

Susan Rayl
Iowa State University, Ames, IA

A War Begins—From Rens to Bears: Player Revolving and Free Agency in Black Basketball in the Early 1940s

Between 1941 when the United States entered World War II and 1943, several professional black basketball teams organized. Players formerly under the auspices of the New York Rens and the Harlem Globetrotters jumped or revolved to various new teams for a nightly wage. While the Harlem Globetrotters initially lost players to the New York Rens, the Rens also lost players to new teams such as Grumman Aircraft, the Paterson Crescents, Harlem Yankees, and Washington Bears. Ren owner/manager Bob Douglas held his players to contracts but during the war he allowed them to play for other teams on nights when the Rens did not play. Douglas feared losing his top players to the military draft, as well as rival teams. In this respect, black basketball players enjoyed free agency during World War II.

This paper uses both primary and secondary sources to examine free agency and player jumping/revolving in professional black basketball between 1941 and 1943, with an emphasis on players from the New York Renaissance team. Primary sources include prominent black newspapers such as the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), *New York Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*; team and player files from the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame; and personal interviews with former Renaissance players and surviving relatives. Secondary sources include books on African American sport history, basketball history, and African-American history. An examination of these sources indicates that professional black basketball set a precedence in free agency among players in the early 1940s, and that free agency proved to beneficial to the players but detrimental to Bob Douglas and the Renaissance team during World War II. Knowing he could not pay high salaries, Douglas supported the free agency of his players, but while they exercised their right to free agency, choosing money over loyalty, most eventually returned to him and the Rens. All held Douglas in high esteem. Free agency in the National Basketball Association (NBA) has been researched and documented, but little research has been conducted concerning player jumping and revolving in professional black basketball prior to the formation of the NBA. The precedent set by professional, black basketball in free agency thus merits attention among historians of both sport and African-American life and culture.