

Media

The History of the NBA. (HBO). Ross Greenberg, Don Sperling, Gill Kerr, and Michael Whalen, Producers; National Basketball Association; Summer 1990. Sixty minutes.

Only with the last decade has the National Basketball Association, (founded as the Basketball Association of America in 1946) gained public acceptance in popularity on a par with major league baseball and the National Football League. In its continual efforts to survive, little was done to record the history of the NBA in particular or professional basketball in general. This one hour in-house production is the NBA's attempt to rectify the situation, but does little to fill the void for either the casual fan or serious historian.

Narrated by Pat Riley, former Los Angeles Laker coach, *The History of the NBA* composed mainly of filmstrips and interviews, is divided into seven segments. "Origins of the Game," the first part, traces the development of the game from James Naismith through the founding years of the NBA to 1950. Part two "Dynasties and Rivalries" centers upon the Boston Celtics, with Bob Cousy and Bill Russell as well as the 76ers and Lakers with Wilt Chamberlain and Jerry West. The third section "Centers of Attention" shows the evolution of the professional game to its current domination of powerful men in the middle with Willis Reed, Wes Unseld, Nate Thurmond, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and others. Displays of ball-handling featuring Cousy, Michael Jordan, Pete Maravich, Earvin Johnson, Earl Monroe, Isaiah Thomas, and Julius Erving comprise part four "The Showmen."

"A New Era," part five focuses on the impact of Larry Bird and "Magic" Johnson on the NBA in the 1980s. "Characters of the Game" such as Detroit's John Salley, Utah coach Frank Layden and Darryl Dawkins (he of the crushed backboard fame), and Celtic announcer Johnny Most comprise part six. The concluding piece "Memorable Moments" has glimpses of Chamberlain's one hundred point game, Houston's upset of the Lakers in 1981, Michael Jordan's deciding basket against Cleveland in 1989, and Johnny Most's famous "Havlicek Stole the Ball!," Tiny "Spud" Webb winning a slam-dunk contest and Larry Bird hitting 15 three pointers in 30 seconds are also highlighted.

There are some strengths in this film. Pat Riley has a commanding appearance in his tuxedo and elicits some fine responses from the interviewees concerning their feelings about the high level of competition when they participated. The reminiscences of Jerry West, Bob Davies and William "Pop" Gates are highlighted. Even the usually reluctant Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain open themselves to Riley's probes.

The film clips of professional basketball's early years, featuring the New York Rens, The Original Celtics, Harlem Globetrotters and Sheboygan Red-

skins are excellent, but too short and disjointed to give a feeling of development. In fact, the period from the beginning of basketball to the founding of the NBA is covered in just over ten minutes. Remarkable! The major part of that section is devoted to George Mikan and his influences on the game: the scoring big man in the center, and rules regarding goal tending, width of the foul lane, and the twenty-four second clock.

The method of presentation, sound and visual “bites” of games, is both a strength and weakness. The pirouettes, leaps, slams and other action are fast and colorful. But these are the same promotional bits used for the NBA Game of the Week. They have been overdone but would not be distracting if this was a solid historical presentation.

One is struck by what is left out of the program. Perhaps it is too much to expect from a one hour show, but the following should be considered. No reference is given to those who founded the league beyond an unidentified photograph. The individuals and why they started the NBA in the late 1940s is a mystery to the viewer as is the NBA’s relations with the National Basketball League with whom it later merged.

Why was the league segregated until Nate “Sweetwater” Clifton was signed in 1949 as a free agent, even though the N. B .L. had been integrated from the early 1940s? How did the league handle competition from rival leagues during the period-The American Basketball League and American Basketball Association? Where are the contributions of Fred Zollner and Carl Bennett at the Fort Wayne Pistons, Ned Irish in New York, Walter Brown in Boston, and Ben Kerner in St. Louis to name a few.

With the film’s emphasis upon players of recent years (as Jordan, Bird, and Johnson), many of the early top players are missing, such as Max Zaslofsky, Larry Foust, Paul Arizin, or Bill Sharman. The unique long-term relationship between Maurice Stokes and Jack Twyman following Stokes injury is missing. Even “Characters of the Game” could be expanded to include World B. Free, “Fat” Freddie Scolari (of the one-hand running set shot), and Twyman who was never known to pass up a shot and once declared he would play until his “arms wore out. ”

There is nothing about the contributions of coaches beyond “Red” Auerbach, Joe Lapchick, Johnny Kundla, Eddie Gottlieb, “Red” Holzman and Jack Ramsey who pioneered NBA strategies. Referees the calibre of Mendy Rudolph, Richie Powers, Manny Sokol and Darrel Garretson are neglected, yet each set a tremendous example of professionalism in a sport very difficult to officiate.

Another problem with an in-house production such as this, is that all of the blemishes are missing. Abundant franchise shifts, drug problems of the players (although the league pioneered treatment among the professional leagues) and its recent history of tight defense (read fights and near muggings as far back as the Rudy Tomjanovich incident) are situations the League did not put in this promotional history.

The NBA’s recent success is due in no small part to its marketing efforts,

arguably the smoothest, best organized and most profitable of all professional sports leagues. Professional basketball has a fascinating history, but more about the professional game of the 1920s through the 1950s is needed to put that period and the present NBA into perspective. A solid history of professional basketball, let alone the NBA, still awaits us.

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