

Hazel Walker and The Arkansas Travelers

ANGELA LUMPKIN

University of North Carolina

Hazel Walker starred as an amateur player for fourteen years – eleven as an All-American – and led her professional team, the Arkansas Travelers, for seventeen years after playing professionally for three years with the All-American Red Heads.

Amateur players in the 1930s and 1940s typically competed in rural schools before being recruited for or before joining teams sponsored by businesses for promotional purposes. Usually these players held clerical jobs, and often missed work to travel and to play, but still received their salaries. Walker, like other players, played with several teams and enjoyed opportunities to compete internationally.

Disgruntled with the entertainment focus of the Red Heads, Walker drew upon her managerial experiences while an amateur to start her own touring team in 1949. The Arkansas Travelers played seven nights a week from October to May in small towns nationally. This highly conditioned and skilled seven-player team won almost 80 percent of its games against men's teams. They also entertained their fans. Always a highlight was the half-time free throw contest when Walker always defeated the local champion.

Numerous players eager for the opportunity to continue competing in basketball tried out for the Travelers, but only a few highly skilled ones who agreed to look, act, and dress feminine were invited to join the team. Walker's leadership and the commitment of the players to training hard and to promoting their team, contributed to the team's success. For the players, the friendships and comradery were lasting.

Yet, the team's legacy was limited. Perceived more as entertainers than as role models or trailblazers, the Arkansas Travelers and especially Hazel Walker were unable to provide impetus for the acceptance of females as professional basketball players.