
Book Reviews

NELSON, MURRY. *The Originals: The New York Celtics Invent Modern Basketball*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. Pp. 229. Appendices, notes, index. \$25.95 pb.

When I read most of Murry Nelson's *The Originals: The New York Celtics Invent Modern Basketball*, the Los Angeles Lakers and the Indiana Pacers were competing for the National Basketball Association's (NBA) championship. The juxtaposition between the basketball I was reading about in Nelson's book during the day and the basketball I was watching on television at night was startling. In many respects, the games bore no resemblance to one another.

As Nelson explains in his well-researched history, the game itself was much different in the early twentieth century. Court dimensions were not standardized; until 1925, courts were commonly surrounded by a cage made of wire or fish net, which was intended to keep the ball in continuous play and "to protect the players from unruly fans" (p. 4). Some baskets lacked backboards. There was "no center court line, no ten-second rule, and no backcourt violation" (p. 4). Basketballs had laces and were considerably bigger and heavier (and thus harder to handle) than contemporary balls (pp. 41-42). Relatively recent ad-vents such as the 24-second shot clock and the three-point line were obviously not part of the game. By our standards, games were extremely low-scoring and physically rough. Moreover, the players Nelson writes about do not resemble today's professionals. The pioneers of pro basketball were *much* shorter than most contemporary players. Nelson describes George "Horse" Haggerty as "one of the biggest men in basketball with 230 pounds on his 6-foot 4-inch body" (p. 53), and he notes that six-foot Chris Leonard "could guard centers, forwards, or guards" (p. 49). Today, many pro teams have 6'6" guards and often have several players over seven-feet tall. Second, for the same reasons that they dominated other socially suspect endeavors, like boxing and vaudeville, working-class white ethnics—most commonly German Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans—dominated the professional game Nelson chronicles, not African Americans. Today, approximately 80 percent of NBA players are African American. Finally, even if one considers inflation, pro basketball players of yesteryear were paid a pittance compared to contemporary cagers: in 1919, Joe Lapchick earned \$10 or \$15 a game (p. 33); in 1995, the average NBA salary was \$1.8 million a season. Still, in at least one way the basketball players Nelson writes about are very similar to players today: they "played for the love of the game, the desire to win, and for money" (p. 67).

Nelson examines a neglected but interesting subject, for the New York Celtics (not to be confused with the Boston Celtics of Red Auerbach and Bill Russell fame) clearly dominated their era. Nelson writes, from 1920 to 1928 “the Celtics played an average of 100 games per season, at times surpassing 200 contests a year, and they had winning percentage of over .900. This record has never been surpassed” (p. 156). There were many reasons for the team’s success. Unlike most professional basketball teams at the time, the Celtics maintained a consistent roster, thanks in large part to management’s decision to sign players to exclusive contracts (p. 73). In addition, many of the team’s players were extraordinarily talented (most notably, Nat Holman, Johnny Beckman, and Joe Lapchick) and played together very well—aggressively, unselfishly, with precise teamwork. Holman, in particular, is noteworthy for he was an extraordinary hustler, playing for many teams before signing with the Celtics (in 1921) and simultaneously coaching the City College of New York varsity beginning in 1919 (pp. 70-71). Although Nelson devotes a great deal of attention to on-the-court matters (his chapter titled ‘How They Played The Game’ is particularly instructive), he also notes some of the social contexts that contributed to the development of early pro basketball; the book’s first two chapters are particularly strong in this regard. Toward the end of the book, Nelson explains his interest in the Celtics. “Separating myth from reality was the initial intent of this work. Who were these guys? How good were they, really? What was the sport of basketball like in the late 1910s and what role did the Celtics have in shaping the game! What reasonable comparisons can be made with other basketball teams of subsequent eras! Were these players and their teams truly great?” (p. 155). Over the course of his narrative, Nelson answers most of these questions, with a keen eye for detail and an obvious respect for the Celtics.

