

Denver: The Basketball Capital of the United States

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Between 1935 and 1968 Denver, Colorado, hosted the National Amateur Athletic Union's basketball tournament. The tournament, which dated back to the turn of the century and had been held for ten years in Kansas City, Missouri, before coming to Denver, was, for a time, the major post-collegiate basketball event in the United States. In 1935, when Denver hosted its first AAU tournament, the National Basketball Association was still a decade away. Collegiate stars who desired to play basketball after they exhausted their eligibility either hooked up with barnstorming teams or played with industrial league teams like the Phillips 66ers, the Peoria Catapillars, or the Oklahoma City 89ers. The culmination of the basketball season was the national AAU tournament which not only included industrial league teams, but also regional tournament champions, service teams, and select college teams. The rosters of these teams included some of the best basketball players in the United States.

The purpose of my paper was to explore the AAU tournament from the perspective of the host city. In 1935 the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression. Denver, the capital of Colorado, suffered with the rest of the United States. As a relatively small city, the prospect of hosting a national basketball tournament offered Denver an opportunity to put the city on the map and to provide the community with athletic entertainment.

Denver organizers believed that a key to the tournament's success was a strong Denver entrant. They were convinced that the only way to sustain the interest of local fans over the six-day tournament was to field a team that could consistently make it to the semi or final round of competition. In 1935, for example, Denver recruited Bob "Ace" Gruenig, a 6'8" center, who would star in the tournament for the next decade. Maintaining a quality team was a challenge. Players expected team sponsors to provide them with jobs and the more gifted players were in a position to jump to other teams. In the thirty-three years of tournament play in Denver, the city's entrant only won three times. However, it made the championship game frequently which clearly contributed to the tournament's success.

In the 1930s, 1940s., and 1950s the tournament drew as many as fifty teams. By the 1960s entries declined significantly and the tournament lost money for the first time in 1967 and left the city in 1968. The major reason for the decline of the AAU tournament was the ability of the National Basketball Association to join professional baseball and football as a successful spectator sport. In 1967 Denver had a franchise in the American Basketball Association which drew attention away from the Denver AAU tourney. The following year, 1968, the Phillips 66ers, the most successful tourney team, announced that it would no longer sponsor a basketball team.

Today it seems odd to read that Denver was once the basketball capital of the United States. My paper attempted to recapture and understand that time.