

How did it all start? The origins of the ABA, from a person who was part of it.

Part I: The ***NEW YORK AMERICANS*** (which played in ***New Jersey***)

August 25, 2005

As the league approaches its 40th anniversary of its formation, I recently had the pleasure of meeting one of the few remaining, if not the only remaining living person, who was part of the beginnings of the American Basketball Association. What follows is part one of a series of interviews about the ABA with Mr. Dick Schramm, who was the Assistant Basketball Coach, to Head Coach & General Manager, Max Zaslofsky of the Americans/Nets franchise.

Many people do not know the origins of this formidable franchise, now a member of the National Basketball Association. What follows is first hand information on how it all started. From a man who was there from the very beginning..... Mr. Dick Schramm.

Marty: "So, Dick, where do we start?"

Dick: "Well....Forty years ago, in 1965, Max Zaslofsky, former NBA player with the Chicago Stags, Ft. Wayne Pistons, and New York Knickerbockers (and the first leading scorer in the NBA in 1946), was Promotional Director and recruiter for Arthur Brown, President and CEO of ABC Freight Forwarding in New York City.

As a very active Sportsman, Brown, who also owned a large stable of Harness Racing Horses and whose horse Perfect Freight was a World Champion in the 1960's, hired Max Zaslofsky to recruit athletes to work in the off-season as salesmen and promotional people for ABC Freight Forwarding Corporation, then one of the largest Trucking firms in America.

As Basketball was Max' key sport, he convinced Brown to sponsor an amateur basketball team of former College players. In early 1965 as Max began to hire ballplayers to fit into this team, he needed a place to play and also needed sponsorship on a national level. Since this team consisted of ONLY former college players, Zaslofsky approached me to help out. At that time, I was Chairman of the Metropolitan AAU Basketball Committee, in New York City. We decided to call the team the "ABC FREIGHTERS".

I developed a very close relationship with Max and together we formed this team and used the Downtown Athletic Club ("DAC"- Heisman Trophy sponsor) in lower Manhattan to play our games.

The team joined an alliance of an AAU National Industrial League that featured The Akron Wingfoots (Akron, Ohio), Phillips 66 (Bartlettville, Okla.), Cleveland Airmatic Valve (Cleveland, Ohio) and several other teams across the Country. The Wingfoots (sponsored by Goodyear Tire) and 66'ers had local TV. The Freighters were coached by Zaslofsky & me and later as Max' responsibilities became more involved at ABC; I coached the team for the last half of the season.

The Freighters team consisted of several well known college players like Bobby Duerr of St. Johns, Albie Grant of L.I.U., Dexter Westbrook of Providence and many others."

Marty: "Wow, great info about leagues long forgotten. In the eighties, I played pick up basketball with a guy who told me about playing in a league like that. Incidentally, he briefly played for the New Orleans franchise and had some funny stories about Doug Moe. So, how did this league relate to the ABA?"

Dick: "Frankly, the AAU league had nothing to do with the formation of the ABA, although, the ABA signed some of the ballplayers. As far as the ABA is concerned, and specifically the Americans, in early 1966 Max received a call from Brown who told him that he & I should come to his office for a meeting regarding a new basketball league.

At this meeting, Leon Rock (Brown's attorney) introduced Mr. Mark Binstein who gave a presentation about the high interest of forming a new Professional Basketball League to rival the NBA. In 1966, the NBA had only 10 teams with 10 players per team giving this major sport only 100 Professional basketball players in the United States. Drafts of College players were limited because there was no room on the team. Those that made it sat on the bench for long periods of time. After Binstein left the office Brown, Rock, Zaslofsky & Schramm had a meeting to discuss the feasibility of taking a part in this new concept. After discussion, it was decided that Rock, Zaslofsky, Binstein, and I would go to San Francisco for a meeting of interested parties. Upon return to New York, the team reviewed all aspects of the league, and Brown decided that we should go to Kansas City in 2 weeks at the next meeting and bring a check for the formation of the New York Franchise. The league was formed with its first Commissioner being George Mikan and Thurlo McGrady of AFL fame was Deputy Commissioner. Some of the other owners were well known; Gene Autry, Gary Davidson, & Senator Smithers of New Orleans, to name a few.

The league had many early meetings to prepare the Rules & Regulations of the league. Among other major differences to the NBA, the ABA had the Red, White & Blue Rawlings basketball, a 30 second clock, and a 3-point field goal."

Marty: "I guess this was to establish a difference or character to the league. It's easy to understand the ball and 3 pt goal, but why the 30 second clock?"

Dick: "The Coaches of the ABA decided that we wanted to show the fans more strategic plays. This would mean more defensive pressure and the offense needed more time to set up for a goal."

Marty: "What activities were you involved in as the league formed prior to that first season?"

Dick: "While the league was being formed, the individual franchises had much to do in the preparation of the season to start in the fall of 1967, getting players, contracts, arenas, T.V., promotions, and recognition through season ticket holders.

In looking for a place to play, The New York Americans decided to pursue the 69th Regiment Armory in Lower Manhattan, the former home of the New York Knicks (who were then at the old Madison Square Garden for several years). In principal, the Americans had a deal with the Armory and when it was announced that this agreement has been worked out, the roof fell in for the Americans. 3 months before the season was to begin, pressure by the New York Knicks to the powers at the Armory, caused the Armory officials to renege on its, as yet, unsigned agreement and forced the Americans to scramble to find another arena to play in."

Marty: "So that qualifies for the first opening shot of the NBA-ABA war?"

Dick: "Finally, as time was running out, the Americans negotiated an agreement with the Teaneck, New Jersey Armory to play the first season in New Jersey. Because the Armory was within the franchises boundary lines, the team was called "the New Jersey Americans", while the franchise documentation remained as the "New York Americans".

Marty: "So it really was going to be the New York Americans? And really always, from an official standpoint, still the New York Americans throughout that first year. But everyone called them New Jersey Americans."

Dick: "Yes, a little known fact. Zaslofsky & I worked hard to pursue & sign players for the first season in Teaneck. The entire Americans Staff put in

plenty of overtime to get ready for the opening of a new league and season.”

Marty: “What was it like prior to that first season? Did the public show interest? What about the players? Excitement, skepticism, nonchalant...?”

Dick: “Yes, there was quite a bit of excitement... everyone knew we needed another league... the timing was right. The “ink” was somewhat skeptical as they were being fed a lot of rhetoric from the NBA. After all, we were the competition and the NBA did not like competition, other leagues (NFL/AFL) thrived on it. Eventually the public caught on real well, and so did the NBA....hence a merger in 1976.”

Next: That first ABA season.



A September 15, 1968 Long Island Press news clipping on Dick Schramm