

Big-League Basketball Comes to Omaha: A History of the “Omahawks”

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Article Summary: In the fall of 1947, America briefly had three major professional basketball leagues. The newest of these, the Professional Basketball League of America, included a franchise in Omaha. With five home-grown players, the story of the Omahawks is the story of the limits and possibilities for Nebraskans chasing pro dreams in the postwar years.

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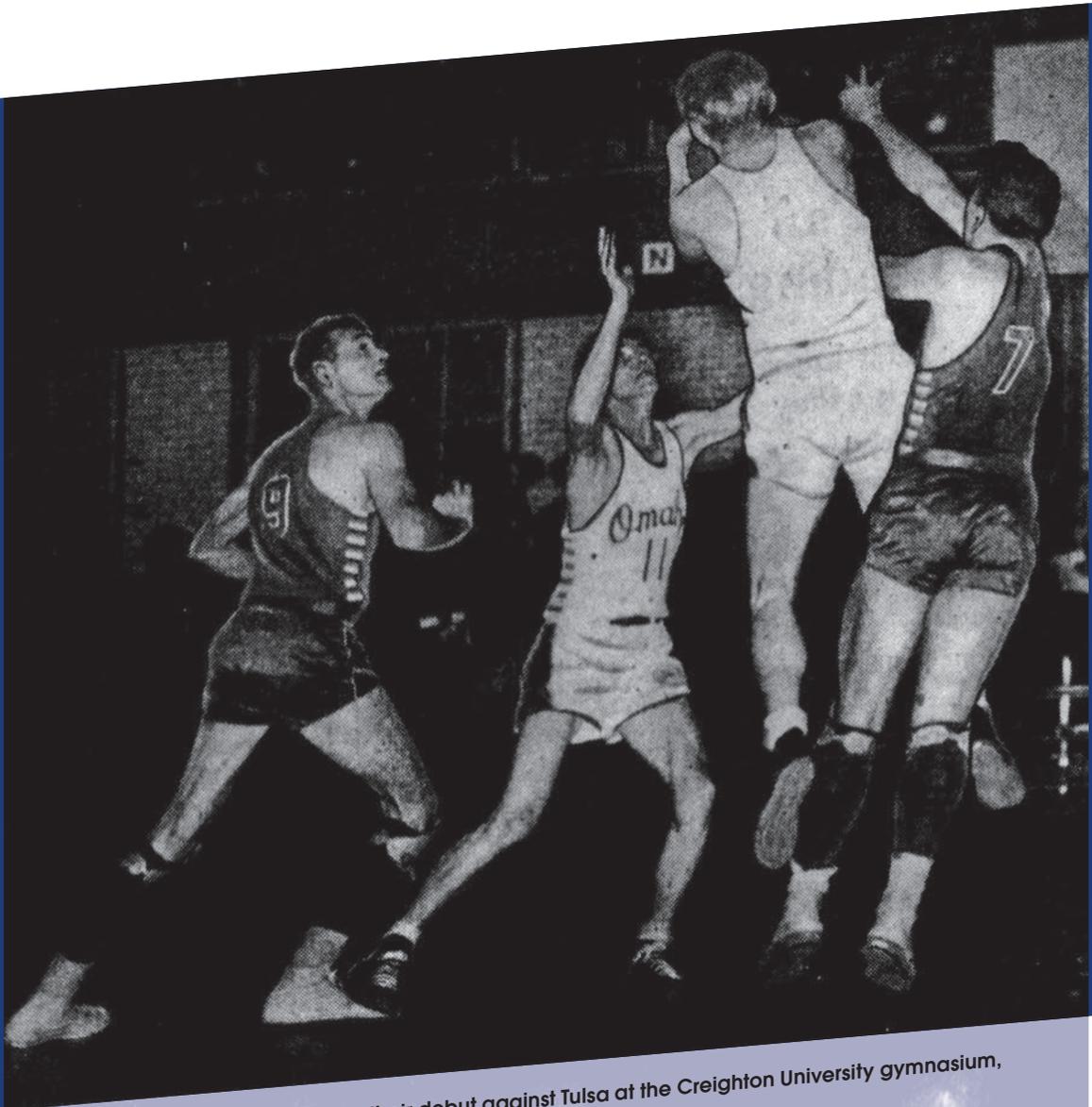
Names: George Mikan, Rex Barney, Ralph Langer, Clyde Ehlers, Jim Kaeding, Wayne Kaeding, Fred Gran, Dick Dermody, Bob Webster, Bob Butherus, Len Shepherd, Bobby McDermott

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Photographs / Images: Omahawks making their debut against Tulsa at the Creighton University gymnasium, losing 46-41 (2 images); Rex Barney; inset article from the *Omaha World-Herald*, October 27, 1947: “Ralph Langer to Lead Pros”; “Omaha Pros Set for Debut” (*Omaha World-Herald*, October 28, 1947); Wayne and Jim Kaedling at home with their parents; “Omaha Pros Bow in Debut” (*Omaha World-Herald*, October 29, 1947); George Mikan signing autographs at a basketball clinic for high school players; “Omahawks Fall, 74-54, to Chicago” (*Omaha World-Herald*, November 4, 1947); photo from the Omahawks’ losing match, November 4, 1947; “Omahawks Post First Win, 63-61” (*Omaha World-Herald*, November 11, 1947); ad for an Omaha-Waterloo game (*Omaha World-Herald*, November 12, 1947)



The Omahawks (above) make their debut against Tulsa at the Creighton University gymnasium, losing 46-41. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 29, 1947.



BIG-LEAGUE BASKETBALL COMES TO OMAHA: A HISTORY OF THE OMAHAWKS

BY PAUL EMORY PUTZ

From 1972 until 1975 the Kansas City-Omaha Kings, a member of the National Basketball Association (NBA), played a handful of home games in Omaha's Civic Auditorium. That three-year span was a rare moment in Nebraska history, a brief time when the Cornhusker State could claim a big league team of its own.¹

The Kings' short stay in Omaha is well known to many Nebraska sports fans, particularly those with an interest in history. Less well known is the story of Omaha's first major professional basketball team. That team, nicknamed the Omahawks, predated the Kings by twenty-five years, playing in the ill-fated Professional Basketball League of America (PBLA) for three weeks in the fall of 1947. Although the existence of that team and

its league was incredibly brief, its story is worth remembering as one of the unique episodes in Nebraska sports history, a history in which basketball is often overlooked.² And with a roster that featured five home-grown players—four of whom spent time in the nation's service during World War II—the story of the Omahawks is the story of the limits and possibilities for Nebraskans chasing pro dreams in the postwar years.³

