

BASKETBALL
SLAVE

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THE

ANDY JOHNSON
HARLEM GLOBETROTTER/NBA
STORY

MARK JOHNSON
with Tracey Michael Lewis

JuniorCam Publishing

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*In Loving Memory of my Parents
Andrew and Barbara
who taught the art of loving someone other than yourself.*

*And, to my nephew Ryan,
who never complains and is an inspiration to all of us.*



NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

OLYMPIC TOWER • 645 FIFTH AVENUE • NEW YORK, N. Y. 10022 • 212-826-7000

PENSION COMMITTEE

July 20, 1992

Mr. Andrew Johnson
P.O. Box 1062
Glenside, PA 19038-1062

Dear Andy:

This letter is to confirm our phone conversation of July 10, 1992 regarding your appeal of the Pension Committee's decision concerning your eligibility for a Pre-'65 pension.

As we discussed, in order to reconsider our decision, we require documentation to substantiate the fifth year of eligibility under the Plan.

Upon receipt of this information, we will re-evaluate your request for benefits.

Sincerely,

Robert Criqui

One of many denial letters after several appeals to the pension committee.

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As we discussed, in order to reconsider our decision, we require documentation to substantiate the fifth year of eligibility under the Plan.

Upon receipt of this information, we will re-evaluate your request for benefits.

Sincerely,

Robert Criqui

July 31, 1992

Mr. Robert Criqui, Vice-President, Finance
The Pension Committee
National Basketball Association
645 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Dear Bob:

I received your letter concerning our phone conversation of July 10, 1992 regarding my appeal to the Pension Committee's decision of my eligibility for my pre-65 pension.

I really don't understand what documents you and the committee are waiting for in order to substantiate my fifth year in the NBA. When my son and I met with you and Meryl Steinberg, almost five months ago, I showed you a contract that was received and recorded by the NBA office and signed by the president of the team, Frank Lane, and also signed by Maurice Povloff, President of the NBA. At that time, I explained, in person, the situation in which I was under contract and under that contract, I was loaned to another professional team that same year and could not play anywhere else because I was not put on waivers during that year in question.

I have been trying to explain my situation since April of 1990, when the committee first denied my request for my pension. Until April of 1992, I did not have any documented proof that I was loaned to another team or was not waived under my NBA contract. When my contract was recovered and reviewed in your office on April 28, 1992, I was told that a decision of my appeal would be made within two weeks and I have not yet received a decision since I was denied on September 1, 1990.

From the time I left your office on the 28th of April of 1992 until now, almost August, I have been asked to obtain all types of documentation to back up an "NBA contract". I have tried to comply with all wishes of the NBA committee to help them in determining a decision concerning my pension.

You have reviewed letters on my behalf by well-respected men in professional basketball who have been involved in the game for over 30 years or more. It has been stated how well I played in the NBA and how I could have played with any team in the NBA. It has also been stated in a letter to the committee what actually happened in the 1962 "loan deal"; also, I was not waived.

Since the committee has received all of this information, I do not know what else they are waiting for at this time. At this point, I feel as though the NBA Pension Committee has not only a legal, but moral obligation to give me an answer concerning my pension.

Sincerely,



Andrew Johnson

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to individuals from all ethnic groups who have been exploited and who never received proper acknowledgment or compensation for their contributions—whether it was building empires or constructing historical buildings.

It is also dedicated to the African-American male sports pioneers:

Before Jackie Robinson made his debut in 1947, playing in Major League Baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Moses Fleetwood Walker was a catcher for the Toledo Mudhens of the American Association in 1883. At that time, few catchers used any equipment, including not wearing a baseball glove for protection.

Willie O' Ree, who broke the color barrier in 1958 to become the first black player in the National Hockey League.

Charles Follis, the first professional black football player (September 16, 1902), and Ollie Matson, who was such a

talented and valuable football player that the Los Angeles Rams exchanged nine players for him in 1959.

John Shippen, Jr., golf's first black professional; and Lee Elder, who was the first black golfer to play in the Masters Tournament.

It is also important that we remember the men whose voices went unheard, who were more or just as talented and yet were unable to get the opportunity to play.

