

In Search of a Dynasty: Vancouver's Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball— 1942 to 1968

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For almost three decades, from 1942 to 1968, Vancouver teams reigned supreme over senior Canadian women's basketball, winning the Dominion title twenty-two of twenty-seven years. Most of these championships were won by two commercially-sponsored teams, Hedlunds and Eilers. This domination followed that of the worldrenowned Edmonton Grads, and it lasted until elite women's basketball in Canada came under the control of intercollegiate competition and national squads.

In searching for a dynasty among the Vancouver teams, an attempt was made to determine if the outstanding achievements were the work of several teams, or of one team with different names and sponsors. In the time period under study, the champion senior Vancouver team changed names and sponsors five times, and for each change, a significant number of players from the previous winners appeared on the team roster of the new team. Also, most interviewed players felt that they were still playing for the same team when these changes occurred. Only one change seemed was more than in name only, and even here, there were still strong connections between the old and new teams. Therefore, it is proposed that there were two closely-related Vancouver dynasties that dominated Canadian women's senior basketball from the early 40s to the late 60s: the Hedlunds team, with its successor, Nut House; and the Eilers team, with its successors, Richmond Merchants, Vancouver Stars, and Vancouver Molson's.

An examination of newspaper reports and an analysis of interviews with former players and coaches of the above teams revealed several factors or enabling conditions that contributed to the success of Vancouver teams. These factors were grouped according to the degree of their exclusivity to Vancouver. In the first group were conditions that could have obtained in many different cities during the time under study:

1. The population of metropolitan Vancouver was large enough to consistently produce the basic pool of talent from which new players could emerge.
2. Once a series of consecutive wins was established by a team, a certain momentum was established, and there was an expectation on the part of team members that success would continue.
3. Most of the better players were all-round athletes, who used other sport(s) to keep them fit for basketball; in their view, they possessed several general athletic traits that could be applied to all of their sporting experiences.
4. With most players interviewed, initial encouragement to play competitive basketball came parents, older brothers, or other male relatives; teachers and early coaches were also sources of encouragement.

5. Several key players stayed with the team for many years, six of the best playing for over eight years; this core of experience helped sustain national domination.

Factors more specific to Vancouver or other western Canadian cities included:

1. Until the late 1960s, most school girls east of Manitoba were taught the Canadian version of “girls’ rules” basketball, a modified game that did not provide the skills, tactics and fitness demanded of the national game; consequently, the pool of talent from which to draw representative teams for national championships was too small. In western Canada, “girls’ rules” was not played after 1923, and teams from that part of the country were able to dominate the game for several decades.

2. Strong support for girls’ and women’s basketball was always present in Vancouver and throughout British Columbia; beginners’ leagues were organized through the Sunday School Athletic Association, the elementary school league, at the junior level in commercial leagues, and in junior high schools. Because the so-called “girls’ rules” game was never played at any competitive level in B.C., it was assumed that women’s games would be played as aggressively and competitively as men’s.

3. Vancouver newspapers gave solid support to amateur sport and women’s sport, particularly during the 1940s and early 50s.

4. Strong competition was provided for the Vancouver teams through local senior leagues, an intense rivalry with Victoria, other towns in B.C., and, when needed, local men’s teams; this competition enabled the Vancouver champions to remain sharp and fit for the national playoffs.

5. From 1923 until 1940, the Edmonton Grads dominated Canadian women’s basketball, and no team was able to defeat them. Vancouver teams were almost as strong, and as soon as the Grads disbanded, Vancouver was able to emerge as the new dominant city.

6. Vancouver was a basketball city, with several strong men’s teams from the 1920s onward. This tradition continued into the 1960s.