Like all books, this one has its faults. Some are relatively minor editorial matters. Too often, for example, Nelson does not make it clear within his narrative precisely who is responsible for a particular quotation. Also, when citing someone within his prose, Nelson rarely provides his or her first name or professional distinction (is this person a former ballplayer, a journalist, a historian?). It is also worth noting that some of the secondary sources Nelson uses to put the Celtics in context are quite dated—like Frederick Lewis Allen’s *Only Yesterday* (1931), Paul Carter’s *The Twenties in America* (1968), Daniel Snowman’s *America Since 1920* (1968). There is, of course, much more recent scholarship on the 1920s some of which might help further explain the struggles and triumphs that professional basketball experienced during the so-called “Golden Age of American Sport.” Some readers may find that Nelson overemphasizes specific games the Celtics played and over-catalogues the team’s exploits; however, I am more disconcerted by an omission. Nelson might have discussed more extensively the ways in which gambling was a significant part of early professional basketball. A lack of sources, no doubt, hindered Nelson from addressing this subject more fully. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that apparently “a few of the Celtics worked for bookmakers in the off-season” (Stephen Fox, *Big Leagues: Professional Baseball, Football, and Basketball in National Memory*, p. 284) and that some Celtics were not averse to betting on their own games.

These criticisms aside, *The Originals* is a good book and makes an important contribution to our understanding of professional basketball’s early years. Basketball is tremendously popular (and profitable) in the United States and throughout the world, but Nelson

is undoubtedly correct when he writes, "People both outside and inside basketball are ignorant of the professional game prior to World War II" (p. 160). *The Originals* admirably rectifies this memory loss and bestows upon the Celtics "some of the long-forgotten recognition that they richly deserve" (p. viii). It does so with the same intelligence and vigor that Nelson himself brings to the basketball court, as anyone who has played with or against him will surely recognize.

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- KAHN, ROGER. *A Season in the Sun*. 1978. Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Pp. 199. New afterword, illustrations, index. \$12.95 pb.
- KAHN, ROGER. *Good Enough to Dream*. 1985. Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Pp. 365. New afterword, index. \$15.95 pb.
- KEELER, JAMES J. *Our Team! Insights from the Publicly Owned Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1999. Pp. xiii + 160. Notes, illustrations, index. \$24.50 pb.

These three books give us snapshots of baseball, for the most part below the major league level, in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The two Roger Kahn books are re-publications by the University of Nebraska Press. In *A Season in the Sun*, Kahn takes his readers on a tour of baseball in the bicentennial summer of 1976. In 1983, Kahn's love affair with baseball led him to purchase and operate a baseball franchise in the low minors. *Good Enough to Dream* recounts that experience. The story of the creation of the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons as told by James Keeler begins in the early 1980s and continues into the nineties.

For those of us who long for the days before free agency, Kahn's look at 1976 reminds us that baseball's good old days were not really so good. Kahn remembers he and his father "talked seriously (and joyously) about baseball. That was a serious thing and that was enough" (p. 7). His father-son talks, however, were before the generation gap, MTV and over-organized youth sports. It was a sign of the times that Kahn could not duplicate those conversations with his own son.

Kahn spent the 1976 season talking with players, coaches, managers, and owners from Siloam Springs, Missouri, to Puerto Rico to Portland. The most successful franchise at the time was the Dodgers. No longer the Bums of his youth, the Dodgers lived far from the playground of the *Boys of Summer* and had replaced the Yankees as the franchise most likened to IBM. Even iconoclastic Bill Veeck, back in Chicago, seemed incapable of recreating the excitement he brought to parks in earlier years. At the minor league level, Kahn saw even less excitement. Visiting Pittsfield, Massachusetts, he found a crowd of 110. Only in Puerto Rico did he find baseball to be "a joyous pastime, played mostly for the wonder of the game" (p. 119).

In *A Season in the Sun*, Stan Musial summed up Kahn's 1976 findings when he said "now is not the time to buy a ball club" (p. 174). Kahn did not follow Musial's admoni-