

TOLEDO'S SLAM DUNK HISTORY

At least 11 with Toledo ties played for the Harlem Globetrotters

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It's been a long, long time since Al W. Price whipped a behind-the-back pass or spun a basketball on the tip of his finger.

Please cut him some slack. He's 91 and he doesn't play for the Harlem Globetrotters anymore.

He used to, though, and the Waite High School graduate wasn't alone. At least 11 men with connections to this city have played for the team over the years, and in the early days they were instrumental in transforming the squad into one of the best in the country.

That seems to have been largely forgotten today, now that the NBA, whose season begins on Tuesday, rules the hardwood and the Globetrotters have been relegated to clowning entertainers. It wasn't like that when the pipeline from Toledo to the all-black barnstorming team started. They were a force to be reckoned with.

"Oh man, playing with the Globetrotters, that was supreme," Mr. Price said recently, pausing momentarily from twirling a toothpick with his tongue at the J. Frank Troy Senior Center on Division Street, where he is a frequent visitor these days.

His lanky but sturdy 6-foot frame remains, and it's easy to picture him as an athlete, only now his body is cloaked in an oversized Obama T-shirt instead of a basketball uniform.

Mr. Price grew up in the 400 block of Pinewood Avenue, playing basketball at the Frederick Douglass Community Center, which was located then around 10th and Washington streets.

His brother Bernie, who attended Libbey High School, would become the first known Toledoan to join the Globetrotters in the 1930s, according to Ben Green, author of *Spinning the Globe: The Rise, Fall, and Return to Greatness of the Harlem Globetrotters*.

The author writes that Bernie Price was the first of a new breed of player — taller and more athletic — that owner Abe Saperstein recruited to make the team more competitive in response to changing rules that made the game more fast-paced. Local products Wyatt "Sonny" Boswell and Roscoe "Duke" Cumberland soon followed.

"Abe really started developing a feeder system, and Toledo and Detroit were the two biggies," Mr. Green told *The Blade*.

It helped that Toledo wasn't far from Chicago, where Mr. Saperstein started the Globetrotters in the '20s, but there was an incredible talent pool here that begs further explanation. Of the 10 black players who helped integrate the National Basketball League (the predecessor to the NBA) in 1942, eight of them were from Toledo, according to a 2003 article in *Northwest Ohio History* by Barbara Floyd, university archivist at the University of Toledo.

Claude Johnson, founder of Black Fives, Inc., a vintage sports licensing company dedicated to researching and promoting the history of early African American basketball teams, recently explored the issue in an article for *Bounce* magazine.



Al Price, 91, once played for the Harlem Globetrotters. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

"The title was going to be, 'There's got to be something in the water,' because there were so many stars that came out of Toledo," he said.

He partially credits the culture of sport that flourished in the Glass City at the time. The community had pro basketball teams — often supported and named after local companies — dating back to the 1920s, and hall-of-fame coach Harold Anderson raised community enthusiasm with his successful teams at UT beginning in the '30s.

For black players, taking the court with the Globetrotters or their rivals in basketball wizardry, the New York Renaissance, was the pinnacle of achievement. Al Price still remembers the excitement when the Globetrotters came to town recruiting.

"All the young fellows at that time were very much interested," he said. "We all came up together playing ball." Some of those who made the early teams weren't just contributors, they were stars. Brightest among them was Mr. Boswell. In 1940, he led the team to a world championship and earned MVP honors for the tournament.

"He was considered the best shooter in basketball, maybe the best shooter that anybody had ever seen in basketball," Mr. Green said. "Sonny was like this outside bomber, man."

He and Bernie Price — who received the Harlem Globetrotters Legends award in 1999 — were good enough that they should merit consideration for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, Mr. Johnson said.

"Their names ought to be mentioned in those conversations," he said.

Even so, when Mr. Boswell and Mr. Cumberland quit the team after a dispute over money, Mr. Saperstein didn't flinch.

"His attitude was: I can always go back to Scott High and get two more Sonny Boswells," Mr. Green said. "That happened repeatedly."

And it worked. More Toledoans followed, and the team's all-time roster includes a host of players with known ties to Toledo. The most recent was Jermaine Tate, a Central Catholic High School graduate who played briefly during exhibition competition in 2003.

Other notables in the early days include Tony Peyton, who played at Scott High School and first suited up for the Globetrotters in the 1940s, and Bill Jones, a Woodward High School and UT star who played for one season in the early '40s.

Mr. Cumberland returned to the team and ended up devoting about 17 years to it. Ray Lothery, a Macomber High School graduate, played in the '60s. And the list goes on.

Few details remain about most of these players because of deaths, fading memories, and the team's sketchy records from that time period. One thing is known for sure, though: back then, the Globetrotters played some serious basketball. There was some clowning around — it was part of the allure even then — but that didn't start until they were safely ahead of their opponent on the scoreboard.

"That was their strength in the early years," Mr. Green said. "They were a terrific basketball team. They could kick your butt and then at the end they would put on a show."

Al Price learned that element of the game, too.

"We did all the tricks and everything," he said. "It's one of those things. You practice. You learn."

He liked life on the road and said the pay was good. A 1951 newspaper account indicated that one member of the team made \$400 a month.

A father of five, Mr. Price became a draftsman in Fremont and Toledo when he gave up pro ball after about a decade. Since then, his hair has grayed and his memory has dulled, but at age 91 he hasn't forgotten how basketball taught him perhaps life's sweetest lesson: the secret of eternal youth.

"We enjoyed each other," he said. "The big secret is enjoy yourself, whatever you're doing."

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