

# Chicago's World Tournament of Professional Basketball 1939—1948

John Schleppe  
University of Dayton

Professional basketball was in disarray in the late 1930's due to poor financial backing, quixotic leadership and the affects of the depression. The two professional leagues were small and weakly organized. Against this background entrepreneur Harry Hannin and Leo Fischer of the Chicago *Herald American* promoted the World Tournament of Professional Basketball which began in March, 1939. Attracting the best available teams, they included the leading black and integrated teams. This was the first time blacks competed with whites on an even footing for a professional team championship. Using major facilities including the Amphitheatre and the Stadium, attention was drawn to the game during the war years and the best teams of the day as the Ft. Wayne Pistons, The Renaissance, the Harlem Globetrotters, Oshkosh All-Stars, Indianapolis Kautskys, Sheboygan Redskins, and the Minneapolis Lakers all participated in the competition at various times.

The tournament was a showcase for the great players of the time including Bob Calihan and Buddy Jeanette of Detroit, LeRoy Edwards of Oshkosh, "Babe" Pressley and "Duke" Cumberland of the Globetrotters, "Chuck" Chuckovitz of Toledo, "Pop" Gates and "Dolly" King of the Renaissance, Mel Riebe of Cleveland and Al Cervi of Rochester. The Tournament was well-served by top referees as Pat Kennedy and Jim Enright during its tenure. It was in the 1946 World Tournament that George Mikan, voted the Greatest Ball Player of the First-Half-Century by the Associated Press, made his professional debut with the Chicago Gears and professional basketball began its long climb to today's popularity. And from the first College All Star Game in 1940 the World Tournament winner played the collegians each November until the last tournament in 1948.

The World Tournament of Professional Basketball rescued professional basketball from near oblivion in the 1930's, provided a show case for its best players, gave black teams and players a chance for real championship play, provided wartime entertainment, literally held the game together during World War II, allowed a focal point while the game expanded after the war and finally ended with the expansion of the professional leagues in 1948.