

ZeJ Media Presents

A Laemmle / Zeller Films Release

A Film by David Vyorst

The First Basket

Narrated by Peter Riegert

www.laemmlezellerfilms.com/thefirstbasket

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This film is not rated
86 Minutes

PRODUCTION TEAM

Producer and Director
Narrator
Co-Producer
Editor
Director of Photography
Musical Director and Composer
Senior Research Consultant
Associate Producer
Associate Producer
Art Director

David Vyorst
Peter Riegert
Jennifer Crescenzo
Carol Slatkin
Gary Griffin
Roberto Juan Rodriguez
Ari Sclar
Katri Billard
Erin Essenmacher
Todd Gardner



The Synopsis

David Vyorst's documentary *The First Basket* explores the impact that basketball had on modern Jewish history, as well as the profound influence that unsung Jewish pioneers had on the evolution of basketball, as it grew from a game played with ash-cans on tenement steps to the second most popular sport in the world.

Though basketball was invented by Dr. James Naismith in Massachusetts, the game spread like wildfire through turn-of-the-century New York settlement houses and proved a perfect fit for urban Jewish kids. By the 1920s, basketball had become a staple of life in American Jewish communities, and many of the top teams grew out of these neighborhoods. *The First Basket* is the first documentary to comprehensively examine both the role that Jewish players had in the evolution of the game and the impact that basketball played in the assimilation of American Jews.

In *The First Basket*, Washington, DC based writer/producer/director David Vyorst and narrator Peter Riegert explore the little-known, yet very important, Jewish history of the game. Chock full of vivid anecdotes and distinctive characters, the film brings back famous as well as unsung basketball legends such as Red Auerbach, Red Holzman, Dolph Schayes, Red Sarachek, Barney Sedran, Eddie Gottlieb, Abe Saperstein, Ossie Schectman, Ralph Kaplowitz, Sammy Kaplan and many more.

The First Basket reveals the rich history and amazing contributions of Jewish athletes who became role models and heroes to generations of fans and changed the face and perception of Jews in all athletics. *The First Basket* is indeed 'the greatest Jewish basketball documentary in the world.'

The Story

Do you know who scored THE FIRST BASKET in the NBA?

On November 1, 1946, in the opening game of the fledgling Basketball Association of America (BAA), Ossie Schectman scored the opening basket for the New York Knickerbockers against the Toronto Huskies. Schectman and his teammates Sonny Hertzberg, Stan Stutz, Hank Rosenstein, Ralph Kaplowitz, Jake Weber, and Leo "Ace" Gottlieb went on to win the opening game 68 – 66 and finish the season with a 33 – 27 record. In 1949, the BAA became the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Schectman's shot is considered the first basket in the NBA.

In fact, several of the BAA and NBA teams had evolved out of the semi-pro teams, settlement houses, playgrounds, schoolyard and community center leagues, and college teams that sprung from the Jewish inner-city neighborhoods of the early 20th century. While the era of Jewish professional basketball players has passed, the story of these sports pioneers illustrates how the American 20th Century was shaped by the experiences of many immigrant groups.

The First Basket follows these Jewish basketball experiences, from the turn of the century settlement houses to the bright lights of Madison Square Garden.

THE FIRST BASKET is about:

- Basketball as a reflection of the inner city. The documentary examines the inner-city social factors that led urban Jewish youths to basketball, and their notable success in basketball from the 1920s through the early 1950s;
- The role of basketball as a middle ground for second-generation eastern European immigrants as they established their own American identities, and the corresponding conflicts between old world tradition and American culture;
- Anti-Semitism and Jewish stereotypes in the face of Jewish success in basketball from the 1920s through the early 1950s;
- The declining presence of Jews in professional basketball from the early 1950s onwards and the CCNY point shaving scandals of 1951, both against the backdrop of 1950s America, the globalization of basketball, and its immense popularity in Israel.

