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# When Basketball was Jewish

## Abstract

Philosopher-novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, writing in *Jewish Jocks: An Unorthodox Hall of Fame*, describes Barney "Tiny" Sedran, born Bernard Sedransky on the Lower East Side of New York, as a quintessential Jewish basketball player: "manically energetic, compulsively alert, upending expectations, and compensating for short—really short—comings" (17). Sedransky was the "shortest player ever inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame," she writes, who excelled at a time "when Jews ruled basketball — and lest you think those last three words are a misprint, let me repeat: Jews ruled basketball" (17). Indeed, in the modern era it is easy to forget who the great boxers and basketball players were, for these "city" sports have changed, just like the neighborhoods that stimulated their growth. Previous books have explored the topic of Jewish exceptionalism in sport from a broad historical-sociological perspective. Peter Levine's *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (1993) chronicles how sport helped transform Jewish immigrants into citizens in full. Allen Bodner's *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (1997) focuses on boxing's golden era in the 1920s and 1930s, when Jewish fighters vied for ring dominance against Italian- and Irish-American opponents. Each of these writers provide a specific historic context for their subjects. The header of Goldstein's essay, for instance, contains the title, the subject, and dates: "Tiny Baller," "Barney Sedran, (1891-1964)" (17). [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Basketball, Jewish players, Urban sports

## Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Jewish Studies | Sports Studies

## Comments

Review of Douglas Stark's *When Basketball was Jewish: Voices of Those Who Played the Game*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.

## when basketball was jewish

**Reviewed by Jack Ryan, Vice Provost and Dean of Arts and Humanities at Gettysburg College**

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Philosopher-novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, writing in *Jewish Jocks: An Unorthodox Hall of Fame*, describes Barney "Tiny" Sedran, born Bernard Sedransky on the Lower East Side of New York, as a quintessential Jewish basketball player: "manically energetic, compulsively alert, upending expectations, and compensating for short—really short—comings" (17). Sedransky was the "shortest player ever inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame," she writes, who excelled at a time "when Jews ruled basketball — and lest you think those last three words are a misprint, let me repeat: Jews ruled basketball" (17). Indeed, in the modern era it is easy to forget who the great boxers and basketball players were, for these "city" sports have changed, just like the neighborhoods that stimulated their growth. Previous books have explored the topic of Jewish exceptionalism in sport from a broad historical-sociological perspective. Peter Levine's *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (1993) chronicles how sport helped transform Jewish immigrants into citizens in full. Allen Bodner's *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (1997) focuses on boxing's golden era in the 1920s and 1930s, when Jewish fighters vied for ring dominance against Italian- and Irish-American opponents. Each of these writers provide a specific historic context for their subjects. The header of Goldstein's essay, for instance, contains the title, the subject, and dates: "Tiny Baller," "Barney Sedran, (1891-1964)" (17).

Douglas Stark's *When Basketball was Jewish: Voices of Those who Played the Game* does not include Barney Sedran, except for a handful of references about his work as a basketball coach. Not including the shortest player ever inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame who also happened to be Jewish seems like an extreme oversight. More likely, though, Sedran did not sit for many

