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Blackhawks pulled together the Tri-Cities

Continued from Page 1S
of the *Davenport Times*. "It was something new. High school basketball was so big here at that time but they did OK, too."

They didn't draw 3,500 every night, though. The second game attracted only 1,700. The largest crowd was 4,400 for the season finale against Fort Wayne. It came after the team already was eliminated from the playoffs and it sent a message. Ferris immediately announced that the team would return for the 1947-48 season.

Attendance grew to an average of 3,258 and by the time the season ended, 450 season tickets already had been sold for the next year.

In 1948-49, their last season in the NBL, the Blackhawks reached a peak with an average of 4,594 paying customers per game. The business was thriving enough to make some people sorry they didn't get in on the ground floor.

"Dumbest thing we did ... was to pass up a chance to buy a stick of stock in the local National Basketball League franchise," Rock Island Argus columnist Bill Kinney wrote in 1949. "Still, salaries and running expenses are high ... so perhaps Leo Ferris, B.W. Grafton and other shareholders are welcome to the headaches that go with the dividends."

In 1949-50, in the new NBA, the Blackhawks' average attendance slipped slightly to 4,442. In '50-51, its last season here, it slipped to less than 3,000 people per game.

The team never did quite as well on the court. Although observers remember the Blackhawks as being spirited and competitive, they had only one winning season, 1948-49. They underwent in-season coaching changes in all but their first year.

The first coach, Hickey, was an affable Irishman who had been a star with the New York Celtics. But apparently he was a better storyteller than coach.

The team finished with a modest 19-25 record that first year and 20 games into the second season, Hickey was replaced.

Bobby McDermott, who had led both Fort Wayne and Chicago to NBL titles as a player-coach, replaced Hickey and the Blackhawks improved noticeably.

They moved from fifth place to second in the last 40 games of the 1947-48 season and bounced in and out of first place during the first 45 games of '48-49. McDermott, known for his devastating two-handed set shot as a player, had coached the club to a respectable 25-20 at that point but it wasn't good enough.

Out went McDermott and in came Roger Potter, who had retired as Moline High School's coach to enter private business. Potter went 11-8 the rest of the way but when he lost four of the first five games in 1949-50, he was replaced by Auerbach, who would later build the Boston Celtics into a dynasty. The team had three coaches in 1950-51.

The flow of players was similar. By the end of the third season, 1948-49, only one player was still around from the original group that moved over from Buffalo in 1947.

That was Don Otten, who had been an all-time great at Bowling Green and was one of the NBL's most dominant players. The Modern Encyclopedia of Basketball lists Otten as being 6-foot-9, 245 pounds, but he was listed at various times in his career as either 6-11 or 7-foot. In any case, he was a giant in that era.

He averaged 12.8 points per game for the Blackhawks in 1946-47, 13.7 in '47-48 (second only to NBL superstar George Mikan), and a league-leading 13.8 in '48-49.

Among the other prominent players of those first few years were Stan "Whitey" Von Nieda, Billy Hassett, Dwight "Dike" Eddleman, Murray Wier, Don Ray, Dee Gibson and McDermott himself.

Von Nieda, a scrappy forward from Penn State, averaged 12.1 points in 1947-48 and was named to the NBL All-Rookie team. He was also voted the Blackhawks' most popular player after that season.

Hassett, from Notre Dame, averaged 10.6 points per game that season and emerged as the team's captain and most combative player.

"It seemed like every game or so he'd get into an argument with the officials," said Jim Gustafson of Cambridge, Ill., a frequent spectator at Blackhawks games. "Hassett would get face to face with them and really go at it.

"I think it was just to put on a show because then everybody would just walk away and forget it. But the crowd loved it."

Such events were commonplace. While many of the players were solid citizens who went on to distinguished careers beyond basketball, the NBL and BAA weren't a haven for gentlemanly behavior.

"The players were old GIs, and many of them had more eyes than teeth," wrote Terry Pluto in his 1992 book "Tall Tales." "They liked basketball but they'd rather drink beer than play ball. And they'd rather fight than drink."

In fact, Von Nieda and Hassett were co-owners of a bar in downtown Moline. The Timeout Tavern, at 527 14th Street, was a popular hangout for players along with the Best Ever Cafe in Rock Island.

The Timeout Tavern is closed but the massive Blackhawks mural that hung on the wall still survives. It now resides at Gatsby's in Moline.

Most of the other signs of the team's existence are gone. Area museums and historical societies have no photos or items relating to the Blackhawks. Only a handful of local collectors have bits of Blackhawks memorabilia — programs, photos, ticket stubs.

There's not much left now except memories.

"Those were great days," James Grafton said. "They normally played on Sunday and it was almost like a social event. It's the one thing in the world that first pulled together the Tri-Cities. People came from both sides of the river to watch those games."

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