The Narrative

Part One: The 1946 – 47 New York Knickerbockers

We get to know the players--Ossie Schectman, Sonny Hertzberg, Leo "Ace" Gottlieb, Ralph Kaplowitz, Hank Rosenstein--through original interviews, archival film clips, and rarely seen memorabilia from their personal collections. The beauty and grace of the early game is displayed through incredible newsreel footage and images from pro basketball's early years as well as from the first game in NBA history. We share the rich experience of that first season - the dream come true of playing in a new professional league. We experience what it felt like to be a young Jewish American right out of World War II, traveling around the country playing professional basketball.

Part Two: Basketball Meant Being American

Between 1881 and 1924, more than two million eastern European Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States. *The First Basket* documents the forgotten story of how these new Americans settled in inner city neighborhoods and their children avidly took to American sports. Since basketball did not require open fields or expensive equipment, it thrived among urban youth. We learn how sports played an essential part in becoming American for the children of these immigrants, and how sports provided Jewish youths with a way of proving to the Gentile world their physical strength, speed, and dexterity, in the face of traditional stereotypes of Jews as bookish and physically frail. The film then covers the conflict between generations, as well as between eastern European Jewish traditions and American culture that this engendered as we see that basketball became the most popular sport among this generation.

Part Three: The Development of Professional Basketball

During the first half of the 20th century, basketball became a staple of Jewish community life. Nearly every urban institution had a basketball team, from the Jewish Community Centers to the labor unions and department stores. *The First Basket* chronicles the evolution of these community-based teams into professional leagues.

Audiences meet and root for the neighborhood semi-pro teams such as the Dux, from the Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn; the South Philadelphia Hebrew All Stars (SPHAs); and local college teams such as CCNY (City College of New York); LIU (Long Island University); and St. John's. We share the stories of Jewish community basketball heroes such as Nat Holman, Sammy Kaplan, Barney Sedran, Nat Krinsky and Red Saracheck.

The film also examines the anti-Semitic responses to Jewish success in basketball. New York Daily News sports editor Paul Gallico wrote in the mid 1930s that basketball "appeals to the Hebrew with his Oriental background [because] the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind and flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smartalecness." We see how qualities such as cunning and wiliness were posited as the keys to Jewish basketball success and how these kinds of statements were indicative of early 20th century America.

The rise of professional basketball culminates with the inauguration of the BAA and the NBA and brings us back to the original Knicks team.



1946-47 New York Knickerbockers

Part Four: The 1950s to the 21st Century

The final section of the film begins by recounting the legend of Nat Holman, CCNY, and the 1951 CCNY point-shaving scandals. We see how these scandals had a tremendous impact on the future of the game as the NBA rose to pre-eminence.

The early 1950s produced tremendous changes in society as well as in basketball. The film examines the sharp decline in the number of Jewish players in professional and college basketball as well as the gradual disappearance of second-generation ethnic Jewish neighborhoods that had produced waves of players, as millions of Americans migrated to the suburbs.

The evolution of basketball from a game played by poor immigrant kids, to a global cultural phenomenon is truly metaphoric of the American 20th century. *The First Basket* examines the incredible growth and globalization of the game, and looks at basketball's tremendous popularity in Israel, where the Tel Aviv Maccabi team won the Euro league championships in 2004 and 2005. *The First Basket* concludes by examining the excitement and pride Israelis share in those victories, and looking back at the history of basketball as it relates to the film's subject matter.



1949-50 NCAA & NIT Tournament champions CCNY Beavers (City College of New York)
Source: Archives, The City College of New York, CUNY

The Team

David Vyorst

Executive Producer and Creator

David Vyorst is a communications specialist living in Washington, D.C. Previously, Mr. Vyorst directed Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide's Internet media department. His political experience includes two presidential campaigns, work on Capitol Hill, and public opinion research. As a lifetime New York Knick fan and film devotee,, Mr. Vyorst brings his personal enthusiasm and love of the game to *The First Basket*. Mr. Vyorst holds a Master's Degree from the London School of Economics and a B.A. from UCLA.

Peter Riegert

Narrator

Peter Riegert, the renowned star of stage and screen, is the writer, director, and star of the critically acclaimed film, *King of the Corner* (www.kingofthecornerfilm.com).

