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Nonfiction film: Jewish basketball legends? Who knew? 8

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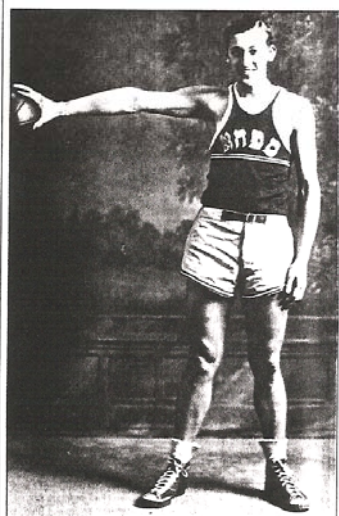
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A Jewish basketball team from 1921-22, "Jewish culture has traditionally celebrated the cerebral over the physical," says filmmaker David Vyorst.



Photographs from Leonard Silber Film



FORERUNNER: Inky Lautman of the Philadelphia SPHLAs (South Phila. Hebrew Assn.), circa 1939-40.

NONFICTION FILM

Honoring Hebrew hoopsters

"The First Basket" documents the early days of organized basketball.

GARY GOLDSTEIN

Did you hear the one about the Jewish basketball legends? No, that's not the intro to a Jackie Mason joke or fodder for a Mel Brooks movie, but the basis of the perception-altering new documentary "The First Basket," opening Friday in Los Angeles.

Produced and directed by David Vyorst, the movie takes a comprehensive look at the early days of basketball and the profound influence that Jewish players, mostly sons of Eastern European immigrants, had on what is now considered the world's second most popular sport (soccer is first). As narrator Peter Riegert asks at the start of the film, "Who knew?"

The movie features a wide range of nostalgic archival footage and memorabilia, plus interviews with such "hardwood heroes" as original New York Knickerbockers Ralph Kaplowitz, Sonny Hertzberg and Ossie Schachtman (who is credited with shooting the first basket in the NBA). It also examines such key cultural issues as anti-Semitism, the social factors that led waves of inner-city Jewish kids to basketball and the sport's aid in their American assimilation, how suburban migration shrank the Jewish presence in basketball after 1950, and the sport's latter-day resurgence in Israel.

Vyorst, a policy and public relations specialist, committed to documenting this multilayered subject more than 10 years ago. "I was rediscovering my Jewish roots and my love of basketball at the same time and the two had become powerful motifs in my life," Vyorst said by phone from his Washington, D.C., office. "Then I heard a radio interview with the 1946 Knicks and some of the original NBA players, all of whom were Jewish, and I just knew there was an important story to be told."

The first-time filmmaker, however, didn't anticipate some of the ambitious project's inherent challenges. "I didn't realize how hard getting images for every detail in the film and licensing each image would turn out to be," Vyorst said. With the help of various researchers and consultants he employed a "by-all-means-necessary approach" to unearthing and securing the vast archival material, a lengthy process that contributed to the movie's six-year assemblage.

Tracking down the surviving former pro players and coaches was also time-consuming, although infinitely rewarding. "They were the nicest old guys in the world. I wish they

would've adopted me as their grandson," joked Vyorst. He added, "Getting to know [ex Boston Celtics coach] Red Auerbach was one of the greatest times of my life." (The knicks' Hall of Famer died in 2006.)

Vyorst also gives points to narrator Riegert, the actor best known for such movies as "National Lampoon's Animal House" and "Crossing Delancey" and his recurring role on "The Sopranos." Noted Vyorst: "Peter has a good Yiddishkeit irony in his voice and yet the drama in his speech is subtle. I worked perfectly for the film." Riegert, who had previously only narrated a 1989 PBS documentary, immediately agreed to be involved. "I'm fascinated by how different groups have had an impact on American culture," said Riegert, calling it from Manhattan. "Jewish basketball is now a big part of popular culture, the project seemed even more intriguing."

In addition, Riegert one-upped as a "quasi-social worker" at the University Settlement House on New York's Lower East Side, the area now in some cases, the exact spot where many of the young Jewish men featured in the movie learned to play basketball. "That coincidence really made the film feel like a natural fit for me," Riegert said.

There's no better fit for the picture, though, than 12-time NBA All-Star Delphi Schayes, perhaps the most notable hoopster profiled in the movie. Schayes, a 16-season veteran of the Syracuse Nationals, and his reincarnation, the Philadelphia 76ers (and father of retired NBA journeyman center Danny Schayes), said he was not only "moved and impressed" when he initially saw "The First Basket" but struck by how different the actual game now looks compared to how it appears in the film's extensive newsreel footage.

"Today's game is not the game of movement it used to be," said the 80-year-old Schayes, reached by phone at his Syracuse, N.Y., home. "Years ago it was more team oriented, but now there's more focus on individual skills. Still, you can't beat today's players for their sheer athletic ability. They're tremendous." (Laker guard Jordan Farmar is one of the very few Jewish players in today's NBA.)

Vyorst has a theory about why Jewish jocks of yesteryear such as Schayes are not as well known as many other semite sports figures. "Jewish culture has traditionally celebrated the cerebral over the physical," Vyorst said. "Even today, at least in America, we don't associate Jewish culture with athleticism, unlike the way it's associated with entertainment."

"The First Basket" finds a way to highlight them both.

Goldstein is a freelance writer. calendar@latimes.com