

Bob Douglas and the Birth of the New York Renaissance: An All-Professional Black Basketball Team

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The New York Renaissance Basketball Team stands as perhaps the greatest all-professional black basketball team of the 1920s and 30s. Under the watchful eye of owner/manager, Bob Douglas, the “Rens” established many records over their twenty-three year existence. The significance of the Rens stems not only from the fact that they were black and professional, but that their owner/manager, Bob Douglas, also was black, unlike Abe Saperstein who founded the Harlem Globetrotters in 1927. Bob Douglas created the Rens as a result of a controversy over amateur and professional basketball players in New York City in the early 1920s.

Culturally, Harlem experienced an artistic movement known as the “Harlem Renaissance” in the 1920s. An abundance of literature, poetry, art, and music expressed the black experience in black terms. This movement attracted writers, musicians, and artists from all over the United States and the Caribbean. It was in this atmosphere that the Rens were formed, a product of the vibrant culture existing in Harlem in the 1920s.

Bob Douglas, a native of the British West Indies, came to New York City as a youth in 1900, the time at which professional basketball was beginning to emerge on the east coast. Immediately following World War I, Douglas formed the Spartan Field Club. This club offered the black youth of New York City an opportunity to participate in amateur sports, one of which was basketball.

By the early 1920s, there were allegations that certain players on Douglas’ basketball team had receive payment for playing sports during the summer months. Basketball, like baseball before it, was being professionalized, even at the youth level. Noted the *New York Amsterdam News*, a New York City black newspaper, in February of 1923: “Take away the financial inducement and there’s nothing to it. Among our colored youth there isn’t a baseball team functioning just for the fun of the thing and the love of the game. They wouldn’t last a month under such circumstances.” Douglas decided that same year to forego amateur sport for the professional ranks in basketball.

Douglas sold the idea of creating an all-professional black team to the owners of the Renaissance Casino, known for its ballroom dancing and the playing of basketball in its facility. In return for practice and playing space, the team used the name “Renaissance.” In November 1923, the New York Renaissance Big Five made their debut as the first all-professional black team in the game of basketball.

Research for this paper was based primarily upon black newspapers, such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and scrapbooks of and interviews with surviving players.