Yes, we celebrate Jackie Robinson and all of the *firsts*—the men who paved the way for multi-billion-dollar sports industries. My father, Andy Johnson, was one of those men. Though treated as a slave, *he refused to stay on the bench* and continued to make an impact. He stayed in the game we call life.

In spite of the obstacles, he and others overcame.



Foreword

KNOWING THE HISTORY AND THE IMPACT of black basketball is pivotal in understanding the contributions and struggles of the Original Harlem Globetrotters and the development of the NBA as we know it today.

Dr. James Naismith invented the game of basketball in 1891 because he wanted to create an activity that could be played inside during the winter months. One of the first basketball games ever played was at a YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts. The game took off—but in different directions. One direction was under Dr. Naismith, who was a sports coach. He introduced the game to colleges. At that time, there was not a high enrollment of blacks in colleges or universities. The other direction went the non-collegiate route. The YMCA exposed communities throughout the country to the game, and these communities were made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds. The YMCAs were a major influence and

responsible for the growth and the popularity of basketball. By the end of the century, the first collegiate games were being played for competition.

In New York, the St. Christopher Club (a church program) for young African Americans was also being exposed to this new sport. In the beginning of the 1900s, the surge was on and the game quickly grew to include amateur sports clubs, colleges, and professional clubs all over the country. One of the professional leagues that organized was the New England League, in which Harry Haskell “Bucky” Lew was recorded to be the first African American to play in a professional basketball game in 1902.

In 1904, Edward Henderson, a Harvard-educated physical education teacher from Washington, D.C., introduced the game to young African-American students. He believed the sport would break down segregation and he wanted to promote health, physical fitness, and academic success to build character. And, these young athletes would prove their equality once and for all, thereby diminishing the myth of black inferiority. His efforts went on to create the CIAA which is equivalent to the Big Ten of Black college basketball.

This era was termed the “beginning of basketball” in the book *Hot Potato* by Bob Kuska. The author breaks the history of the sport down perfectly: “The Era of Amateurism, 1910 to 1918; Decline of Amateurism, 1919-1923; and the Rise of Professionalism, 1923-1930. There was no organization of teams across the country. These actions lead to the early professional and barnstorming teams throughout the 1920s. There were hundreds of men’s professional basketball teams in towns and cities all over the United States. Part of this barnstorming era were

dominating teams from NY like The Original Celtics (all-white) and two African-American teams, the New York Renaissance Five (Rens) and the Original Harlem Globetrotters.

Before the dominating era of the Harlem Rens, there were a few teams that made history. The New York Celtics, for the first time in history, would play an all-black team by the name of the Commonwealth Five. The Commonwealth Five was owned by two white men, Roderick “Jess” McMahon and his brother Eddie McMahon. The Commonwealth Five would go on to win the Colored Basketball World’s Championship, becoming the only white-owned team ever to win the title. We must not forget about the all-black Loendi Big Five of Pittsburgh; they also won several championships. The Savoy Big Five out of Chicago had several notable wins over the Loendi Big Five. They would eventually become the birth of the Harlem Globetrotters.

Things changed rapidly when the New York Renaissance Big Five stepped onto the scene. The owner, Robert Douglass, a former player and native of the Caribbean, had sole ownership of this all-black team. They separated themselves quickly by being the first team that was fully black owned. He gave his

2 Basket Ball Games
and Dance
Friday Eve.
at 8:30
March 10

Black
vs.
White

FOR THE LIBERATOR
Something New in the Field of Sports

St. Marks Flashes
(Eastern Lightweight Champs)

College Settlement
(N. Y. State Lightweight Champs)

Blue Belt Girls
(Necely)

VS. Game
Y. W. C. A.
(127th Street Branch)

A Silver Loving Cup for the Winning Girls' Team

New Star Casino
1076 Street and Lexington Avenue

Admission, 75 Cents Tickets For Sale Boxes, \$4.00
The Liberator, 128 West 13th Street Chris Hayward's, 206 West 133rd Street
Chicago 1898

players a guaranteed year-long contract, which was not happening at that time. Bob named the former team (Spartan Braves) after the Harlem Renaissance Casino and Ballroom. In 1925, the new Harlem's Renaissance Big Five went on to win the Colored Basketball World's Championship.

