

Professional Basketball in Fort Wayne, Indiana

By Chris Bandemer

In 1891 in a YMCA in Springfield, MA, Dr. James Naismith struggled with a rowdy class that was confined to indoor activities during the harsh New England winters. Under instruction from his boss, Naismith was given 14 days to create an indoor game that was more enjoyable than calisthenics and could provide an athletic distraction.ⁱ Additionally the game couldn't take up too much room and had to be fair for all players and not too rough. Eventually, Naismith hit upon the idea to nail two peach baskets to a gymnasium balcony and establish 13 rules, for a game that would become known as basketball.

Despite its humble beginnings basketball fever caught on quickly. By 1895, various YMCA teams were holding regional tournaments.ⁱⁱ It is generally accepted that the first professional basketball game took place in 1896 in Trenton, New Jersey.ⁱⁱⁱ Local players from Trenton rented the local Masonic Hall, charged admission, and split the profits.^{iv} Because of their reputation, the game attracted a sizable crowd and produced a gate that exceeded the night's rent. Each player earned \$15.00 and the one dollar left after the split was awarded to the team captain.^v So popular was basketball that in the early 1900's, professional basketball teams seemed to sprout up wherever there were a few enthusiastic players who were enterprising enough to rent out space and sell seats.^{vi}

These early games were not what we see in today's game. Players wore uniforms featuring long tights and velvet shorts and played in a wire cage, which enclosed the court and protected the fans from the players and the players from the fans.^{vii} With victory prized so highly, the game became rough, since there were few experienced referees and no effective ruling body.^{viii} It eventually became too rough to be looked upon by the YMCA administrators as a healthy

exercise and the YMCA embarked on a campaign of discouraging the formation of club teams and conducting tournaments.^{ix}

A player from that time period noted, “players would be thrown against the wire and most of us would get cut. The Court was covered with blood.”^x Raucous fans at many games took such a personal interest in the game that they exchanged insults and even punches with the competitors.^{xi} Frank Basloe, an early promoter and manager, told the story of a Trenton player who was knocked out during a game in Millville, PA and the patrons, proceeded to kick him in the face and broke his jaw^{xii} At other games, fans amused themselves by jabbing hatpins and lighted cigarettes through the cages at the players’ legs.^{xiii} In tough Pennsylvania coal mining towns, miners favored nails, which they heated with mining lamps and threw in the direction of the referee or opposing free throw shooter.^{xiv} Fort Wayne fans, at North Side High School, were known to lean out and hit the opposing players on the head as they ran by.^{xv} Needless to say, this was not the game envisioned by James Naismith.

In all other sports, professionalism was the consequence of spectator interest; first the sport became entrenched among its followers; then, in order to have the best teams, a team’s backers offered money to the best players; when the best players and the best teams began drawing the largest crowds, the opportunity for profit was not lost upon the promoter and full fledged professional teams and leagues were formed. In basketball, there was no large pre-existing audience – the players became professional in order to continue playing, before the best ones came into such demand that a business could be based on hiring them.^{xvi}

The first professional league was formed in 1898 and named the National League, it folded within five years.^{xvii} During this time other professional leagues sprang up, with essentially narrow geographic bounds. The usual pattern had several teams from different sections or

suburbs of one large city and a few members from satellite cities within a 100-mile radius.^{xviii} There were local leagues, regional leagues, industrial teams, as well as, barnstorming teams who drove from city to city playing any team they could find. These early leagues were plagued by instability and no contracts binding players to teams. Financial control was primary in the hands of players or coaches.^{xix} In this climate it was not unusual for players to sell their services to the highest bidder on a per game basis.^{xx} In 1919, Joe Lapchick played for four different teams in four different leagues.^{xxi} This created a self-damaging cycle; impermanence of line-ups and unreliability of schedule limited fan interest to local die-hards, and the lack of accommodation for large crowds created the penny pinching conditions that led to shifting player allegiances.^{xxii} This time period is rife with examples of leagues and teams that formed and disbanded within a year or two.

