



Pro Basketball in 1939-40: On the Cusp of Depression and War

John Hogrogian

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In *Pro Basketball in 1939-40*, John Hogrogian, a sports history researcher and retired attorney, focuses on the five-month season that began at the end of the Great Depression and ended as World War II loomed.

Hogrogian reveals that, years before the National Basketball Association was founded in 1946 and decades before superstar playmakers and multimillion dollar contracts, professional basketball was a cash-strapped, loosely organized, and poorly attended spectator sport. It involved two leagues: the American Basketball League in the Mid-Atlantic states and the National Basketball League in the states bordering the Great Lakes. Each league originally had eight teams, though the ABL fell to five because it depended on ticket sales for its financial solvency; the NBL benefited from corporate sponsorship.

At the same time, professional barnstorming teams, Hogrogian writes, “were almost certainly the best basketball teams in existence.” They were independent of league affiliations and traveled throughout the country, introducing the game to cities beyond the ABL and NBL’s domain and playing to new fans. Two of the greatest teams—the New York Renaissance and the Harlem Globetrotters—had only Black players. “For most of the country,” Hogrogian writes, “these touring teams defined professional basketball. They were Johnny Appleseeds, planting seeds that would sprout after World War II.”

Hogrogian’s informative text covers teams, players, and game statistics in a meticulous manner. Brief sections covering the era’s influences and influencers give the text its structure. A good portion of the book discusses independent teams with and without corporate sponsorship who played against ABL, NBL, and major barnstorming teams, as well as postcollegiate, amateur teams who played professional-style basketball west of the Mississippi, a region otherwise without the sport. More than forty teams are covered in all, down to their regional derivations, standings, schedules, scoring, and rosters; all of this information is upheld by newspaper and book citations. However, the excess of information sometimes makes the compendium a slog.

The text is clear and succinct, but also favors repetitive, matter-of-fact recitations over developing a narrative, addressing events like the first World Championship Professional Basketball Tournament in Chicago in 1939 without background information to illuminate its significance, and people like famed owner George Halas are covered only in brief. It addresses a little understood sports world with considerable detail, but eschews historical context, even as it uses events like the Great Depression and the Second World War as an organizing motif.

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AMY O’LOUGHLIN (January 4, 2021)

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