The Rens provided an opportunity for African Americans to compete against white clubs such as the New York Celtics and Philadelphia Spahs. At some of these events, race riots would break out. Games were sometimes played on a court that was surrounded with chicken wire, thus the term Cage. This was done to prevent bottles and other debris from hitting the players if the home team's crowd did not like the way the game was going. The Rens took on anybody that would play, from black colleges, amateur, to other professional teams.

The Rens dominated basketball for the years that they were on the scene. One year, the Renaissance won 88 straight games in 86 days. They would later go on to win the 1939 World Professional Championship held in Chicago. The Harlem Globtrotters also played in the tournament but were in the same bracket as the Rens. So those two teams would have never met for the championship. The final score of that tournament championship would be the New York Rens 34 and the Oshkosh All-Stars 25. The Oshkosh All-Stars were a member of the all-white NBL (National Basketball League) precursor to the NBA. That championship team consisted of players like John "Boy Wonder" Isaacs, Tarzan Cooper, Wendell Smith (recently inducted into the baseball hall of Fame in 1994 posthumously for journalism), William Jenkins, and standout William "Pop" Gates. Legendary UCLA coach John Wooden stated, "The Rens are the greatest team I ever saw."

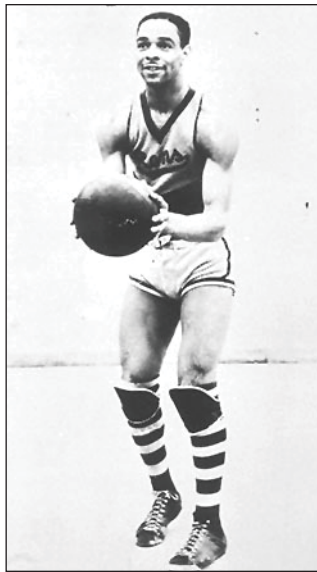
Of that championship team, Pop Gates was the only pro basketball player to appear in the World Professional Basketball Tournament at Chicago Stadium for all ten years, from 1938 to 1948. Pop joined the Rens in 1938; he was already on the road to making history. His resume reads like a true legend of basketball. He was the “first” in many accomplishments of the professional era of basketball: from being the first player to jump from high school to appearing in the Pro-World Championship in Chicago; to several All-pro teams; Hall of Fame teams; and being one of the first blacks to play in the all-white NBL with the Buffalo Bisons, otherwise known as the Tri-city Blackhawks. Pop became the player/coach for the Dayton Rens (formally the Harlem Rens) the only all-black team that was allowed to enter the NBL; he actually had a high-point scoring game of 38 points that year. This was the only black-owned franchise in Major League history—then and now!! The firsts did not stop there. Pop went on to become the first black player with the Scranton Minors team in the Eastern League. Pop ended his career with the Harlem Globetrotters, first, as a player and then as a coach. He was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame. Unfortunately, it wasn’t until sixty years later in 1989, way after that World Championship game in 1939.

I had rare access to Mr. William “Pop” Gates’ last unaired interview in 1998, when he talked about his life and his long career in basketball and being the first of all of these segregated teams in that era. The treatment he had to endure being black and just doing what he was good at was unbelievable. All I can say is that Pop is one of the strongest individuals I know about. It was as if he was a one-man civil rights movement by himself. From his inner strength and morals and the help of some of his

teammates, players and team owners, he made it through. One of the questions asked of Pop during the interview was: “In all of your years of being around the game of basketball, what is the best team you ever saw?”

He replied, “That period of time of playing, observing, and coaching from the late thirties up to 1955. There were two teams that stand out. The first was the 1939 World Championship Harlem Globetrotter team . This team consisted of players such as Bernie Price, Duke Cumberland, Ermer Robinson, Louis “Babe” Pressley.

The other was the 1956 Harlem Globetrotter team that I had the pleasure of coaching and help assembling. This team consisted of Roman Turman, Willie Gardner, Meadowlark Lemon, Clarence Wilson, Carl Green, Charlie Hoxie, Leon Hillard, Woody Saulsbury, and Andy Johnson.”



William "Pop" Gates