The respected teams were typically independents such as the Original Celtics of New York. They played, and won championships, in various leagues, but made more money and boosted their reputation by touring and taking on local opponents.^{xxiii} In 1921, games between the two New York teams, the Celtics and Whirlwinds, packed armories with nearly 10,000 spectators.^{xxiv} While high school and collegiate games were growing, the pro game was stagnating because there was no way to accommodate large enough crowds to generate a consistent profit.^{xxv} As a result, it was very common for teams to be sponsored by a business.

In 1925 Joseph Carr, President of the NFL, formed a professional basketball league, the American Basketball League (ABL). The league consisted of nine of the best independent pro teams from the East and Midwest: the Chicago Bruins, Cleveland Bulldogs, Washington Palace Five, Boston Whirlwinds, Brooklyn Arcadians, Buffalo Bisons, Detroit Pulaski Post Five, the Fort Wayne Caseys, and the Rochester Centrals^{xxvi}. The Caseys, named after the Knights of

Columbus (K of C) was formed in 1919^{xxvii}. In 1922 they beat the barnstorming New York Celtics 21-17 in the Concordia College gym, but lost the next day 48-23.^{xxviii} The Caseys (later reorganized as the Fort Wayne Hoosiers) played in the American Basketball League from 1925-1931 and made it to the finals three times^{xxix}. According to www.probasketballencyclopedia.com, the team played at South Side High School, but other sources say the games were played at Concordia High School.

A catalyst for the formation of the NBA was the National Basketball League (NBL). The NBL started in 1935 as the loosely organized Midwest Basketball Conference, but changed in 1937 to the NBL to attract a larger audience^{xxx}. The league was created by three corporations; General Electric, Firestone, and Goodyear^{xxxi}. The GE team was started in the 1920s as a club within the company and played in the local shop league.

In 1937, the industrial teams agreed to match their teams against 10 previously independent professional teams.^{xxxii} The teams included the Akron Firestone Non-Skids, Akron Goodyear Wingfoots, Cincinnati Comellos, Columbus Allmen Transfers, Dayton Metropolitan, Fort Wayne General Electrics, and Indianapolis Kautskys. Scheduling was at the discretion of each team and teams did not play the same number of games.^{xxxiii} Because of their ability to offer jobs to former college players, the teams from Akron and Fort Wayne had an advantage over the independent teams. The General Electrics played in this league for one year and finished with a record of 13 wins and 7 losses. It wouldn't be until 1941 that Fort Wayne had another professional basketball team.

The NBL had a seeming monopoly on the professional game, but the league was unstable. From 1937 to 1947, there was very little consistency. Some teams like the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets and the Anderson Duffy Packers played only a few years. The league was constantly

adding and losing teams. In 1946 a group of hockey arena owners got together and formed a competing league, the Basketball Association of America (BAA). While the NBL had a head start on the professional game, fans, and professional talent, the BAA had large cities and more experience with sports promotion.

One of the biggest hurdles facing any team was finding a location to play. As mentioned earlier, teams would rent out high school gymnasiums, dance halls, or armories. Sometimes basketball games preceded a weekend dance. In order to make money the team needed a location where they could consistently play. In order to finance such a facility, the owner/promoter had to make money year-round. A prize fight could fill a place once a week, a circus was good for six weeks, a handful of track meets could be held, and bike races, wrestling, horse shows, dogs shows, rodeos, etc. would only occasionally fill the facility. In this environment, a man named Ned Irish saw an opportunity.