Mr. Riegert has appeared in more than 30 films including *Animal House*, *Local Hero*, *Crossing Delancy*, *The Mask*, and *Traffic*. His television credits include *The Sopranos*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and the final episode of *Seinfeld*.

Jennifer Crescenzo

Co-Producer

Previous to *The First Basket*, Jennifer Crescenzo was the Senior Producer for 8 years at Video/Action, a social justice organization. Ms. Crescenzo received a Capitol Region Emmy Award for producing and directing *Extraordinary Response to International Terrorism*, the story of how the people of Lockerbie, Scotland reached out to the hundreds of families who lost loved ones after the terrorist attack on Pan Am Flight 103. Other award-winning work includes *Kathleen's Story*, a young woman's struggle with breast cancer; *Louis Martin: Walking with Presidents*, the story of a ground-breaking black journalist who used his gift for "getting the right story to the right people" to win the confidence of presidents and champion the rights of black Americans; and *Through My Eyes*, a look at the lasting impact of family and community violence through the eyes of children. Her work has been broadcast on Court TV, WETA, and CNN, and screened at the National Press Club and the Kennedy Center.

In the spring of 2006, Jennifer completed *Ready to Play*, her first feature-length documentary film, about how her father salvaged a run-down elementary school ball field in the heart of Washington DC and built a 25-year neighborhood old softball league that keeps a changing community together. Ms. Crescenzo holds a BA summa cum laude from the University of Notre Dame.

Carol Slatkin

Editor

Carol Slatkin is a highly regarded television editor, specializing in long format documentary programming. Over the past 20 years Ms. Slatkin has edited a wide variety of award winning projects broadcast on PBS, National Geographic Television, Discovery Communications, NBC, and Turner Broadcasting. Her most recent project is the critically acclaimed *Frontline: Is Wal-Mart Good for America?* Last year, Ms. Slatkin co-produced and co-edited Discovery Docs *With All Deliberate Speed*, a feature length documentary about the Brown v. Board of Education decision. Ms. Slatkin is a co-owner of a post production facility, P&C Post, Inc., where she edits, and manages post-production on various programs.

Gary Griffin

Director of Photography

In 2005, Gary Griffin won the Sundance Film Festival's American Excellence in Cinematography Award for the documentary *The Education of Shelby Knox*. Additionally, *Autism is a World*, shot by Gary Griffin was nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary short film. Additionally, Mr. Griffin directed photography on the 1992 HBO documentary film *Educating Peter*, which won the Oscar for best documentary film. He is director of photography of NVF's feature documentary *Still Fighting*. Some of his other work includes *The Character of George Washington* (PBS), *God and the Inner City* (PBS), *Mariachi, the Spirit of Mexico* (PBS), and *Fighter* (First Run Features). His award-winning cinematography includes productions for A&E, PBS, ABC, HBO, NBC, CNN, and CBC. Mr. Griffin is an adjunct film professor at American University in Washington, D.C.

Roberto Juan Rodriguez

Musical Director and Composer

Roberto Juan Rodriguez (www.robetojuanrodriguez.com) is a bona fide innovator, a rare musician whose creative vision synthesizes Cuban music and Jewish music into an entirely new music that breathes joy and melancholy with tremendous emotional clarity. Before leaving Cuba for Miami with his family at age 9, Mr. Rodriguez studied violin, piano, and trumpet at music schools in Havana while also learning to play drums and trumpet. In Miami, he encountered Jewish Holocaust survivors who had re-settled there, as well as Cuban Jews from the island. Rodriguez started drumming professionally in his father's ensembles in Miami when he was barely in his teens. For the next decade or so, he immersed himself in the culture of Miami's vibrant Jewish community.

Moving to jazz headquarters, New York, Mr. Rodriguez soon established himself as a first-call drummer. Jazz and pop notables with whom he has worked include: Ruben Blades, Lester Bowie, T-Bone Burnett, Randy Brecker, Paquito D'Rivera, Julio Iglesias, the Miami Sound Machine, Joe Jackson, Dave Liebman, Paul Simon, Lloyd Cole, Marc Ribot and Phoebe Snow. *El Danzon de Moises (The Dance of Moses)* his first recording as a composer for John Zorn's *Tzadik* label appeared in 2002 to critical raves. The formation of *Septeto Rodriguez* and a new album *Baila! Gitano Baila!* followed.

