

# THE BUSINESS OF SPORT

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## *His Handshake Was His Contract:* **Bob Douglas and the Marketing of the New York Renaissance Five**

In 1971, the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame inducted Robert L. Douglas. Letters in support of Douglas' nomination noted that he kept the Renaissance basketball team financially solvent through the difficult years of the Great Depression and World War II and that even though Douglas sealed an agreement with a signed contract, his handshake was as good as any contract.

This paper examines Bob Douglas, the businessman, and the networking, community-oriented, and marketing tactics he employed to keep the Renaissance basketball team thriving between 1923 and 1949. At a time when blacks owned just ten percent of all businesses in Harlem, Douglas and men like him were exceptional. Such people served a vital role in the African-American community, both in Harlem and across the country. In Jim Crow America, Douglas and his Rens stayed in business when all the odds were against them.

Bob Douglas followed his father and other immigrants from the Caribbean into the New York business world. By 1923, when he organized the Rens, Douglas had come to know the game of basketball well and also was a respected member of the community. Though the Rens were a basketball team, they were also a business, and Douglas knew he had to employ tactics that would keep the organization financially solvent. During the Ren's twenty-six year existence Douglas used several tactics including: networking, benefit games, traditional rivalries, games against white teams, barnstorming, music and dancing, amateur farm teams, contracts with his players, requiring guarantees and a percentage of the profits, and honesty.

Primary sources used for this paper include prominent black newspapers such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*; team and player files from the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame; and personal interviews with former Renaissance players and relatives.