Irish, a New Yorker, believed that college games could fill large arenas. His key innovation was the double header. He realized that the general sports attending public, which would have to pay major league prices in a major league setting, could not be satisfied with a game that lasted less than an hour and a half. It simply wasn't enough for an evening out. Baseball, hockey, and theatre had conditioned patrons to expect 2-3 hours of entertainment.^{xxxiv}

The owners of the BAA were looking for ways to fill their arenas when their hockey teams were not in town; basketball was the perfect solution. The 11 charter members of the BAA were the Boston Celtics, Chicago Stags, Cleveland Rebels, Detroit Falcons, NY Knickerbockers, Philadelphia Warriors, Pittsburgh Ironmen, Providence Steamrollers, St. Louis Bombers, Toronto Huskies, and Washington Capitols.^{xxxv} While the NBL had an established league with the biggest stars, the BAA teams were located in large metropolitan cities, they had access to

reporters and editors in large cities, they had their own buildings, there was no stigma from previous teams, they had extensive experience with sports promotion, and they understood the importance of a championship at the end of the season.^{xxxvi}

The establishment of the BAA meant that these two leagues would fight for talent, attention, dollars, and playing space. If a professional basketball league of the best players was to flourish, the two leagues could not co-exist. It was evident that a basketball league would exist, but how would it look? The answer lay with the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons.

The Zollner Machine Works was founded in Duluth, MN in 1912 by Theodore Zollner. Zollner invented an automatic machine for weighing difficult bulk items such as sugars and grains for wholesale merchants. By 1918 the one-man operation had saturated the local market and Zollner turned his attention to the automobile, specifically rebuilt automotive engines and precision parts for pneumatic tools used in Minnesota's iron mines. By 1924, Zollner Machine Works products were highly touted. A Zollner rebuilt engine was considered equal to a new engine while the Zollner designed and built pistons were considered superior to the original equipment.^{xxxvii}

Zollner pistons were so successful, that despite a national depression, the leading engine manufacturers were demanding Zollner pistons for their engines. Eventually Duluth became economically unfeasible and the operation moved to Fort Wayne. The twelve-man work force that moved to Fort Wayne in 1931 eventually employed 1,800 and became the supplier for 70% of the world's heavy duty aluminum alloy pistons for internal combustion engines.^{xxxviii}

Despite their focus on growing the business, Theodore and his son, Fred, were avid sports fans. In an effort to further improve employee relations, the company sponsored athletic teams in bowling, softball, and basketball. The Zollner Pistons were originally organized as an

industrial league basketball team. On February 26, 1941, the Pistons played a playoff game, in a triple header, in front of 2,000 people, at the General Electric Gym against International Harvester to determine who would represent Fort Wayne in the upcoming world's professional basketball tournament in Chicago.^{xxxix} The Pistons won the invitation to Chicago by beating Harvester 37-35 in overtime.^{xl} The Pistons went to Chicago and lost in the finals to the Oshkosh All-Stars.

The national exposure wetted Zollner's appetite for showcasing the Pistons on a grander stage. In 1941 the Pistons joined the NBL and played their first exhibition game in Marion, Indiana against the independent Hoosier Comets. The league opener was played on Monday, December 1, 1941, at North Side High School Gym, against the Chicago Bruins. In front of an estimated 2,500 fans, the Pistons won 48-46. The next week, Fred Zollner stunned the basketball establishment by signing the biggest name, Bobby McDermott, away from the Boston Celtics.

For the next five years, the Pistons were one of the dominate and more importantly stable teams in the NBL. Since their establishment in 1941, the Pistons went to the final four times, winning the championship in 1944 and 1945. The team was loaded with talent and Mr. Zollner took care of his players with jobs and other incentives. If the receipts outpaced expenses, he put money in a communal pot to be split by the players at the end of the season. According to Blackie Towery, "Mr. Zollner was very liberal. Every ball player that ever played wanted to come to Fort Wayne after they heard that deal."

Despite their dominance in the NBL, Zollner understood how fragile the league was. In 1943-1944, Fred Zollner helped underwrite the entire league that was down to a 22-game schedule with four teams: Fort Wayne, Oshkosh, Sheboygan, and Cleveland. Two years later, the league had 12 solid members, up from eight the previous year. Despite having the best

players, an established league, and stable fan base, the NBL was still quite provincial. The upstart BAA was a threat that could not be ignored.