Dennis Boni

Cinematographer

Since 1983, Dennis Boni has established himself as one of the DC area's foremost cinematographers. Boni was one of the few hand-picked cinematographers to be accepted and trained by Garrett Brown, the Steadicam's inventor. He is known for his meticulous attention to lighting and production details, and has shot pieces that have been shown on all the major networks, as well as PBS, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel and the Learning Channel. Mr. Boni is well known for his award winning documentary work, as well as for commercials and high-end corporate pieces. Boni has worked with three presidents, and recent clients include Paramount Pictures, MGM/UA Home Entertainment, America Online, Microsoft, Dell, QVC, Winstar, the Washington Area Chevy Dealers Association, MCI and Fannie Mae. Boni has also worked on feature films, including *Contact* for Warner Brothers, and *Canadian Bacon* for Polygram Entertainment.

Boni has shot extensively overseas during his 19 years as a cinematographer, as well as across the United States. In the past few years, assignments have included archaeological and historical sites in Bolivia, Guatemala, Italy and Israel, coral reefs in Honduras and the Bahamas, farms and wildlife in France, India and Zimbabwe, and mega cities such as Istanbul, Mexico City and Shanghai.

Ari Sclar

Senior Research Consultant

Ari Sclar is a PhD candidate in history at Stony Brook University in Stony Brook, New York. Mr. Sclar's doctoral dissertation examines basketball's impact on American Jewish culture and identity in the first half of the 20th Century. Mr. Sclar has also directed content for the Jews in Sports web site, first at NYU and then the American Jewish Historical Society.

Katri Billard

Associate Producer

Katri Billard has worked in film and video since 1996 on long format documentaries such as *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*, *Trembling Before G-d*, The History Channel's *April 1865*, the recently released *MANA: Beyond Belief* as well as on shows for PBS, HGTV and the Gallery Channel. Ms. Billard has also produced many commercials, PSAs and industrials in the DC area for clients such as The White House Science & Technology Awards, Children's Hospital, Best Buy and the Smithsonian. Additionally, Ms. Billard has worked on staff with the Washington Jewish Film Festival; as director of the Shorts@Visions local film series; and on the film committees of WIFV Film Festival, Ladyfest DC and Art-o-Matic. Ms. Billard is a member of Women in Film & Video and AIVF, and recipient of a 2001 DC Arts & Humanities Artist Fellowship for comedy filmmaking as well as a 2003 Finalist of the DC Scriptwriting competition.

Erin Essenmacher

Associate Producer

Erin Essenmacher is a San Francisco-based writer and video producer with a strong background in television production as well as marketing and fundraising. As an Associate Producer and Research Director for Hedrick Smith Productions, Ms. Essenmacher was responsible for research, character development and field production on prime-time specials for PBS, including *Critical Condition*, *Juggling Work and Family* and *Rediscovering Dave Brubeck*. On the latter two programs, she also served as a Web Producer, responsible for conceptualizing each show's companion site and writing the supporting text and articles. She has since worked as writer, researcher and field producer on various broadcast projects and currently works as a

writer/producer for The Discovery Channel. Essenmacher has been a fundraiser for various political and non-profit groups and for several independent films. She served as PR/Marketing Director for the post production facility Waveworks and Double R Productions, its sister production company. Ms. Essenmacher holds a B.A. in Political Science and American Culture from the University of Michigan.



1922 Philadelphia SPHAs

Consultants and Advisors

Steven A. Riess (Ph.D., University of Chicago)

Professor: Department of History, Northeastern Illinois University

Steven A. Reiss is the author of *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (1980, rev. ed., 1999), *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (1989), and *Sport in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (1995).

Jeffrey S. Gurock (Ph.D., Columbia University)

Libby M. Klaperman Professor of Jewish History: Yeshiva University

Jeffrey S. Gurock is considered one of the most prominent scholars in the field of American Jewish History. Professor Gurock is a widely noted lecturer, and is the author or editor of eleven books including the acclaimed *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports*, published in 2005.