Professional Basketball in the 1940s

To understand the three-week existence of the PBLA in 1947, one must first understand the 1940s professional basketball scene. At the time, the two major professional leagues were the National Basketball League (NBL) and the Basketball Association of America (BAA). The NBL began play in 1937 and had most of the talent. Historian Murry Nelson estimates that 90 percent of the top professional players competed in the NBL in 1947.⁴ But the league had a weakness. Most of its teams were from smaller cities in the Midwest and upstate New York: Sheboygan and Oshkosh (Wisconsin), Fort Wayne, Anderson, and Indianapolis (Indiana), Youngstown and Toledo (Ohio), and Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester (New York). The NBL's Chicago Gears were the primary exception to the league's mid-sized city makeup. Led by George Mikan and Bobby McDermott, the Gears won the 1946-47 title and were favorites to repeat in 1947-48.⁵

The BAA, on the other hand, was an upstart league. Hockey owners associated with the

National Hockey League founded it in 1946 in order to keep their large arenas occupied when hockey was out of town. Low on talent compared to the NBL, the BAA nevertheless had the advantage of playing in big-city markets. It featured teams in Boston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, among others.⁶ After the 1948-49 season, the NBL and BAA ended their three-year battle for basketball supremacy and merged to form the league that all basketball fans know today: the NBA.⁷

In 1947, however, the formation of the NBA was not inevitable. Professional basketball faced an uncertain future: its two major leagues battled over limited resources in an American sporting scene dominated by professional baseball and college football, and the fans who did enjoy basketball patronized the college game more than the professional version. To top it off, in 1947, teams associated with the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) provided a viable option for the top college players after their college eligibility ended. The AAU circuit, which culminated in an annual national tournament, featured many company teams. These teams would hire top players for a regular 9-to-5 job—depending on the company, the jobs might involve factory work, sales, clerking, or other tasks—with the idea that players would also spend evenings practicing and playing basketball for a company-sponsored squad. In the 1940s the 66ers/Oilers, sponsored by Phillips Petroleum, dominated the AAU with a star-studded roster. The 1947-48 Phillips team, for example, featured Hall-of-Famer Bob Kurland, a six-foot-ten center from Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State) who out-dueled George Mikan in college. In an era of meager professional basketball salaries, the AAU offered players two major enticements: the chance to secure long-term post-basketball employment, and the chance to retain amateur eligibility, which would allow players to compete in the Olympics.⁸

To sum up the 1947 situation, then, there were two major professional basketball leagues: the NBL and the BAA. But those leagues were not national in scope and they did not necessarily attract all the elite college players. Some of the top college stars competed instead for AAU teams, diluting the professional talent pool. The issue of racial segregation came into play as well. While both the AAU and the NBL allowed a few black players to join their leagues in the 1940s, many of the top black players competed for traveling teams like the Harlem Globetrotters or New York Renaissance. The talent of the best all-black teams was every

Seventeen-year-old Rex Barney in 1942. A standout basketball and baseball player for Creighton Prep, Barney began pitching for the Brooklyn Dodgers just months out of high school. In 1947 he joined the Omahawks to make some money, stay in shape in the offseason, and “play for the home folks.” Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.



bit on par with that of the best white teams, a fact expressed most emphatically in 1948 when the Harlem Globetrotters defeated the champions of the NBL, the Minneapolis Lakers.⁹

Given the state of the basketball scene in 1947, the addition of a third major professional league seems ill-conceived. And yet the PBLA emerged anyway. Deemed by one historian as “one of the worst good ideas in sports history,” the league was the brainchild of Maurice White, owner of the Chicago Gears.¹⁰ As mentioned above, the Gears had won the NBL title in 1946-47. Along with the Harlem Globetrotters and the Phillips 66ers/Oilers, they were likely one of the three best basketball teams in the country. But when NBL owners rebuffed White’s efforts to assert more authority over the league in 1947, White decided to set up his own operation. He took his Gears out of the NBL and made them the centerpiece of the new sixteen-team PBLA. White sought to instill order in his new league by creating a sixty-game schedule and signing most players to two-year contracts. He also attempted to expand the geographic scope of professional basketball by focusing on the areas west of the Mississippi River and south of the Ohio River. Omaha was part of this westward strategy.¹¹

Building the Omahawks Roster

Omaha’s PBLA franchise belonged to the league’s Northern Division, along with St. Joseph, Kansas City, St. Paul, Chicago, and Waterloo, Iowa.¹² The PBLA office tabbed Frank Hagan, Creighton University athletic director, as the business manager for Omaha’s team. Len Shepherd, who had played semi-professional basketball in regional leagues around the Midwest in the 1920s, came on as coach.¹³ As for the name of the team—the “Omahawks”—it was chosen during a naming contest conducted with the aid of the *Omaha World-Herald*. The newspaper reported that Mrs. A. B. Richie Jr., of Auburn, Nebraska, supplied the winning entry.¹⁴

The “Omahawks” moniker had a bit of a history before its attachment to Omaha’s PBLA franchise. Around 1875 a British emigration promoter named Edwin A. Curley came to Nebraska to investigate conditions in the state and report back to his home country. His report, published in 1875, included several observations about life in Omaha. “Of the people of Omaha, those of the sterner sex have received the appellation of ‘Omahawks’ and ‘Omahogs’ from their playful neighbors, and that of ‘Omahosses’ from too-familiar friends,” Curley reported, “while the dear ladies are ‘Omahens’

or ‘Omahussies’ according to one’s point of view.”¹⁵ Curley’s remarks about Omaha were revived when the *World-Herald* mentioned them in the 1930s.¹⁶ In 1939 the name “Omahawks” was suggested (unsuccessfully) as the name for a minor-league hockey team.¹⁷ Thus, while it is impossible to say if the 1870s use of “Omahawks” had any bearing on Mrs. Richie’s submission in 1947, it is clear that it had been in circulation in Omaha circles for some time.

By conducting a contest to select the team’s name, the Omahawks’ managers sought to establish an early connection between the team and local fans. Even more important than the name was the Omahawks’ attempt to build local support by signing homegrown basketball talent. The team’s roster featured no fewer than five Nebraska-born players: Rex Barney, Ralph Langer, Clyde Ehlers, and brothers Jim and Wayne Kaeding.

The six-foot-three Rex Barney had been a standout basketball and baseball player for Creighton Prep in the early 1940s. Named All-State in basketball after the 1943 season, he received scholarship offers to play collegiately at Nebraska, Notre Dame, and Stanford. Instead, at eighteen he signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers and pitched for a few months with the big league team. He quickly earned a reputation for throwing hard and wild—some even claimed he outthrew famed fireballer Bob Feller of the Cleveland Indians. Barney entered the Army in the fall of 1943 and departed for Europe, rejoining the Dodgers after the war. With his signing the Omahawks had a local celebrity and standout athlete who could potentially develop into a decent basketball player.¹⁸ For his part, Barney listed three reasons for signing with the team: money, the chance to stay in shape during baseball’s off-season, and the opportunity to “play for the home folks.”¹⁹

Ralph Langer, a six-foot-two forward nicknamed “Swede,” hailed from western Nebraska. Named to two All-State teams as a high-schooler from Ainsworth, he graduated in 1939 and moved on



Ralph Langer . . . “knows the score.”—*World-Herald* Photo.