Despite a splashy start in 1946 the BAA was off to a shaky start. In its first year, the BAA lost four teams of its 11 teams. Since the Pistons' inception, Fred Zollner was always looking for a way to compete at the highest level and now he'd get his chance. As the start of the 1948-1949 season neared, it was clear that the two leagues could not co-exist. During that summer the BAA commissioner started informal merger talks with NBL teams. The Minnesota Lakers, on the verge of establishing a dynasty with George Mikan, were not interested; Rochester didn't want to compete against its bigger neighbor in New York City; eventually the Commissioner found two wedge cities, Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. He was able to convince both that their futures lay with the BAA in the more prestigious bigger cities.

The NBL felt betrayed, but Fort Wayne's move forced other teams to jump ship. Shortly thereafter, both Minneapolis and Rochester joined the BAA. Immediately, the BAA became the premier league for players and fans alike, while the NBL now with teams in Syracuse, NY; Anderson, IN, Hammond, IN; Denver, Oshkosh, WI; Moline/Rock Island/Davenport; and Waterloo, IA, was effectively dead. While the BAA was the winner, it still took a few years for the financial viability of all the teams to stabilize. In 1949, the BAA merged into the NBA.

While the Pistons were on the vanguard of forming the NBA, the NBA was less interested in Fort Wayne. The BAA/NBA was originally conceived as a major league sports experience, which by definition occurred in major cities. While Fred Zollner had the resources to keep his team on stable footing, Fort Wayne was considered a backwater town. The classic travel story of the league's early days concerns teams traveling to Fort Wayne. After a game in, say, Rochester, a team would catch the westbound 20th *Century Limited* toward Chicago. The players would not

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even enjoy a full night's sleep but would have to get off at a nonscheduled stop in rural Indiana at 5am. As Knicks official Marty Glickman recalled:

The only thing there was an uncovered wooden platform. Traveling with the Knicks, I knew that our instructions were to walk on a two-lane blacktop road toward a blinking yellow light a half-mile away. That turned out to be the only light at a crossroads where there were ten or twelve buildings, nothing taller than two stories. Then we were to look for the plate glass window with the sign of the Green Parrot Café. Carl Braun was our designated shooter of the pebbles up to the second-floor window, because he had the softest touch. After two or three pebbles hit the window, a frowsy haired woman would look out and say "oh the Knicks". She'd get on the phone, and in a little while four or five cars would gather and drive us the forty miles into Fort Wayne. We'd go right to bed and get up for the game that day or night^{xii}.

Despite being playing in a small market, beginning in 1943, all games at North Side High School were sellouts and the Pistons had the highest percentage of attendance of any of the professional teams^{xiii} The players called North Side "the Pit" because the seats came right down to courtside. One visiting player recalled that "fans used to lean out and hit players on the head as the ran by"^{xiiii} By 1953, the Pistons had outgrown North Side's gymnasium and moved into the Fort Wayne Memorial Coliseum, which was built specifically with the team in mind. The idea for the project started in 1944 with an original cost of \$3 million which passed a county-wide referendum 25,705 to 7,720. Upon completion, the league took notice of the new venue and the \$18,000 paid by Fred Zollner to host the 1953 All-Star game. The game was played before a record crowd of 10,340. The game was also historic because Don Barksdale became the first African American to play in an NBA All-Star Game and it was the first nationally televised professional basketball game.

One of the most well-known games in Pistons history occurred on November 22, 1950, when the Pistons beat the Minneapolis Lakes 19-18. At the time, the Lakers were the most feared team in the league and were lead by the best player in the league, George Mikan. The Pistons game

plan was simple, if the Lakers never got the ball, they couldn't score. If they couldn't score, they couldn't win the game. When the Pistons had the ball, they did nothing but pass the ball back and forth. The fans, players, and referees became frustrated; the fans booed and stomped their feet in anger, the referees yelled at the Pistons to play ball; and the Lakers committed fouls simply to have the chance to get the ball back. At half-time, the score was 13-11 in favor of the Lakers with Mikan scoring 12 of their points. The second half was even worse. The Lakers despite being annoyed by the Piston's strategy, adopted it as their own. As the clock mercifully ticked to zero, the Pistons held a one point lead. A missed Lakers' shot at the buzzer gave the Pistons the win, the upset, and the dubious honor of winning the lowest scoring game in NBA history. After the game, Lakers coach John Kundla, said, "if that's basketball, I don't want any part of it." Within days the NBA instituted a technical foul for obvious stalling. Within four years, the league would officially adopt the 24 second shot clock.