Peter Levine (Ph.D., Rutgers University)

Professor: Department of History, Michigan State University

Peter Levine is best known for three books: *A.G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball* (1985), *Idols of the Game* (1995), with Robert Lipsyte, and most importantly, *Ellis Island and Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (1992), an award-winning, popular book about sport and the assimilation of American Jews in the 20th century.

Charley Rosen

Sports Writer, Novelist

Charley Rosen is one of the most prolific basketball journalists in the world. Mr. Rosen is a

commentator on ESPN, and the author of nine books including: *More Than a Game*; *The Cockroach Basketball League*; *The Wizard of Odds: How Jack Molinas Almost Destroyed the Game of Basketball*; *Scandals of '51: How the Gamblers Almost Killed College Basketball*;

Barney Polan's Game; and *The House of Moses All-Stars: A Novel*. Mr. Rosen is a former coach in the Continental Basketball Association, has been intimately involved with basketball for the better part of five decades -- as a writer, a player, a coach and a passionate fan.

Laurence Roth (Ph.D. University of California, Los Angeles)
Assistant Professor: Department of English, Susquehanna University

Laurence Roth is the author of *Inspecting Jews: American Jewish Detective Stories* (Rutgers University Press, 2004). He teaches American Jewish literature, Jewish cultural studies, 20th-century American literature and popular culture, and literary theory.

Cliff Hackel
Producer/Editor

Cliff Hackel, Producer/Editor Cliff Hackel is an Emmy-award winning documentary producer/editor with over twenty years of freelance experience working for commercial networks, cable outlets and PBS. Mr. Hackel received an Emmy for documentary editing in 1990 for ABC's *The Koppel Report: Death of a Dictator*, and has a strong background in creating personal profiles for television. Mr. Hackel produced and edited the award-winning PBS documentary *Rediscovering Dave Brubeck* that profiled the legendary jazzman, as well as magazine length shows for CNN about Grammy award-winning record producer Daniel Lanois and best-selling author Anne Lamott. He has also edited programs for both broadcast and cable networks including ABC, CBS, PBS, CNN, National Geographic Television, The Discovery Channel, and American Movie Classics. His body of work also includes over a dozen PBS specials, including various episodes of *Frontline*. Mr. Hackel's work has received several Emmy nominations, including the *PBS Health Quarterly* in 1991, CBS's *The Kennedy Center Honors* in 1994, CNN's *Arkan: Wanted in 1997*, CNN's *Operation Teacup* in 1998, and PBS's *Critical Condition* in 2000.

Stephen L. Rabin
Advisor

As President of the Educational Film Center (EFC), Stephen L. Rabin brings over twenty years of experience and expertise in educational filmmaking to *The First Basket*. During his tenure at EFC, Mr. Rabin has overseen production on all EFC projects, including the PBS primetime evening features *The Marshall Plan*; *One Woman, One Vote*; *Off Limits*; *Harry Hopkins: At FDR's Side*; *The Odyssey Of John Dos Passos*; and *America's Embattled Economy*. As the former Media Program Director at the National Endowment for the Humanities, Mr. Rabin was responsible for the development and funding of more than 500 hours of national primetime television and radio programming.

Neil Keller

Private Archivist/Collector

Neil Keller is one of the foremost private collectors and experts on the subject of Jews in sports. For over two decades, Mr. Keller has collected memorabilia of Jewish people in all sports, entertainment and politics among other areas. His collection may be the largest such private collection in the world with more than 12,000 items (from various countries). He has given lectures to various Jewish organizations in United States and Canada, written articles for Jewish newspapers, and been featured in articles in *The Washington Post*, *Sports Collectors Digest*, and *The Jerusalem Post*, and other publications. Mr. Keller is also the subject of the documentary film, *Obsessed with Jews*.

Linda J. Borish (Ph.D., University of Maryland)

Associate Professor: Department of History, Western Michigan University

Linda J. Borish teaches 19th-Century American Social and Cultural History, American Sport History, Women's History, and American Studies and Material Culture and has published articles on Jewish American women, sports, and social change.