**Ralph Langer
to Lead Pros**
**Ex-Bluejay Star Named
Quintet’s Captain**

Omaha World-Herald,
October 27, 1947.



Omaha World-Herald,
October 28, 1947.

to play college basketball for the Creighton Bluejays. Described as an “unorthodox sharpshooter,” Langer teamed up with six-foot-six center Ed Beisser to lead the Bluejays to back-to-back trips to the National Invitational Tournament in 1942 and 1943, earning All-American honors from the Newspaper Enterprise Association in 1943.²⁰ A 1942 article in the *Omaha World-Herald* offers a brief description of Langer’s game. “Omaha fans have grown accustomed to the wild man, for that describes him perfectly,” the article noted. “[Langer] seems in a dozen places at once as he buzzes in and out of opponents’ defenses in ghostlike flickerings. Hair flying, knees high, the Langer boy appears cannon-propelled when he shoots.” The article went on to note that Langer’s speed set him apart; most forwards could not keep up with “Ramblin Ralph.”²¹

Called to the nation’s service after the 1943 season, Langer returned to basketball after the war. He signed with the Denver AAU squad, one of the league’s best, in 1946-47 before casting his lot with the Omahawks in the fall of 1947.²² Named team captain, Langer clearly served as the face of the Omahawks franchise and was the team’s most credentialed basketball star.

Although not as ballyhooed within Omaha as Barney and Langer, the sibling duo of Jim and Wayne Kaeding had perhaps more name recognition among basketball fans elsewhere in the state. Jim first put the Kaeding brothers on the map as a high schooler for Benedict (population 221 in 1940) in York County. He competed in

the 1940 state basketball tournament, earning an honorable mention slot on the All-Tournament team.²³ Beginning in the fall of 1940, the Kaeding brothers attended York College until 1943, when wartime duty called them into service. Their dynamic offensive play at York turned heads and earned them first-team All-Conference honors in the Nebraska College Athletic Conference.

Although Wayne was two years older and a bit taller, the brothers’ scoring prowess was markedly similar. One newspaper account in 1943 tried to differentiate the two by explaining that “Wayne is a dead shot from all angles” while Jim “has uncanny ability to penetrate a tight defense for close shots.”²⁴

The Kaeding brothers dominated the Nebraska conference, but one of their most impressive moments came after conference play in 1943 when York participated in a college tournament in Kansas City. In the first game Jim scored twenty-eight points and led York to an upset victory over Akron University. Syndicated newspaper reports of the game gushed: “Jim Kaeding’s performance was amazing . . . The slender willowy blonde made every conceivable type of shot.”²⁵ The next game was against North Texas. Although York lost on a last-second desperation heave, Wayne nearly matched his brother’s total by tallying twenty-seven points.²⁶

The war delayed the brothers’ senior seasons until 1946-47 but it did not diminish their basketball skills, particularly for Jim. He went on a tear upon his return to York, averaging more than twenty points, setting a new single-season conference scoring record, and finally outscoring his brother in a season. Newspaper reports that year described him as a “slippery forward” with a reliable one-handed push shot.²⁷ Apparently Jim’s scoring spree caught the eye of basketball executives in the East, because the Philadelphia Warriors drafted him in the 1947 BAA draft (he never signed with the team).²⁸

Near the end of York’s 1946-47 season, the *World-Herald* published a feature article commemorating the Kaeding brothers’ careers. It described their upbringing on a farm near York and the love of sports instilled in them by their father (who had installed a basketball hoop on the family’s barn), and their five older brothers. The home-built hoop and the large family proved instrumental in helping the Kaeding brothers hone their ability. “Our brothers were tall,” Jim explained, “so Wayne and I had to develop a one-hand shot to arch the ball over them and into the hoop.” The article, published seven months before the creation of the PBLA, did not mention the possibility of professional basketball. It did, however, note that Jim and Wayne intended to remain within the world of athletics. The brothers planned to move into the high school coaching ranks after their York careers.²⁹

The fifth and final Nebraskan on the Omahawks squad was six-foot-five center Clyde



The Kaeding brothers, Wayne (left) and Jim (standing) at home with their parents, Johanna and William, at the family farm near Benedict in York County. The photo illustrated an article about the Kaedings, "Brothers of the Hoop," that appeared in the *Omaha Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, February 9, 1947. Wayne had just married two weeks earlier and Jim "was scheduled for trip to the altar Saturday." The brothers earned all-conference honors at York College before and after serving in World War II. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.

Ehlers, also a farm boy from the York area. Unlike the Kaedings or Langer, Ehlers had no college playing experience. He established his basketball reputation as a high schooler for Thayer (population 135), leading the team to back-to-back Class C state titles in 1940 and 1941. Newspaper reports from 1941 were especially laudatory, describing him as "Big Clyde Ehlers," who "shoots equally well with either hand" and seemed to be "all over the floor."³⁰ After Thayer brought home the title in 1941, one reporter declared that Ehlers was "the boy the college coaches were casting second glances at."³¹

Ehlers was only a junior in 1941 when he earned first-team All-State honors. But his senior season at Thayer proved to be a disappointment. Unable to play in a key district game due to illness, Ehlers watched Thayer lose without earning a chance to defend its state title.³² He moved on to the University of Nebraska, but dropped out and returned home before the end of his freshman year.³³ Although he did not play college basketball, Ehlers excelled for various semi-pro teams in Nebraska during and after the war, including the Lincoln Nut House AAU squad (its name derived from a wholesaler of walnuts, pecans, and other nuts).³⁴

A few out-of-state players joined the five Nebraskans on the Omahawks roster. Fred Gran, a lanky six-foot-six center, deserves special mention because he became a key player. Although mostly unknown in Nebraska, Gran was widely known to basketball fans in North Dakota. He had starred for Minot High School in 1936 and 1937, earning All-State honors.³⁵ Later he enrolled at the University of North Dakota, where he played briefly for the Sioux. Apparently not much of a student, Gran had to sit out the first semester of the 1940-41 season because of problems with his grades.³⁶ Gran's basketball skills were unquestioned, however. Noted for his "hook-shot wizardry," Gran earned second-team All-Conference honors in 1940-41 despite missing half the season.³⁷ He ended up joining the Air Force in 1942, returning to Bismarck after the war, where he played for an independent semi-professional team.³⁸

Other non-Nebraskans on the Omahawks roster included Dick Dermody, Bob Webster, and Bob Butherus. Butherus, a six-foot-two guard/forward described as an "aggressive defender and rebounder," had no college experience but had played for the Kansas City M&O Smokies in the AAU circuit. Webster, a six-foot guard with a decent

