

Murry Nelson
Penn State University

The Height of Jewish Excellence in Basketball: The South Philadelphia Hebrew Association Team, 1918-1945

The South Philadelphia Hebrew Association (SPHA) team originally began as a local team called the Combine Club in Philadelphia. All of the original players on the team had played at South Philadelphia high schools and playgrounds and one of those players, Eddie Gottlieb, persuaded the SPHA to sponsor the squad and purchase uniforms. Though the sponsorship was withdrawn in later years, the team maintained the name throughout its more than 25-year existence during which time it joined a “minor” professional league in 1923 and won two league titles. From 1925-1945 the SPHAs played in a number of professional leagues and as an independent professional squad winning no fewer than ten league titles. Recognized as one of the two dominant teams of the 1930s (along with the New York Rens), the SPHAs finally faded from existence shortly after World War II.

During their “reign” the SPHA was a phenomenon in Philadelphia and the players were recognized celebrities. Like the Original Celtics, whose dominance preceded theirs, the SPHAs were successful because of their ability and their stability. Gottlieb recruited excellent players and they stayed together for many years learning to anticipate their teammates’ moves and to take advantage of their opponents’ lapses. This paper examines the SPHAs as a team and as a cultural and community entity. How did the SPHAs generate and maintain support among their fan base, particularly during the economic depths of the Depression? Though the players originally came from South Philadelphia high schools, how was the player stock replenished and from where? At what point did the SPHAs relinquish their Jewish “exclusivity” and have Gentiles join their team and what was the effect of that on their success, professionally and commercially? How did the work with the SPHAs lead to the later success of Eddie Gottlieb and his NBA franchise, the Philadelphia Warriors?

The SPHA’s success was analogous to that of their chief rivals for supremacy in the 1930s the New York Renaissance. This success was rooted in the Settlement Houses and YMHAs of the South Philadelphia region and the instant liking that second generation Jews took to the game itself, shortly after its invention in 1891. The team’s continued successes were directly related to the support of the South Philadelphia community in financial and spiritual ways. The only significant declines in attendance at games came when the team signed Gentiles and this action seems to have affected the fan base. Gottlieb’s ability to maneuver player rosters between the SPHAs and the ABL franchise Warriors in the late 1920s prepared him for similar machinations in the 1940s when his BAA Philadelphia Warriors entered the NBA.