The 1954-1955 season was paradoxically the high and low point of Piston basketball. That season, the 43-29 Pistons faced the 43-29 Syracuse Nationals in the finals. Although the game was a highlight for these two cities, the match-up wasn't as enthusiastically embraced by the rest of the league. Sportswriter Terry Pluto believes the league's split identity was exemplified by this series:

Yes, they were basketball's best, but that still didn't stop a lot of people – especially those powerful snobs in NYC from asking, "how can the NBA be a big league sport when Fort Wayne and Syracuse are in the Finals?" Of course, the answer was that they beat out the Knicks, but the truth hurt^{xliv}.

With the series tied the series 3-3, game seven found the Pistons up 17 points at the half. Unfortunately, the Pistons continued their six year losing streak in Syracuse and lost 92-91 after Syracuses' George King hit a free throw with 12 seconds left in the game. Even worse for the Pistons and the City of Fort Wayne was that the Pistons had to play all their home games in

Indianapolis because the American Bowling Congress had booked the Coliseum for 72 days to hold their national tournament.

The next year in 1955-1956, Fort Wayne was the strongest team in the Western Division, again. Fort Wayne's success was due to rookie Coach Eckman's innovative and soon universal "four big man" alignment in which 6'5" forward Mel Hutchins, played one of the guard positions with three regular front court men. Eckman's innovative lineup lead the Pistons to the finals, again. They got there by beating the St. Louis Hawks in game five 102-97. In doing so, the Pistons became the first NBA team to win the final three games of a five games series^{xlv}. Unfortunately, the Pistons lost in the finals to the Philadelphia Warriors four games to one. This loss was also notable because 34 years later Fred Zollner would be known as the longest-tenured owner to never win an NBA championship^{xlvi}.

Despite the successes from 1954-1956, on February 14, 1957 Fred Zollner announced that the Pistons were moving to Detroit. In the month leading up to the announcement there were rumors of a move, but many fans discounted the idea, suggesting that the story was being planted as an incentive to increase crowds in Fort Wayne for the remainder of the season.^{xlvii} Although the team would move to Detroit, in deference to the loyal fans who supported the team throughout the years, Zollner committed the team to playing seven regular season games in Fort Wayne.^{xlviii} While the move was disappointing to many in this community and despite Detroit's inability to support prior professional basketball teams, the move was a logical move for the team in the smallest market. A larger venue, in a larger city, closer to Zollner's customers would enable the Pistons to grow, recruit, maintain talent, increase television revenue, and the players would no longer have to endure the adventure of getting to Fort Wayne^{xlix}.

While the move made long term sense, in the short term the move didn't immediately excite Detroit's fan base. One sportswriter quoted a Detroiter as saying, "Piston games were known as a place where you could take your girl and sit upstairs for fifty-cents and neck in privacy."^{li} Some observers estimated that Zollner lost more than \$100,000 in the first season in Detroit, but was able to weather the losses because his principal business was so lucrative.^{li} Fred Zollner was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame on October 1, 1999 and the NBA Western Conference Championship trophy is named in his honor.

After the loss of the Pistons, it would be nearly 15 years before professional basketball would return to Fort Wayne. In 1974, Coliseum manager Phil Olofson and local businessman Jim Nolan organized the Fort Wayne Hoosiers. Olofson and Nolan were part of an effort to create a new league composed of teams from Indiana and Ohio, ironically named the International Basketball Association (IBA). The league sought to establish teams of players who were just barely unable to make it into the NBA or ABA, but who could offer exceptionally fine basketball.^{lii} The concept of the league being international perhaps came from the presence of two teams from Ohio.^{liii} Teams were located in Fort Wayne, South Bend, Hammond, Elkhart, Lafayette, Anderson, Dayton and Hamilton (OH). Despite heavy local promotion, local and league attendance was dismal^{liiv}. At the end of the season, the IBA folded and joined the long line of teams and leagues who preceded the NBL.