**Omaha Pros
Bow in Debut**
Tulsa Bags 46-41 Win
Over Omahawks

Omaha World-Herald,
October 29, 1947.

scoring touch, came to Omaha from the University of Southern California, where he had played both baseball and basketball. The six-foot-two Dermody played football and basketball for the University of Arizona before joining the Air Force in 1944.³⁹

The Six-Game Season

Although the Omahawks roster featured a couple of potential standouts, expectations were low for the start of the year. Ralph Langer and Jim Kaeding could be counted on to carry the scoring load, but beyond that it was unclear who would provide the offensive punch. Wayne Kaeding might have helped, but first he had to get out of his high school coaching duties in North Platte. That didn't occur until after the season began, so Wayne didn't start with the team until the second game. Meanwhile, the Omahawks lacked height and professional experience—most teams, unlike Omaha, had at least a player or two who had played for the NBL or BAA. Compounding the lack of experience, the team only had a few complete practice sessions before the season began. Recognizing these obstacles, head coach Len Shepherd informed reporters to expect rough going early in the season.⁴⁰ His assessment proved correct as the Omahawks dropped their first four games by an average of twelve points. After the first game, a 46-41 loss to Tulsa before a crowd of 600 people, an *Omaha World-Herald* reporter concluded that Ralph Langer's old Creighton Bluejays teams were a class above the professional Omahawks squad.⁴¹

Coach Shepherd attributed the opening loss to a lack of conditioning, and he vowed to work his players hard to prepare them for the second game.⁴² With the NBL-champion Chicago Gears coming to town, the Omahawks would need all the improvement they could muster. Led by future basketball Hall of Famers George Mikan and Bobby McDermott, the Gears were easily the best team in the PBLA. The six-foot-ten Mikan was an unstoppable force inside. His career just beginning in 1947, Mikan would go on to become professional basketball's first nationally-known superstar, winning championships in the NBL, the BAA, and the NBA. The five-foot-eleven McDermott, on the other hand, belonged to the era before Mikan. Known for his fierce competitiveness and his unstoppable two-handed set shot—a shot that he launched from as far away as forty-five feet—McDermott won four NBL MVPs in the 1940s and in 1946 was voted the NBL's Greatest Player of All Time.⁴³ But McDermott's peak years came in

the 1930s and 1940s, and he never played in the NBA. With the lack of national attention given to professional basketball in the pre-NBA years, and without the college basketball pedigree of Mikan, McDermott never became a household name.

As the Omahawks prepared for their matchup against the Gears, their coach pulled no punches regarding his team's chances. "They are the best in the country," Shepherd said of the Gears. The only chance the Omahawks had, he thought, was if Ralph Langer and Jim Kaeding could hit a few shots early, allowing the team to slow down the pace. Shepherd also hoped that his team could benefit from the fact that the Gears "will not be taking us too seriously."⁴⁴ Shepherd did not mention another possible Omahawks advantage: the Gears would be playing their fourth game in four nights, while Omaha would be operating on a five-day rest.

An estimated crowd of 1,000, the largest of the season, turned out to the Creighton gym to see the Gears defeat the Omahawks, 74-54. The Omahawks' offense sputtered, with only Langer (ten points) and reserve guard Bob Webster (fourteen points) reaching double figures. Mikan dominated under the basket, using his height advantage over Fred Gran to drop in twenty-six points. According to newspaper reports, McDermott "furnished the long-range fireworks" by making six baskets "from well outside the foul line."⁴⁵ At best, the Omahawks could take solace in the fact that they kept the game within single digits for thirty-four minutes, trailing only 53-44 until the Gears pulled away. So, too, their physical play caught the attention of Mikan. Decades later he remembered having "a particularly rough time of it" during the game, with one of the Gears players being sent to the hospital after a hard foul.⁴⁶ As for the small group of fans in attendance, they could at least say that they saw the great George Mikan in action.

Over the next two games the Omahawks continued to struggle, dropping matchups with St. Paul (52-39) and Louisville (60-48). For the most part the players' performance in the first four games followed the preseason expectations. Langer and Jim Kaeding stood out as the team's best players, the former tallying double digits in all four games and the latter receiving praise for his hustle.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, only two other Omahawks managed to reach ten points: Webster with his fourteen against the Gears and Gran with fourteen in the fourth game, against Louisville.⁴⁸ Gran was perhaps the brightest ray of hope on the team. He joined the Omahawks without much acclaim,



but by the second game Shepherd had begun to comment on his improvement and potential.⁴⁹

After dropping their matchup against Louisville, the Omahawks traveled to Waterloo, Iowa, for a November 10 game against the Pro-Hawks. Waterloo was not one of the PBLA's best teams but had legitimate pro talent in Price Brookfield, who had played in the NBL, and Noble Jorgensen, who would go on to play four seasons in the NBA. Despite playing their second straight game on the road, the winless Omahawks showed signs of life. Gran followed up his fourteen-point game three nights prior with a twenty-point outburst, Jim Kaeding chipped in thirteen, and the Omahawks notched a 63-61 victory.⁵⁰ There was no time to celebrate, however, as the next night Omaha hosted the Grand Rapids Rangers.

The Rangers had three players with pro experience, most notably the six-foot-six George

Ratkovicz, who would go on to have a six-year NBA career.⁵¹ Weary from their victory the night before, the Omahawks still managed to match Ratkovicz and the Rangers shot-for-shot in front of 500 spectators. A *World-Herald* reporter described the tense matchup as "often brilliant and often mediocre" but "never dull." Fights nearly broke out near the end of the game and after the final horn sounded. The end-game heroics belonged to Omaha's own Rex Barney. With fifteen seconds remaining and the game tied 52-52, the Rangers fouled Barney. Scoreless up to that point, Barney toed the line and sank the free throw, providing Omaha with its winning margin. The next day the *World-Herald* could not resist a baseball-themed lede when describing the victory: "Rex Barney threw a curve through the strike zone in the last 15 seconds at Creighton Tuesday night."⁵²

Barney's game-winner was made possible

George Mikan was a recently-retired star player for the NBA's Minneapolis Lakers when he signed autographs for Gibbon, Nebraska, high school team during a basketball clinic in Omaha on December 28, 1955. Eight years earlier, Mikan's Chicago Gears had been the team to beat in the short-lived Professional Basketball League of America. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.

