

Introduction

In the long and storied history of Philadelphia sports, there have been many participants whose work had a lasting effect on the games with which they were associated. Some were prominent on a local level, while others enjoyed a national reputation.

Most of them, of course, were players. A few, however, were nonuniformed participants who did not perform on the playing field. In this category, no one was more influential than Eddie Gottlieb.

Unquestionably, Gottlieb ranks as one of the most powerful nonplaying sports figures ever to operate in Philadelphia. But his success wasn't restricted to that city. He had an enormous impact at a national level, too. In fact, as one of the pioneers of professional basketball, Gottlieb is unquestionably the single most important reason the sport has reached its current level of success. But, although Gottlieb is most closely associated with basketball, he also attained a high level of prominence in other sports, especially in baseball.

Gottlieb's story is a complex one. Over the course of his life, he wore many hats: owner, general manager, coach, player, entrepreneur, promoter, booking agent, schoolteacher, and sporting goods salesman. He was wise, yet cautious, a stickler for details, loyal, honest, frugal, opinionated, gruff, profane, and cunning. Although he insisted on being the boss—today he might be called a “control freak”—he had legions of

friends who included the rare mix of members of his team, opponents, fans, and the media.

Called “The Mogul” by almost everybody, Gottlieb was one of the founders of the Basketball Association of America (BAA), which later formed the basis for the National Basketball Association (NBA). Because of his vital role in that process, Gottlieb has been called “The Father of Pro Basketball.” It has often been said that without Gottlieb, there would be no NBA.

He was the coach of the city’s first major league basketball team, the Philadelphia Warriors, founded in 1946. He purchased the team for \$25,000 in 1952, owning it until 1962, when he sold the franchise to a group from San Francisco for \$850,000.

While the Warriors were winning two professional basketball championships, including one in the BAA in its first year of operation, Gottlieb was a dominant figure in the sport. He was chairman of the NBA Rules Committee for 26 years. And he strongly supported the creation of the 24-second clock, while initiating numerous other new rules.

Certainly, the crowning achievement of his career came when he drafted Wilt Chamberlain after almost single-handedly pushing through a rule that allowed teams to draft high school players who played in their areas. For 30 years, he also was responsible for drawing up the NBA schedule, which he did by hand, often making notes on a crumpled sheet of paper that he carried around in his back pocket. When the job was finally switched to a computer, the machine couldn’t handle it and the assignment was returned to Gotty.

During his career, Gottlieb always worked out of tiny offices in Center City, handling all of the many duties of a professional sports team with the help of just a few other people. One was the legendary public address announcer Dave Zinkoff, who spent 42 years with Gotty. Another was ticket manager Mike Iannarella, a Gotty associate for 48 years. Harvey Pollack, still active with the 76ers, served as Gottlieb’s publicity director, starting in 1946.

Gottlieb was a keen judge of talent. He was also extremely innovative. He disliked excessive dribbling, preferring instead that his players pass the ball. To make his point, he occasionally held drills with a partially deflated ball.

While they existed, the Philadelphia Warriors were one of pro basketball’s most colorful—and interesting—teams. They played at both the Arena and Convention Hall (both in West Philadelphia), sometimes tak-

ing the court in the second game of a doubleheader in which four different pro teams participated. Symbolic of the unpretentious conditions of early pro basketball, the Warriors also sometimes played games at local high schools.

Believing that it helped to attract fans, Gottlieb usually built the Warriors around local players, a group that over the years included All-Americans such as Chamberlain, Paul Arizin of Villanova, George Senesky of St. Joseph's, Tom Gola of La Salle, Ernie Beck of Penn, and Guy Rodgers of Temple. During their 16 years in Philadelphia, Warriors players Joe Fulks, Neil Johnston, Arizin, and Chamberlain led the league in scoring a combined total of nine times. It was during one of those years (1962) that Chamberlain scored 100 points in one game.

The Mogul, however, was more than the driving force behind the Warriors and the NBA. He helped in the relocation of the Syracuse Nats to Philadelphia where the team became the 76ers. And he was a key figure in Negro League baseball. He was a promoter and booking agent for African American teams dating from the 1920s to the late 1940s, in effect controlling who played where and when in eastern Pennsylvania. In 1933, Gottlieb also became the principal owner and financier of the Philadelphia Stars, a Negro League team with which he was connected until it disbanded in the early 1950s.

Gotty was one of the founders in 1919 of the storied SPHAS (South Philadelphia Hebrew Association), which became Philadelphia's first major pro basketball team and performed in the city for some 35 years. He served two stints as head coach of the Philadelphia Textile School (now Philadelphia University) basketball squad. In 1922, he helped to found the Philadelphia Baseball Association, an organization that eventually included 60 semiprofessional teams. In the 1940s and 1950s, he was the promoter and booking agent for the Harlem Globetrotters during their annual summer tours in Europe.

During his career, Gottlieb was also the commissioner of a local semiprofessional football league and was involved as a promoter of professional wrestling matches. Once, he even attempted—unsuccessfully—to put together a group headed by the well-known Levy family to purchase the Phillies, intending to become general manager and to add to the team star players from the Negro Leagues. Later, in recognition of his vast knowledge of Negro League baseball, he was also named by commissioner Bowie Kuhn to a 10-member committee charged with recommending pre-Jackie Robinson Negro League players for induction into

the Baseball Hall of Fame. The work of that group resulted in players such as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and many others getting inducted into the baseball shrine.

