Jordans. Before the 1986-87 season, Magic and Bird filmed a commercial for Converse that is a true '80s artifact. It features the two of them along with Isiah Thomas, Mark Aguirre, Kevin McHale, and Bernard King, awkwardly rapping about the greatness of the new Converse Weapon shoe.

ABA's Lasting Legacy

Composition of NBA All-Star Teams

- Players originating in the NBA
- Players originating in the ABA