On November 9, 1991, professional basketball returned to Fort Wayne. The seeds for the for a team were planted a few years prior when Chicago PR firm KemperLesnick explored placing a Continental Basketball League franchise in Fort Wayne. Ultimately, the group took their money and concept to Sioux Fall, IA. Being upset about being passed over for Sioux Falls,

Mac Parker put together a local group of approximately ten (10) investor and secured a franchise from the Continental Basketball League, and the Fort Wayne Fury was born^{lv}.

Like the IBA, the CBA was a league for players who were just barely unable to play in the NBA. There was no NBA affiliation, which meant permanency for teams, players, and fans. The ownership group established a contest to name the team. Approximately twenty-two thousand people entered and 15 picked the name Fury. What made the CBA exciting was the 7-point scoring system. Unlike the NBA which ranks teams on their win/loss record, the CBA's ranking was based on a 7-point scoring system; 3 points for winning the game and one point for winning each quarter of the game^{lvi}.

The Fury was equal parts entrepreneurial endeavor and community development. The keys to the Fury's success were winning, local players, good half-time entertainment, and getting local business involved. With good local support and known players such as Damon Bailey, Eric Anderson, Scooter Barry, Jay Edwards, and coaches Rick Barry and Keith Smart the team won games and more importantly stayed solvent^{lvii}.

In 1999, NBA Hall of Famer, and former Indiana University stand-out Isiah Thomas bought the CBA for 10 million dollars. It is speculated that he bought the league with the intention of selling/merging it into a developmental league for the NBA. Unfortunately, this gamble did not pay off and in 2001 the league folded^{lviii}.

Isiah Thomas' idea for an NBA developmental league was either ahead of its time or the NBA didn't want to pay him for the concept. Regardless, shortly after the CBA folded the NBA established its own developmental league, the National Basketball Developmental League (NBDL), which then became the NBA D-League, and was recently rebranded as the NBA G-League, the G representing the NBA's strategic partnership with Gatorade. Tim Bawmann,

President of the Mad Ants, explained the partnership is specifically designed to allow Gatorade to test their products on the players, and develop specific drink formulas for the players to help them recover faster. Eventually, every player will have a specialized drink mixture, which will then filter up to the NBA and then down to the general public^{lix}.

In 2006 the D- League Fort Wayne Mad Ants; a play on Fort Wayne's namesake, General "Mad" Anthony Wayne, found a home in Fort Wayne. After twelve seasons in Fort Wayne, the Mad Ants are the second longest running professional basketball team in Fort Wayne and it's anticipated the Mad Ants will eclipse the 16 years the Pistons spent in Fort Wayne. Similarly, the Ants have proven they can compete, finishing higher than 3rd in the league three times and winning the league championship in 2013-2014. As of last Saturday, they were leading the Central Division by two and half games over the Grand Rapids Drive.

Although the Mad Ants were originally an independent team, in September of 2015 the team was purchased by the Indiana Pacers. The affiliation allows players a better possible route into the NBA. Despite its NBA affiliation the Mad Ants face many of the same issues faced by the early professional basketball teams. Issues such as recruitment, attendance, player retention, control in scheduling games, and travel^{lx}.

Like the 1954 Pistons who couldn't play at the Coliseum because of a bowling tournament; the Mad Ants won the right to host an Olympic qualifying double-header, but couldn't because the Komets had previously scheduled games which couldn't be rescheduled^{lxi}. Player retention is also a big issue. Although players are drafted, they can forgo the G League for playing in Europe, or more traditional careers outside of professional basketball. This means the Mad Ants have to compete against teams closer to bigger cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City. Part of the Mad Ants recruitment tools include offering really

good executive housing, a private practice facility (the only team in the league with this amenity), Fort Wayne's downtown development, and hopefully a downtown arena^{lxii}

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