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The Rise and Fall of the East Liverpool Five, 1898-1909

The development of basketball as a professional sport and commercial recreation in East Liverpool, Ohio, a pottery manufacturing center on the Ohio River near Pittsburgh, provides an interesting case study in both the emergence of professional basketball in eastern and mid-western industrial cities in the first decade of the twentieth century and in the development of commercial recreational culture in such cities. Over about a ten-year period, basketball in East Liverpool went through several phases, phases that characterize the early development of the game throughout the nation.

East Liverpool basketball began as an amateur pastime for skilled local players sponsored by the YMCA before moving on to become a successful semiprofessional recreation spectacle involving large crowds of paying customers. It then joined (and briefly dominated) a full-fledged professional league but failed to maintain that success and collapsed a few years later. This took place in the sort of small urban-industrial city that increasingly dotted the northeast and mid-west by 1900, places as integral to the era's demographic shifts as the metropolises that dominate historical discussions of "urbanization." Places that were rich in the sorts of enterprises with which professional basketball is best compared. Tracing this process in a single location over a manageable period of time allows a succinct discussion of the game's spread and development in the early twentieth century.

Historians interested in the development of sport spectacle in the United States in the early twentieth century have examined baseball and football at great length. They

have examined professional basketball much less extensively. Likewise, urban historians have investigated New York, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and other major metropolises very heavily, but have focused less frequently on the development of the smaller industrial cities that dotted the expanding rail networks of industrial America. It is no accident that the subject and the venue are closely related. Much of the early history of basketball as a professional spectator sport took place in these smaller cities which were themselves just as representative of the “Rise of the City” at the turn of the century in some ways as larger centers.

This study is also interested in the cultural impact of spectator athletics on such a city, especially the relationship between sport as a public spectacle and consumer culture. Professional basketball, like other team spectator sports at the turn of the century, was a commercial amusement that blurred some of the dichotomous class lines generally associated with public recreation at that time. It was a rough, rowdy, boisterous, un-genteel, and clearly male cultural arena which, nevertheless, had a degree of public respectability and some middle-class following. Team sporting events, like amusement parks, were public places in which (at least some) middle-class patrons were permitted to behave in un-restrained, un-reserved ways. The encouragement of this sort of behavior for commercial purposes was a key development in the emergence of a consumer-oriented culture in the twentieth century. (It is no accident that in East Liverpool, as in many other cities, commercial athletics were associated physically and financially with amusement parks.) The relationship of commercialized team athletics to this process has not been studied fully; this project permits examination of this relationship in a single manageable context.

The paper is based on local newspaper accounts (not one, but several of East Liverpool’s daily papers survive), as well as other primary sources dealing with the development of the Central Basket Ball League, of which East Liverpool was a member for three years.