**Omahawks
Fall, 74-54,
to Chicago**

**Omaha Pros Hold
Own Until Gran
Ousted on Fouls**

Pro Cage Results

| | | |
|------------------|----------------------|--|
| Chicago Gears 74 | Omaha 54 | |
| New Orleans 58 | Waterloo 53 | |
| St. Paul 57 | Springfield 42 | |
| St. Joseph 42 | Kansas City 34 | |

by the trio of Fred Gran (seventeen points), Jim Kaeding (ten points), and Ralph Langer (eleven points). Along with his team-high scoring, Gran received praise from a *World-Herald* reporter for his “outstanding defensive ball.”⁵³ A reporter from the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* came away impressed as well. He commented that Langer and Gran operated as a “potent front line” despite their lack of height. He also wrote that “it looked like a different Omaha team than the inept ball handling that took the court at the beginning of the season.”⁵⁴ The Omaha team did indeed seem to be improving. Kaeding and Langer continued to provide quality play, and the Omahawks now had a third star in Gran, the team’s leading scorer for three straight games.

The PBLA Implodes

Gran’s emergence, the two-game winning streak, Barney’s heroics—all was for naught two days later when the PBLA suddenly announced that it would fold.⁵⁵ With teams playing in front of sparse crowds, the league hemorrhaged money, losing \$600,000 (equivalent to around \$6.4 million today) in the span of three weeks. Maurice White’s attempt to turn the PBLA into the premiere professional game failed spectacularly and had far-reaching implications. Immediately the NBL and BAA began to pick off the top players from the disbanded league, George Mikan

being the most important prize. When Mikan signed with the NBL’s Minneapolis Lakers, he set that franchise on a path of professional basketball success rivaled only by the Boston Celtics. He also altered the power dynamics between the NBL and BAA. As mentioned above, the NBL had far greater talent than the BAA in 1947. But the Minneapolis Lakers’ owner pined for the big-city arenas of the BAA. After signing Mikan and winning the NBL title in 1947-48, Minneapolis and three other stalwart NBL teams—the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons, Rochester Royals, and Indianapolis Kautskys—jumped ship to the BAA. Their departure shifted the balance of power in favor of the BAA, setting the stage for the NBL’s merger with the BAA before the 1949-50 season.⁵⁶

While the PBLA debacle altered the landscape of professional basketball, it also disrupted the lives of Omaha’s players. Although they knew that the league and the Omaha team were taking on debt, players were stunned at the suddenness of the league’s demise. Many had signed two-year contracts and left respectable employment to pursue their pro dreams. They assumed that the league’s financial backers could withstand early financial losses as the PBLA tried to build a support base. A *World-Herald* reporter noted that the Omahawks players left a meeting with Len Shepherd shaking their heads in disbelief. “About the only thing left for us to do is go home,” Ralph Langer commented. “What few pro jobs there are open probably will be filled by ‘name’ players from the other teams.”⁵⁷

As Omaha’s best and most consistent player, Langer may well have had a shot to carve out a career on an NBL or BAA roster. But his PBLA experience did not incline him towards casting his lot with the pro game. With no chance to play professionally unless he moved east, Langer instead put down roots in Omaha and raised a family. His son Mark inherited his basketball skills, earning All-State honors in 1969 while playing for Creighton Prep.⁵⁸

The rest of the Omahawks players landed on their feet as well. Clyde Ehlers, who played in every game but had a limited impact in his reserve role, moved back to a farm in the York area. The Kaeding brothers, who had given up high school coaching jobs to play for the Omahawks, successfully found work once again in the coaching ranks. Wayne managed to get back his old job at North Platte. Later, he moved to Beatrice, where he coached high school and junior high sports for a few decades. He also

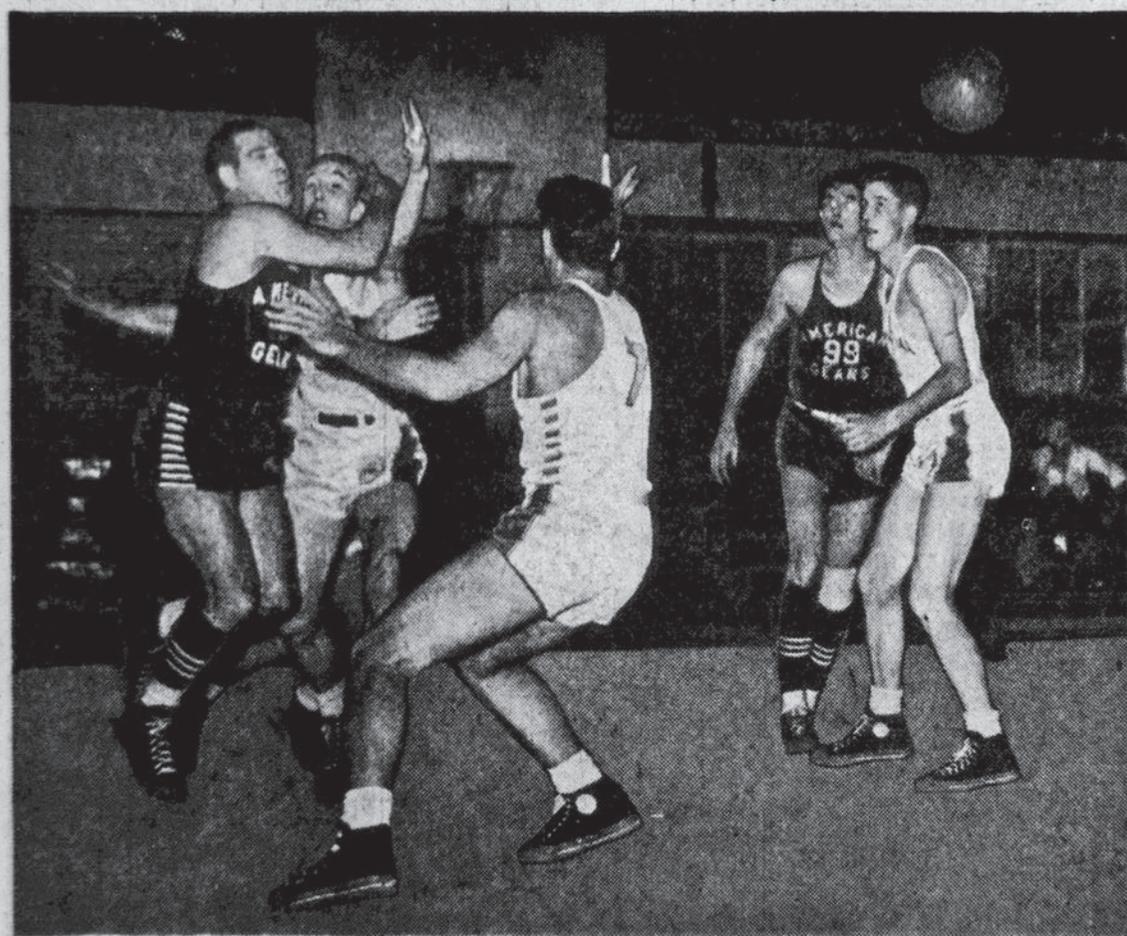
earned a reputation in the 1950s as a standout baseball player in Nebraska's semipro circuit.⁵⁹ As for Jim, he became a coach in Sutton, Nebraska, before moving on to Muscatine, Iowa, in the 1950s. Like Langer, he passed on his athletic genes: his grandson, Nate Kaeding, was a three-sport star in high school who went on to kick for the University of Iowa football team and for nine years in the NFL.⁶⁰

