Upstate New York: Capital of Professional Basketball

by Dominick Caggiano


Upstate New York was once the basketball capital of the United States. Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo were all homes to professional basketball teams. However, economic decline in the region, new modes of transportation that allowed teams to travel greater distances, the spotlight of national television, the growing importance of advertising markets, and the professionalization of professional sports all led to the decline of professional sports in the region. Once the jet engine made it possible for teams to rapidly cross the continent in the late 1950s, basketball in upstate New York was doomed.

The Rochester Royals, the Syracuse Nationals, and the Buffalo Braves struggled financially in part because of growing salaries in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Bob Cousy, the star point guard of the great Boston Celtics, became the first president of the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) in 1954 when the average player salary was eight thousand dollars a year. The average player salary increased to twelve thousand dollars in 1958. The owners formally recognized the players’ union after the players threatened to boycott the NBA’s first televised All-Star Game in 1964. With union recognition, players received a pension plan and other benefits and the average player salary skyrocketed to over two hundred thousand dollars by 1976. Higher salaries were the final nail-in-the-coffin of professional basketball in upstate New York.

The Rochester Royals were a successful team in the National Basketball League (NBL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) from 1945 to 1957. The Royals made the playoffs in each of their three seasons in the NBL and won the championship in 1946. The Royals’ success continued after the NBL and NBA merged 1949. They made the playoffs in their first seven seasons in the NBA and won the NBA championship in 1951. Their success continued until the 1954-1955 season. After the season, owner Les Harrison stepped down as head coach and their two stars departed; Bob Davies retired and Arnie Rizen was traded to the Boston Celtics. The team started three rookies the next season and its performance and profitability continued to decline, despite a move into the seventeen-thousand seat War Memorial Arena in Rochester. After the 1956-1957 season, the Royals relocated to Cincinnati where they became the Cincinnati Royals. This proved to be a temporary home and the team that was originally the Rochester Royals is now known as the Sacramento Kings.

The Syracuse Nationals was another enormously successful organization in upstate New York. The Nationals were in existence from 1946 to 1963 and qualified for the playoffs in all seventeen seasons. They won three NBA Eastern Division Championships and the NBA Championship in 1955. The Nationals were led by prominent stars such as Hal Greer and Dolph Schayes. However, Philadelphia investors Irv Kosloff and Ike Richman purchased the team from owner Danny Biasone in 1963 and the moved it to Philadelphia to fill the void left when the Warriors left Philadelphia for San Francisco. The Syracuse Nationals were the final National Basketball League to move and the last small market team in the National Basketball Association.

The Buffalo Braves joined the NBA in 1970 as part of a league expansion. Four teams from smaller cities were awarded NBA teams – the Buffalo Braves, the Cleveland Cavaliers, the Houston Rockets, and the Portland Trailblazers. While the Braves struggled in their first two seasons, they qualified for the playoffs in three out of their next four seasons. They “turned around” after hiring Jack Ramsay, an innovative coach, and drafting Bob McAdoo, who went on to become Rookie of the Year and the league’s 1975 Most Valuable Player of the Year. However, the team’s success did not last long. Ramsay resigned as coach after the team lost to the Boston Celtics in the playoffs after the 1976 season. In 1977, John Y. Brown Jr. purchased a controlling interest of the team in 1977 for approximately six million dollars. The league agreed that if average attendance fell below 4,500 per game, the team could be relocated to Southern California. The Buffalo Braves eventually became the San Diego Clippers and later the Los Angeles Clippers.
Bob MacAdoo (1972-1986)

**Born:** September 25, 1951 in Greensboro, N.C.  
**Height:** 6-9; **Weight:** 225 lbs.  
**College:** North Carolina  
**Drafted:** Buffalo Braves (1972)  
**Career PPG:** 22.1; **Rebounds:** 9.4  
**Member:** Basketball Hall of Fame (2000)

**Career Highlights**  
NBA Rookie of the Year, 1972-1973  
Most Valueable Player, 1974-1975  
Traded to NY Knicks, 1977  
NBA championship, LA Lakers, 1982

Dolph Schayes (1948-1964)

**Born:** May 19, 1928 in New York, NY  
**Height:** 6-8; **Weight:** 220 lbs.  
**College:** New York University  
**Drafted:** Syracuse Nationals (1948)  
**Career PPG:** 18.5; **Rebounds:** 12.3  
**Member:** Basketball Hall of Fame

**Career Highlights**  
All-America at NYU, 1949  
Twelve-time NBA All-Star, 1951-62  
All-NBA First-Team, 1952-55, 1957-58  
NBA championship, Syracuse Nationals, 1955