



# WARTIME BASKETBALL

The Emergence of a National Sport during World War II

DOUGLAS STARK

**"I love this book. The narrative comes alive with the fascinating testimonies of those involved. Along the way, Douglas Stark traces the evolution of the game during those otherwise fearsome years. This is a must-have book for both the casual basketball fan as well as the devoted hoop-o-phile."—CHARLEY ROSEN, author of *Perfectly Awful: The Philadelphia 76ers' Horrendous and Hilarious 1972–1973 Season***

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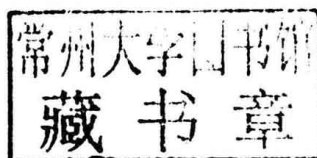
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## WARTIME BASKETBALL



*For Bennett and Alexis*

*Two big basketball fans*





*Rally to our nation's colors  
For the glory of our land  
To ensure our peace and freedom  
Hearken to our chief's command*

*Never shirk and never weary  
To defend our hearth and home  
We hold dear each hill and valley  
Lakes and oceans white with foam*

*Never will we knuckle under  
Any tyrant's bold demand  
We'll defend our country's honor  
Every inch of our land*

*Woe to him who courts the favor  
Of that small minority  
Who would sell us down the river  
Threaten our security*

*There are some, I know not wherefore  
They are men who would destroy  
Our democracy and freedom  
Which we cherish and enjoy*

*We must stand at once united  
Against this foe wherever he be  
Ensure our everlasting freedom  
For us and our posterity*

—JULIUS STARK, OCTOBER 1941



## PROLOGUE

While I was writing my first book, *The SPHAS: The Life and Times of Basketball's Greatest Jewish Team*, I devoted a chapter to basketball and war. The chapter focused on how World War II impacted basketball: leagues were forced to contract, players had to split their time between military service and basketball, and service basketball emerged on bases across the country. It was a short chapter, brief in its content, and only hinting at a larger story waiting to be told. It did not even mention the integration of professional basketball, which occurred during the war years. As I came to learn, nothing substantial had been written about this period of basketball history during World War II. It was largely undocumented.

In contrast, much has been written about baseball and football during World War II. Recent books have captured this period in baseball and football history, showing the sacrifices these sports made to support the war effort and how the war impacted those sports. Movie reels contain footage of baseball stars Hank Greenberg and Joe DiMaggio enlisting in the military. But basketball was a much different sport. Although a distinctly American game founded in 1891 in Springfield, Massachusetts, basketball was still regional on the eve of World War II, its popularity confined to certain parts of the country. Its coverage in newspapers was not nearly as comprehensive or extensive as those other sports. Sometimes away games for professional teams were not covered in the newspapers at all. Sometimes only a box score survived. In some instances, only a score made its way into the sports pages.

Basketball did not have the same advocates as baseball. President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote his famous “Green Light” letter saying baseball should be played during the war, but he did not advocate for basketball. Baseball writers Wendell Smith and Sam Lacy used their positions as influential African American writers to urge Major League Baseball to integrate, something the sport finally did in 1947 with Jackie Robinson. Basketball had no journalist—black or white—championing for the game’s integration. Basketball was on its own.

Yet World War II greatly impacted basketball. The style of play changed. It became more up-tempo, which increased scoring. It also acquired a more national character. In the 1930s with college basketball doubleheaders, teams from different parts of the country faced each other in highly anticipated match-ups in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, but military basketball forced players from different parts of the country to play *with* each other. As this happened, a more national game emerged, eliminating the regional differences in the game and creating a game everyone could recognize. Finally, professional basketball integrated five years before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball. Unlike baseball, basketball integrated with less fanfare and problems. It just happened. The success of basketball during World War II also led to the formation of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and the ensuing success of basketball in the post-World War II era.

Basketball today is a global sport, played in all countries by people of all abilities. Its success today can be traced to World War II and how the game changed for the better during that time. This is a story that deserves to be told alongside the chronicles of other professional sports.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

World War II is a period in our history that continues to fascinate us more than seventy-five years later. This has been particularly true regarding sports during the war years. For me, this interest in basketball's place in World War II developed while I was working on my first book, *The SPHAS: The Life and Times of Basketball's Greatest Jewish Team*. I became intrigued with the role that service basketball played and how many of the players and coaches in the postwar years had their start during the war. As I researched this book, I came to appreciate not only the sacrifices everyone made but also how the game was still developing and the impact these players had on the game's growth and development. Today's game is a direct descendent of the game during the war years. My research shed light on an important time in the game's history, one that is largely ignored. It was a wonderful journey of discovery.

This journey could not have been completed without the help of Bill Himmelman, one of the most generous people I have met, always willing to share his time and knowledge. As I came to learn, it is never too late to call Bill with a question. His knowledge of the game's early history and his research into the players and their playing statistics are unmatched and a tremendous resource for those researching basketball prior to the founding of the NBA. I owe him thanks for all his assistance and most importantly his patience.

Additional individuals were especially helpful. David Smith, former librarian at the New York Public Library, continued tracking down

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As always, family plays an important role—Mom, Dad, Jim, Sunday, Nick, and Rachel—deserve my heartfelt thanks for their continued support.

Although too young now to appreciate this book, Bennett and Alexis have certainly been in my thoughts during its creation. I hope they will grow up to love basketball and appreciate a good story.

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