Rex Barney, already the most famous of the Omahawks bunch, had the least to lose from the PBLA debacle. In 1948 he was back pitching with the Brooklyn Dodgers, posting career highs in wins (15), strikeouts (138), and earned run average (3.10). His career went downhill, however, when he broke his ankle on the last day of the 1948 season, an injury that came soon after pitching a no-hitter against the New York Giants. He never recovered the form that briefly made him one of the National League's top pitchers, and by 1950 he was out of major league baseball. Barney did not give up on

baseball, though. He tested out the waters of sports broadcasting in Omaha in the 1950s and found that he liked it. From there he moved east, eventually landing in Baltimore where he hosted a sports-talk radio show and served for three decades as the Baltimore Orioles public address announcer.⁶¹

The non-Nebraska players moved on as well, all of them leaving the state. In terms of pro potential, Fred Gran probably had the most to lament. If the PBLA had succeeded, or if it had lasted long enough for Gran to make a name for himself, he may have been able to forge a brief professional career. Instead, already nearing thirty, he went home to North Dakota, where he played semiprofessional ball into the 1950s.⁶² In 1949 a sportswriter who had covered Gran's high school and college career in North Dakota reminisced about Gran's basketball exploits. "I have yet to see a pro ball player of his size that could match the great Fred Gran when he wanted to play basketball," he noted, "and that includes the

Paul Emory Putz received an MA in history from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and is a PhD candidate in the department of history at Baylor University. His article "From the Pulpit to the Press: Frank Crane's Omaha, 1892-1896," appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of Nebraska History.



Chicago's Bobby McDermott moves in, slaps the ball away from Ralph Langer and Dick Dermody (7) . . . Fred Gran hovers in the background with George Mikan (99).—World-Herald Photo.

Omaha World-Herald, November 4, 1947.

**Omahawks
Post First
Win, 63-61**

**Waterloo's 2d-Half
Rally Fails; Gran
Scores 20 Points**

Pro Games Tonight

Grand Rapids atOmaha
Chattanooga atAtlanta
Tulsa atNew Orleans

Monday's Results

Omaha 63 Waterloo 61
Grand Rapids 63 Kansas City 58
Oklahoma City 41 Tulsa 38
Chicago 75 Springfield 61
St. Paul 76 St. Joseph 57

Omaha World-Herald,
November 11, 1947.

spectacular Junior [Walt] Kirk...now playing pro with the Indianapolis Jets.”⁶³ Over the span of six games for the Omahawks, Gran’s play seemed to back up such a claim. He ended his brief foray in the professional ranks as the Omahawks’ leader in field goals made and second to Ralph Langer in points per game.⁶⁴

Remembering the Omahawks

As for the Omahawks’ legacy within Omaha, their three-week existence did not entirely disappear from the city’s collective memory. While sparse attendance at games shows that the team did not take Omaha by storm in 1947, the Omahawks did receive consistent coverage in Omaha’s leading newspaper, with numerous stories, interviews, and pictures of game action dotting the sports pages of the *World-Herald* in late October and early November. Over the next few decades Omaha sportswriters did their part to keep the memory alive, bringing up the 1947 experiment whenever professional basketball news made it relevant. For example, in 1967 George Mikan became commissioner of the American Basketball Association (ABA), an upstart rival to the NBA. *World-Herald* sports columnist Wally Provost could not help but think back to the PBLA days, writing that the ABA seemed to possess the “bravado which accompanied organization of the Professional Basket Ball League of America 20 years ago.” Provost then launched into a brief history of the Omahawks, citing Langer and “ex-state college headliners Wayne and Jim Kaeding” as the top players on the team. The PBLA “looked terrific on paper,” Provost recalled, but “the entire PBLA scheme was ill advised” because of the glutted basketball market.⁶⁵

In 1972, when the Kansas City-Omaha Kings came to town, the Omahawks emerged as a conversation piece again. Some Omahans even suggested that the Kings should change their

name to the “Omahawks,” a proposition quickly shot down by the Kings’ general managers.⁶⁶ Provost took the opportunity to refresh readers’ minds on Omaha’s history with big league basketball. “Hardly a soul around even cares to recall that Omaha’s first venture into professional basketball ended with the hissing sound of a collapsing balloon,” Provost wrote. He once again cited Langer and the Kaeding brothers as the team’s key players, and attributed the failure of the league to the talent shortage wrought by the glut of professional leagues and the PBLA’s limited finances.⁶⁷

Sportswriters were not alone in reminiscing about the Omahawks. Readers of the *World-Herald* also brought up the team from time to time. Writing a letter to the *World-Herald* soon after Rex Barney’s death in 1997, Arnold J. Stern of Omaha tried to recall the events from a half-century before. “If memory serves me, Rex Barney was on the roster of the Omaha Hawks, a professional basketball team that played its home games at the old Creighton gym in 1947 or 1948,” Stern wrote. “I saw George Mikan, who later starred for the Minneapolis Lakers, play for the Chicago American Gears against Omaha. I think that one of Omaha’s players was Ralph Langer, who had played for the Creighton team that did well in the NCAA tournament in the early 1940s.”⁶⁸

Although a few details were hazy (the team name was actually the “Omahawks,” for example) Stern’s memories were mostly correct. And while the Omahawks’ existence was certainly ephemeral, Stern’s recollections and Provost’s recaps point to the power of professional sports to foster civic pride and civic memory. “The allure of being ‘big league’ was mighty strong,” Provost wrote in 1973 when explaining why Omaha wanted a PBLA franchise in the first place.⁶⁹ For Omaha’s citizens and for Nebraskans, the desire to be “big league” has usually been channeled towards rooting for the big-time college athletics of the Cornhuskers or cheering on homegrown athletes who have graduated to the professional ranks. For a few short moments in history, however, Nebraska has claimed a big league team of its own.⁷⁰ While Nebraskans and Omahans wait for those days to return—a dim prospect at best for the foreseeable future—they will have to content themselves to chase the allure of the big leagues by remembering the past. 🗨️

Omaha World-Herald,
November 12, 1947.

PROFESSIONAL MAJOR LEAGUE

BASKETBALL

TOMORROW NIGHT, 8 P. M.

OMAHA vs. WATERLOO

CREIGHTON GYM

Tickets on Sale at HAUFF SPORTING GOODS
RUSSELL SPORTING GOODS — ADAM HAT STORE

Admission \$2, \$1.50, \$1

NOTES

¹ Although the Kings dropped “Omaha” from their name after the 1974-75 season, they continued to play a few home games in Omaha for three more years.

