

Murry Nelson
Pennsylvania State University

The Short, Exciting Life of the Penn State Professional Basketball League, 1914-1921

At the turn of the twentieth century there was a great spirit of can-doism” (e. g. Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*) among many Americans and innumerable American towns aspired to achieve “big league” status. What constituted such an appellation; a stop on the railroad? That was a start, but in the heavily industrialized Northeast, it seemed that every town had a rail stop. Did the number of trains per day, arriving and departing, constitute big league status? Another possibility, but merely being in a crossroads location might lead to that. What about housing a large, well known industry? Certainly this was a vital foundation for growth, development and recognition. Did possessing a professional sports team make a city or town big league? There was a mark that not every town could claim, though the definition of “big league” was still rather elusive and inconsistent.

Basketball’s recent invention (in 1891) and growth made it possible for new, smaller towns to assert their importance, to make them candidates for further growth and, thus, development through the establishment of more industries in those towns. Basketball had spread rapidly west from its invention in Springfield, Massachusetts. Carried largely by the enthusiasm of Settlement Houses and YMCAs, the game had great appeal to the children of immigrants in the cities of the Northeast. The game was attractive because it required little space or equipment to play in some manner and this lack of space or resources was common for the impoverished children of the towns and cities.

Basketball’s rules were still evolving and the game was an expression of independence by young men who could shape the game’s development without the interference of the older generation who had never played the game. The game could be

played indoors and out and was. There could be any number on a side until the rules were finally codified for league play in the early 1900s. That, of course, did not stop youngsters from continuing to play with seven, eight, nine or more on a side. The game was popular among workers and ethnic groups and many industries saw the advantage of establishing company teams or leagues to both keep workers busy when not working and to create a sense of community and loyalty of workers with their companies.

In November 1914 the new Penn State League got underway with five teams (in Pittston, Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, Hazelton and Freeland). In various combinations the league existed until 1921. The financial difficulties that arose because of the high stakes bidding for players drove the Penn State League out of business. The towns of Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Pittston, Plymouth, Carbondale, Nanticoke, Hazleton and Freeland disappeared as “major league” professional sports cities, but it had been fun while it lasted. This paper chronicles the life of the Penn State League.