Gottlieb's connection with local sports went back to his youth. Born in 1898 in Kiev, Ukraine, he immigrated with his parents to the United States at the age of four. By the time he was 10, Gottlieb was playing on a grade school basketball team. He attended South Philadelphia High School where he played basketball, baseball, and football before graduating in 1916. Gottlieb then attended the School of Pedagogy in Philadelphia, playing basketball for two years and serving as captain in his final year. He graduated in 1918 and soon thereafter launched a career as a teacher.

At the age of 19, Gottlieb joined with former high school teammates Hughie Black and Harry Passon to form an amateur basketball team, which two years later became known as the SPHAS. The SPHAS performed as an independent team and then as a member of the amateur Philadelphia League until joining the semiprofessional Eastern League in 1925. Over the next 22 years, while playing in three different leagues, the SPHAS won 13 league championships, made 18 trips to the playoffs, and became known as the team that held highly popular dances following games at the Broadwood Hotel in Center City.

In those days, basketball was primarily a Jewish man's game and featured low-scoring contests, a leather-covered ball, two-hand set shots, and a center jump after each field goal. Players wore high-top black sneakers, leather kneepads, and sleeveless shirts and were paid between \$5 and \$30 per game. It was a vastly different game from today's fast-paced version, so much of which is played above the rim.

While he was running the SPHAS, Gottlieb was busy with his Negro League and booking agent duties. He booked as many as 500 amateur baseball games each week. He also booked appearances for entertainers. Gottlieb arranged for the first appearance of fellow South Philadelphia resident Joey Bishop in 1937. He made dates for many years for not only Bishop, but for others such as baseball comedian Max Patkin.

Life was always a big gamble for Gotty, who was never averse to placing a wager at various race tracks and other spots around the city. He took risks. He navigated uncharted waters. And during much of his career, he had an uncanny knack of being able to make things work.

"Eddie was one of the brightest people I've ever been around," said renowned local sportscaster Bill Campbell who broadcast Warriors games

in the club's early years. "He was very opinionated, very stubborn, but very honest. He was a very, very interesting guy, and one who was just a brilliant, brilliant person."

Gottlieb had a fascinating and unique life. He was colorful and imaginative, relentless, enthusiastic, and indefatigable. Indeed, there are few sports figures with lives more interesting than Gottlieb's. And he knew virtually everything there was to know, not only about Philadelphia sports, past and present, but about sports on a national level.

Jerry Rullo, who came out of Temple to play with the SPHAS and Warriors, called Gottlieb "a terrific businessman. And his word was as good as his bond. He had a terrific memory. And he was a very honest man."

By virtue of its content, this book serves as a history of two of Philadelphia's legendary basketball teams, the SPHAS and the Warriors. Gottlieb operated both teams during their entire existences, and, to a great extent, his story is the story of these two teams. Because he ran the Stars from their start to their finish—thereby running at one point three pro teams at once—Gotty's story will also serve as a history of that team.

The following pages also include a discussion of the evolution of the Jewish community in Philadelphia and its early passion for the game of basketball. From the 1920s to the mid-1940s, basketball was the preferred sport of Jews, and most of the players were members of that religion.

There is also a look at the African American community in Philadelphia, its relationship to both baseball and basketball, and segregation in those two sports. As a hotbed of black baseball during the first half of the 20th century, Philadelphia has a unique background in this area.

As for Gotty, it was never difficult to find words to describe him. And anyone who tried never had to rely on words that were insipid or ambivalent. Gottlieb was the kind of person who brought out the best in one's vocabulary.

More than 27 years after his passing, Gottlieb continues to inspire provocative comments by those who knew him. In the process of interviewing more than 50 people for this book, and holding conversations with another two dozen or so, virtually everyone had strong opinions about The Mogul. Some were flattering. Some were not. He affected different people in different ways. And descriptions of him sometimes were contradictory. But in all cases, they helped to describe a man who throughout his life was anything but wishy-washy.

"To me, he was in a class by himself," said former Warriors player George Dempsey. "He was a brilliant guy. It was fun to sit down and talk

with him because he had more stories than anybody I ever knew. And he knew other sports like baseball and boxing as well as he knew basketball. He was a unique character with a good heart, and it was a joy to be in his presence. He was a competitor like nobody else. He wanted to win in the worst way.”

Indeed, Gottlieb was one of a kind, a Damon Runyan kind of character who far surpassed his humble origins. From Russia to South Philadelphia, from dingy gyms to gaudy arenas, from an unknown kid to a nationally prominent sports figure, his life followed an extraordinary path that was crammed with special achievements.

It was a life that could fill a book.

While working on this book, it was obvious to me that the perfect person to write the foreword was Paul Arizin. Paul was a former Villanova All-American, two-time NBA scoring champ, and a man who in 1996 was named one of the top 50 NBA players of all time. An enormously prominent figure in basketball, a star on the last Philadelphia Warriors’ NBA championship team, and, like Gottlieb, a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, Arizin knew Gotty intimately. Gottlieb had signed him to his first pro contract, was his first pro coach, later owned the team, and the two had remained close friends over all the years that followed.

Paul and I had been friends for some years, too. We lived in the same town, and among those interviewed for the book, he was unquestionably my best source. When I approached him with the idea of writing the foreword, he quickly and enthusiastically agreed to do it.

Arizin wrote a wonderful foreword that provides not only special insight, but some interesting personal views and experiences. Unfortunately, shortly after he’d completed the foreword, Paul died suddenly at his home. He was 79 years old.

Paul Arizin was a fine, humble gentleman. And he was a person who, when he was in the local post office or the local library or his local church, would never, never unveil his celebrity status. It was a thrill to have seen him play and then to have gotten to know him, and I am proud and honored that with the consent of his wife, Maureen, who died of an injury about two months after Paul’s passing, his foreword appears in this book.