² By my count there have been twelve articles that feature sports in *Nebraska History*: baseball (7), horse racing (1), boxing (1), soccer (1), football (1), and tennis/golf (1). No articles which prominently feature basketball have been published. In terms of book publications, numerous popular histories focusing on Nebraska Cornhusker football have been written. Few have been written about basketball, although one important exception is Steve Marantz’s *The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central: High School Basketball at the ‘68 Racial Divide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

³ On basketball’s growing national reach in the wake of World War II, see Douglas Stark, *Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

⁴ Murry R. Nelson, *The National Basketball League: A History, 1935-1949* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 182.

⁵ Nelson, *The National Basketball League*, 158-77.

⁶ Nelson, *The National Basketball League*, 160-61. For an excellent analysis of the business structure and economics of the BAA and NBL from 1946 to 1948, see David George Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 20-52. On the history of the BAA, see also Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots: Pro Basketball’s Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 150-65.

⁷ For unexplained reasons, the NBA tends to privilege the BAA side of its pre-merger history. It still considers 1946 as the official start of its existence even though the NBL was in operation in 1937 and even though there are more current NBA teams that began in the NBL than in the BAA. Five current NBA teams came from the ranks of the NBL: the Lakers, Kings, Pistons, Hawks, and 76ers. Only three current NBA teams came from the BAA: the Celtics, Warriors, and Knicks.

⁸ This summary is drawn mostly from Adolph H. Grundman’s definitive history of the AAU national tournament, *The Golden Age of Amateur Basketball: The AAU Tournament, 1921-1968* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). There were also company teams in some of the professional leagues, including the NBL, but players from these teams were not eligible for Olympic play.

⁹ For an account of this game and the game’s importance, see John Christgau, *Tricksters in the Madhouse: Lakers vs. Globetrotters, 1948* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Michael Schumaker, *Mr. Basketball: George Mikan, the Minneapolis Lakers, and the Birth of the NBA* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 99.

¹¹ Nelson, *The National Basketball League*, 178-81; Schumacher, *Mr. Basketball*, 99-102.

¹² The Northern Division teams included Omaha, Chicago, St. Paul, Grand Rapids, Louisville, Kansas City, Waterloo, and St. Joseph. The Southern Division featured Houston,

Atlanta, Birmingham, Tulsa, Chattanooga, Oklahoma City, New Orleans, and Springfield.

¹³ “Sponsors Appoint Omaha Five Coach,” *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter, *OWH*), Sept. 21, 1947, 29. See also the entry for Shepherd in Jeff Marcus, *A Biographical Directory of Professional Basketball Coaches* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003). My thanks to the Omaha Public Library, which provides patrons with access to NewsBanks’s Historic *Omaha World-Herald* archives. All *World-Herald* sources for this essay came via that database. Unless otherwise noted, all other newspaper sources were accessed via www.newspapers.com.

¹⁴ “Auburn Fan Wins,” *OWH*, Oct. 29, 1947, 17.

¹⁵ Edwin A. Curley, *Nebraska: Its Advantages, Resources, and Drawbacks* (London: 1875), 56-57. It should also be noted that Omaha’s Western League baseball teams from 1885 to 1901 were nicknamed the “Omahogs.” See W.C. Madden and Patrick J. Stewart, *The Western League: A Baseball History, 1885 through 1999* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002).

¹⁶ B. F. Sylvester, “The Home Town,” *OWH*, Oct. 5, 1935, 4.

¹⁷ “Hockey Players Named Knights,” *OWH*, Nov. 5, 1939, 1.

¹⁸ Rex Barney with Norman L. Marcht, *Rex Barney’s Thank Youuuu for 50 Years in Baseball from Brooklyn to Baltimore* (Centerville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1993); Don Harrison, “Rex Barney,” *Society for American Baseball Research*, <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/f0e1d9d4>.

¹⁹ Robert Phipps, “Vince Recalls Mick Walker,” *OWH*, Nov. 1, 1947, 7. Barney also noted that he received permission from Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey before signing on with the Omahawks.

²⁰ The “unorthodox sharpshooter” line came from a syndicated article announcing the 1943 All-America team. See “Phillip Paces NEA’s 1943 All-America Hard-Courter,” *Bismarck Tribune*, March 16, 1943, 6.

²¹ Howard Wolff, “Langer’s Play Stuns Scribes,” *OWH*, Dec. 31, 1942, 11-12.

²² Grundman, *The Golden Age of Amateur Basketball*, 102; “Sponsors Appoint Omaha Five Coach,” *OWH*, Sept. 21, 1947, 29; “Ralph Langer Cinches Berth,” *OWH*, Oct. 24, 1947, 27.

²³ “1940 State Tournament Teams,” *Journal and Star* (Lincoln, NE), March 17, 1941, B-1. Wayne had already graduated in 1938; he worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps before enrolling at York with Jim.

²⁴ “York’s Kaedings and Shaneyfelt Head All-State College Lineup,” *OWH*, March 14, 1943, 3-B.

²⁵ “Upsets Are Predominant In National College Tourney,” *Bismarck Tribune*, March 10, 1943, 8.

²⁶ “Long Shot Nips York,” *OWH*, March 11, 1943, 18.

²⁷ “York Hands Peru Five First Loop Loss,” *OWH*, Feb. 5, 1947, 12.

²⁸ Robert D. Bradley, *The Basketball Draft Fact Book: A History of Professional Basketball’s College Drafts* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 4.

²⁹ Gregg McBride, “Brothers of the Hoop,” *Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, Feb. 9, 1947, 5-C. McBride’s article claimed

that there were six Kaeding brothers, but in fact there were seven. This is confirmed by census records and an interview that Wayne Kaeding gave in 2012. See "Wayne Kaeding Now a Baseball Hall of Famer," *York News-Times*, March 22, 2012, http://www.yorknewstimes.com/sports/wayne-kaeding-now-a-baseball-hall-of-famer/article_65ef748e-73c9-11e1-812b-0019bb2963f4.html. My thanks to the editors of *Nebraska History* for discovering the discrepancy and confirming the correct number by examining census records.

³⁰ "Class C Results," *Nebraska State Journal*, March 14, 1941, 15.

³¹ Glenn Trump, "Scottsbluff, Thayer Unbeaten During 1941 Cage Campaign," *Evening State Journal* (Lincoln, NE), March 17, 1941, 10.

³² "Capital City Fives In Limelight," *Lincoln Star*, March 7, 1942, 8.

³³ "Outstanding Frosh Have Quit College," *Lincoln Journal and Star*, Feb. 7, 1943, B-2.

³⁴ "Nut House In Twin Victory," *Nebraska State Journal*, March 12, 1945, 5; "Professional Basketball League of America 1947-48," *The Association for Professional Basketball Research*, <http://www.apbr.org/pbla.html>.

³⁵ "Repeaters on All-State Teams Have Been Few," *Bismarck Tribune*, March 9, 1940, 6.

