

# Basketball and Community: Assimilation and the American Jewish Experience

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I spent a good part of my adolescence watching and playing basketball. Kelly Park in Brooklyn, on the corner of Ave. S and E. 15th Street, was my second home. Fat, slow, but a good outside shooter, I made it into half-court games with my friends, played one on one with Kenny Hammerman, and leaning against schoolyard fences, watched the likes of Connie Hawkins, Billy Cunningham and other high school stars do battle. From an early age, armed with my trusty public school G.O. card, I took the BMT subway to the old Madison Square Garden on 49th Street and Eighth Avenue to watch the erstwhile exploits of the New York Knickerbockers. Unaware that I was witnessing the professional game's transformation into integrated sport, I marvelled at Sweetwater Clifton's hands, the height of Ray Felix and Walter Dukes, Harry Gallatin's wide body, and the shooting ability of the Santa Clara stick, Kenny Sears. Once a year, my father even took me to a game; father and son night for the Flatbush Lodge branch of the Free Sons of Israel—but we always left early to avoid the crush on the subway that for some reason he feared. Today, as my middle-aged body resists the physical demands I make on it to keep my blood pumping and my endorfin flowing, my basketball dreams—on the court, taking over for Bill Bradley or for Earvin “Magic” Johnson, scoring, passing, and dominating the action—provide solace from the inevitable physical deterioration that awaits us all.

Growing up in America as a third-generation Jewish-American male, both my past and my fantasy hardly seem unusual. What may be surprising, however, is that they are not very different from what my father and many other second-generation Jewish men experienced. Born to orthodox Jewish Russian immigrant parents in 1908 on Sackman Street in the Brooklyn Jewish enclave of Brownsville, he won a basketball medal playing for Evening Recreation Center 184 at the age of seventeen before a brief career at guard for Brooklyn College. Unlike my fantasies, however, any dreams he might have had of glory on the hardwood likely found him taking over for one of the “Heavenly Twins”, Max Friedman or Barney Sedran, or for the incomparable Nat Holman—smallish, white, Jewish men like himself who grew up in urban, Jewish neighborhoods and who established basketball, especially in the eastern United States, as the sport of Jews. Both as spectators and as participants, Jewish involvement in James Naismith’s American invention, especially between 1900 and 1950, was greater than in any other sport, even boxing. A rich part of second-generation community life, both as experience and symbol, it served as a middle ground in which the children of immigrants took advantage of opportunities provided by themselves and by others to determine their own identities as Americans and as Jews.

Growing up as the children of East European immigrants in communities that were overwhelmingly Jewish, they created for themselves, sometimes with parental approval, often without it, their own world within a world—a meaningful life in which sport and physical activity played an important role. Here, with basketball at its center, both at Jewish community centers, public schools, and settlement houses, they learned about American values, tried out new identities, thought new thoughts, challenged their roots and made choices—all within Jewish bounded space. Their story demonstrates the possibilities for living in the United States as Americans in ways that do not deny a real Jewish presence and a fierce pride in being Jewish.