interviews; or if he did, the interview was not properly archived. Stark presents twenty transcriptions of interviews with Jewish basketball players who were as significant athletes. Dolph Schayes is perhaps the most recognizable name among the twenty for contemporary basketball fans, probably because of his son's college and NBA careers. What Stark does not do, however, is provide the necessary historic framework for these players, especially the dates of their professional careers. For example, the entry for Louis "Red" Klotz, who was, among other things, the founder of the Washington Generals, the team the Harlem Globetrotters defeated night after night for decades, opens with little information: "I grew up in South Philadelphia, and that neighborhood was all about basketball. I lived in the Jewish area. Basketball was a sport that excited us" (179). Many of the interviews open with birthdates. Phil Rabin, for instance, answers what must have been the standard opening question for many of the players profiled: "I was born July 10, 1913, in Paterson, New Jersey. At the time it was one of the top cities for basketball. There was a professional team called the Paterson Crescents. I would carry the bags for a few players. Later in life, I played for them" (127). Readers learn Rabin's birthdate, but when he played for the Paterson Crescents is never documented, which is a serious omission. While the transcriptions can be intriguing—Red Sarnchek claims that basketball "was the recreation thing of the socialists and the labor movement" (110)—the lack of detailed historical markers is a flaw that this book never overcomes. While it is true that these athletes struggled for an American identity on both an individual and a collective level, their histories needed a chronological frame in order to highlight their achievements. As Stark notes in his "acknowledgments," the interviews are divided into four groups: "the late 1970s and early 1980s," the "late 1980s," the "late 1980s and early 1990s," and the "early to mid-2000s" (ix-x). Only the final group was interviewed by Stark himself. Moreover, the interviews are not presented in this tidy decade-by-decade structure. Stark also did not include the interview questions used with each group, and therefore an unevenness appears when some interviewees are asked who the best overall player is today while others are not asked that question, which inadvertently contributes to the structural hodgepodge. At times, a page can read like a sound recording,

lacking the style and flow of a well-crafted essay. Still, compiling this information and presenting these athletes to readers was clearly a labor of love for Stark.

His 2011 book, *The SPHAS: The Life and Times of Basketball's Greatest Jewish Team*, is a valuable contribution to basketball history, American urban history, and the history of Jewish life. Founded in 1918, the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association's team (SPHAS) played in the American Basketball League. The team dominated the league, capturing seven championships in thirteen seasons. While researching this book, Stark began to uncover the stories of Jewish basketball players who had faded from popular memory. One half of the twenty players profiled in *When Basketball was Jewish* had some connection with SPHAS, either as players or opponents. As Joel "Shikey" Gotthoffer observed, "Before we disbanded we became the darlings of Philadelphia. Connie Mack's ballclubs were no longer the darlings, the SPHAS were" (74). Cities in the Northeast were all basketball hotbeds. If a single theme traces though Stark's book, it is that basketball helped the children of Jewish immigrants become American by their engagement with an American game.

Basketball became popular because of its simplicity. All that was needed was a ball, or a facsimile of a ball, and a goal. The city game that evolved from these primitive tools became about running, passing, and cutting to the basket. Stark's book "reveals the game's arc from its humble beginnings to its place in society at the dawn of the sixties" (xii).

Teams like the SPHAS were revered by Jewish community members because they represented integration in the face of ever present antisemitism, especially on the road. Almost all of the players interviewed were asked about antisemitism, and they respond with examples that more often than not illustrates their place as athletes, not just Jewish athletes. Moe Goldman's answer was typical: "In the [American Basketball League], there was antisemitic feeling among the fans in other towns. We went to Prospect Hall in Brooklyn to play the Visitations, and the first row of spectators when we went by would poke us with cigarettes. ... I think it was

Jewish-Gentile. They'd call us "Jew bastard" or something like that. Maybe it was a little intensified for the SPHAS, but I think they did it for every team. Most of the teams in the ABL had Jewish players" (137-138). While antisemitism was and remains a sad fact of the American experience, Goldman implies that if you were the opposition then you were in for it no matter what.

Every player Stark profiles places basketball first. Dolph Schayes, perhaps, sums up what basketball meant to him by quoting his mother after she was asked by his Aunts about his job prospects after graduating from college with a degree in engineering: "Oh, Adolph is going to become a professional basketball player. What kind of a job is that for a nice Jewish boy?" (288). Schayes is indicative of the pleasure each of these men took from the game, he exemplifies how Jews helped basketball develop as both a city game and a thinking man's game won by combining offense and defense, and he had a Hall of Fame career.

*When Basketball was Jewish* is a flawed collection. Each interview lacks precise chronological anchors, markers that would allow readers to situate the speaker in a particular era. At times, some interviews read like transcriptions, rather than edited and refined statements presented in a professional journalist manner. What this collection does do, though, is elevate the voices of twenty distinguished Jewish basketball players, men who played the city game with passion, precision, and pride.

Stark, Douglas. *When Basketball was Jewish: Voices of Those Who Played the Game*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 301 pp. 2017.

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