³⁶ "Sioux, Bunnies To Meet for 'Cellar,'" *Bismarck Tribune*, Feb. 12, 1941, 8.

³⁷ "The Register's 1941 All-Conference Basketball Teams," *Des Moines Register*, March 23, 1941, 4-Sports.

³⁸ "Phantoms Upset Globe Trotters," *Bismarck Tribune*, March 14, 1947, 9.

³⁹ Player bio information from "Professional Basketball League of America 1947-48," *The Association for Professional Basketball Research*, <http://www.apbr.org/pbla.html>.

⁴⁰ "Ralph Langer to Lead Pros," *OWH*, Oct. 27, 1947, 9; "Omaha Pros Set for Debut," *OWH*, Oct. 28, 1947, 11.

⁴¹ Maurice Shadle, "Omaha Pros Bow in Debut," *OWH*, Oct. 29, 1947, 17.

⁴² "Pros Promise to Be in Shape," *OWH*, Oct. 31, 1937, 20.

⁴³ Todd Gould, *Pioneers of the Hardwood: Indiana and the Birth of Professional Basketball* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 110-11; Nelson, *The National Basketball League*, 101; Curtis Harris, "Bobby McDermott," *Pro Hoops History*, Aug. 21, 2013, <https://prohoopshistory.net/2013/08/21/prohoopshistory-hall-of-fame-bobby-mcdermott-fort-wayne-pistons-chicago-gears-original-celtics/>.

⁴⁴ "Pros Promise to Be in Shape," *OWH*, Oct. 31, 1937, 20.

⁴⁵ "Omahawks Fall, 74-54, to Chicago," *OWH*, Nov. 4, 1947, 11.

⁴⁴ Mikan's recollections come from Richard F. Triptow's *The Dynasty That Never Was: Chicago's First Professional Basketball Champions The American Gears* (Lake Bluff, IL: self-published, 1996), 152-153. Mikan misremembered the name of the Omaha squad, calling them the "Tomahawks," but he did remember the presence of Barney, "the old Brooklyn Dodger pitcher."

⁴⁵ Maurice Shadle, "St. Paul Pots 52-49 Victory," *OWH*, Nov. 7, 1947, 31. After a game in Chicago attended by PBLA leaders, the *World-Herald* reported that Jim Kaeding and Langer were singled out for praise by league officials. See "Omahawks Post First Win, 63-61," *OWH*, Nov. 11, 1947, 11.

⁴⁶ "Omaha Quint Beaten, 60-48," *OWH*, Nov. 8, 1947, 9.

⁴⁷ "Pros Promise to Be in Shape," *OWH*, Oct. 31, 1937, 20; "Omaha Quint Plays Saints," *OWH*, Nov. 6, 1947, 25.

⁴⁸ "Omahawks Post First Win, 63-61," *OWH*, Nov. 11, 1947, 11.

⁴⁹ "Professional Basketball League of America 1947-48," *The Association for Professional Basketball Research*, <http://www.apbr.org/pbla.html>.

⁵⁰ Maurice Shadle, "Rex Barney's Throw Wins," *OWH*, Nov. 12, 1947, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "Omahawks Win Second Straight," *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, Nov. 12, 1947, 9.

⁵³ "Omahawks, Pro Basket Loop Quit," *OWH*, Nov. 13, 1947, 23; Maurice Shadle, "Local Quintet Added Debts as Gates Poor," *OWH*, Nov. 14, 1947, 29.

⁵⁴ Nelson, *The National Basketball League*, 178-81; Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, 162-63; Schumacher, *Mr. Basketball*, 99-102.

⁵⁵ Maurice Shadle, "Local Quintet Added Debts as Gates Poor," *OWH*, Nov. 14, 1947, 29.

⁵⁶ Stu Pospisil, "A Century of High-Fives in State Hoops," *OWH*, <http://dataomaha.com/documents/a-century-of-high-fives-in-state-hoops>.

⁵⁷ "Wayne Kaeding Now a Baseball Hall of Famer," *York News-Times*, March 22, 2012, http://www.yorknewstimes.com/sports/wayne-kaeding-now-a-baseball-hall-of-famer/article_65ef748e-73c9-11e1-812b-0019bb2963f4.html.

⁵⁸ Roger Bates, "Memories Not Easily Forgotten," *Muscatine (Iowa) Journal*, Jan. 13, 2009, http://muscatinejournal.com/news/opinion/editorial/columns/memories-not-easily-forgotten/article_edbd2717-ab55-5e1a-a173-5c24d096ab82.html. Kaeding died in 1990 and his obituary noted that he "played basketball professionally." See "James Kaeding," *Belleville (Kansas) Telescope*, Aug. 30, 1990, 7.

⁵⁹ Barney recounts this history in his autobiography, *Rex Barney's Thank Youuuu*.

⁶⁰ "Olympics Play Minot Grudge Tilt Tonight," *Bismarck Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1950, 5.

⁶¹ Bill Misslin, "The Bucket," *Bismarck Tribune*, March 29, 1949, 12. Misslin was quoting Bill Murphy, a former sports editor for a radio station in Bismarck. Murphy had moved to Illinois, and he was writing back to his friends in North Dakota comparing the top basketball talent he saw in Illinois with those he had seen in North Dakota.

⁶² The only statistics kept for the PBLA were field goals made, free throws made and attempted, fouls, and total points. The complete statistics for the abbreviated PBLA season can be found at "Professional Basketball League of America 1947-48," *The Association for Professional Basketball Research*, <http://www.apbr.org/pbla.html>. For the Omahawks, Ralph Langer averaged 11.2 points per

game, Fred Gran averaged 10.5, and Jim Kaeding averaged 8.7. Langer led the team in both free throws attempted and made, and of all players who attempted at least 6 free throws, Langer's 68.2 percent accuracy topped the team.

⁶³ Wally Provost, "Omaha Had a Fling At Pro Basket Ball," *OWH*, Sept. 20, 1967, 57E.

⁶⁴ Howard Brantz, "A Weighty Problem," *OWH*, April 1, 1972, 19.

⁶⁵ Wally Provost, "Omahawks Died With the League," *OWH*, Feb. 13, 1973, 21.

⁶⁶ "NU Schedule Questioned," *OWH*, Aug. 18, 1997, 17.

⁶⁷ Provost, "Omahawks Died With the League."

⁶⁸ Besides the Omahawks and the Kansas City-Omaha Kings, another time in which Nebraska could claim to have a "big-league" team (that is, a professional team competing in a league that aspired or claimed to be the nation's best in a major sport) was the 1980-81 season of the Women's Professional Basketball League. The Nebraska Wranglers (based in Omaha) competed that year. Like the PBLA, however, the WBL did not last long, folding in 1981. The Wranglers are mentioned in Karra Porter's *Mad Seasons: The Story of the First Women's Professional Basketball League, 1978-1981* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

