

Renaissance Rivalries and Loyalties

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In 1923 Bob Douglas organized an all-black basketball team, known as the New York Renaissance, better known as the Rens. Organized as a result of controversy between amateur and professional play among blacks in New York City, within a couple of years the Rens attained several victories. They became the pride and joy of Harlem, New York. Every Harlem boy dreamed of one day becoming member of the Renaissance team.

Almost immediately, the Rens established rivalries with the Loendi Club of Pittsburgh and the Original Celtics, and later with the Philadelphia SPHAs, the Oshkosh All-Stars, and the Indianapolis Kautskys. In Jim Crow America, the Rens were refused admittance into a professional league. The Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s forced the Rens to barnstorm in order to remain financially solvent. Through barnstorming rivalries and personal friendships with players from opposing teams developed and continued, both at home and on the road. Ironically, these rivalries and friendships transcended the color line at a time when the mixing of the races was discouraged, if not forbidden in many places.

Team rivalries were aided and abetted by sports writers of well known and local black newspapers such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Interstate Tattler*, the *New York Age*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*. The most prominent black sportswriter in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s, Romeo Dougherty, served as a middleman between the rival teams, and between the Rens and their fans. He became close friends with Bob Douglas, the Rens owner/manager. Other sportswriters, such as Wendell Smith and Fay Young also filled this role. Sportswriters occasionally travelled with the team to games.

This paper delineates both the rivalries and fan support of the New York Rens, from 1923 through 1939 by answering the following questions: When did the rivalries begin and what spurred them on?; Socio-economically, what types of people supported the Rens?; And, What types of interracial relationships did opposing players develop and maintain? It uses primary sources, including black newspapers from New York, Baltimore, Chicago, and Pittsburgh; white newspapers from New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Oshkosh, and Sheboygan; team and player files from the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame; obituaries; personal interviews with ex-players and surviving relatives. Secondary sources used in this analysis include books on basketball history and African-American history.

This paper argues that as the first, and only, black team inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, the unique styles and high level of Renaissance play, the rivalries created, and the effect of the fans in Harlem New York and across America, merits additional attention from historians of both sport and African-American life and culture. Though not admitted to a league until 1948, the New York Rens set a standard for professional basketball copied by many, but achieved by few. The history of the New York Rens is essential to the history of professional basketball. The innovative and unique play of the Renaissance team brought them much success and countless fans - both black and white - in Jim Crow America, at a time when 50% of the black population was unemployed. The Rens thrived, with individual players earning up to \$125 per week. The rivalry between the Rens and the Original Celtics gained in intensity until the late 1920s, when the Rens began to defeat the Original Celtics consistently. Even into the late 1930s, fans flocked to Renaissance-Celtic contests.