

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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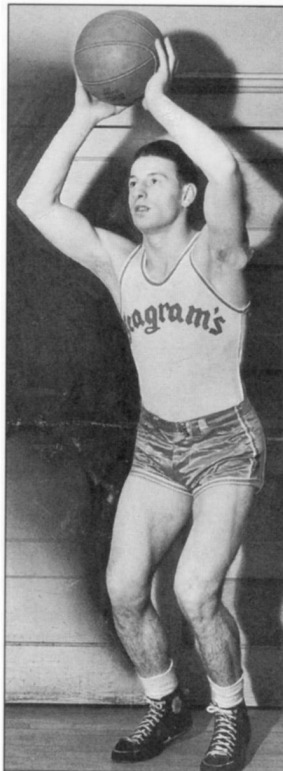
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The Rochester Royals The Story of Professional Basketball

by Kevin Cook





The Rochester Royals in the 1946-47 season.

Front row left to right: Bob Davies, Fuzzy LeVane, William Holzman and Al Cervi. Back row: Les Harrison, Al Negratti, LeRoy King, George Glamack, Arnie Johnson, Frank Beatty and Ed Malanowicz. (Gannett Newspapers)

COVER: Al Cervi of the Rochester Royals makes a basket during a game in this undated photograph. (Rochester Public Library).

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Les Harrison and The Rochester Royals

The story of professional basketball in Rochester is largely the story of one man, Les Harrison. Almost single-handedly, he formed, coached and owned one of the world's most talented and successful basketball clubs of the late 1940s and early 1950s. A shrewd sports operator, he built his team through perceptive and opportunistic player transactions. While maintaining a vision of bringing to Rochester the best in athletic entertainment, Harrison took great personal financial risks. He consistently competed against other franchises with better arena facilities, bigger bankrolls, and larger population pools. For a time, he triumphed over them. However, the growing success of professional basketball, a success in which Harrison had played a key role, eventually contributed to the downfall of his Royals. Pro basketball became a nationally recognized major-league sport in which smaller cities, such as Rochester, could not compete financially with metropolitan teams. Additional factors were detrimental to Harrison's franchise. The growth of suburbs and competing local entertainments, as well as, ironically, the team's own success on the court, also contributed to the club's demise. Still, Harrison had succeeded in giving his hometown a brief taste of the highest level of athletic competition, a significant contribution to the cultural life of Rochester.

The Royals were not initially formed as a professional franchise, but rather evolved from semi-professional roots. Les Harrison had been a local high school basketball star, graduating in 1923. Immediately, he began to both organize and play for semi-pro teams sponsored by two liquor companies, Seagrams and Ebers Brothers. While running a fruit and vegetable business inherited from his father, he continued to compete on the basketball court. By 1930, both basketball clubs were being coached and entirely run by Harrison. He paid his players by the game and, like other team managers, encouraged opposing players to jump to his squad, even during the season. Harrison's teams played against the area's top semi-pro competition, with the Seagrams twice competing in Chicago's World Professional Basketball Tournament. This tournament featured a wide open field of 14-16 semi-pro and professional teams. Rochester was defeated early in the competition of 1940 and 1941, but it is indicative of their national reputation that they were even invited. Harrison left the Ebers Bros. organization and moved the Seagrams into the 4200 seat Edgerton Park Sports Arena for the 1943-44 season. In the process, he changed the club's name to the Rochester Pros. The local Gannett newspapers, which were dry, had disliked giving indirect advertising to the liquor business through game coverage on the sports pages and had pressed the sponsors to adopt a new team name. Harrison began to regularly schedule the most prestigious national teams, such as

the Harlem Globetrotters and New York Renaissance. Harrison's talent scouting acumen grew as he began to sign former collegiate stars from distant schools such as Notre Dame and Dartmouth. Although the Pros were only semi-professional, Harrison still worked to bring his city the best competition the sport had to offer. Clearly, he had a financial incentive but, as will be seen, he persevered with this version even when his pocketbook suffered. Harrison was a practical businessman, but also civic-minded. Soon, he had an opportunity to take local sports to a higher level. The National Basketball League (NBL) was looking for a new franchise.

During the early 1940s, pro basketball lacked a centralized organization. Several regional leagues had come and gone between 1900 and the mid-1930s until only two of significance remained: The American Basketball League, located in eastern cities, and the NBL of the Midwest. By the early forties, the NBL was clearly superior in talent. While the league possessed franchises in major cities like Cleveland and Chicago, teams were also based in minor areas such as Oshkosh and Sheboygan. Many NBL teams were not formed as commercial ventures alone. They were instead created by local citizens for the benefit of the community. For example, the Oshkosh All-Stars were founded by a local super-market owner to provide the town with rare winter entertainment. The Sheboygan Redskins were owned by a civic corporation of 120 stockholders and operated by a volunteer board of directors. The Fort Wayne club was owned by the Zollner Piston Co. Players worked for Fred Zollner's piston factory and received all gate receipts above team expenses.

Les Harrison and his brother, Jack, desired an NBL franchise but Seagrams and Ebers Bros. did not share their vision. If Harrison was to further his dream of big-time basketball, he would have to go it alone with Jack. According to Harrison, "my brother and I mortgaged everything we could lay our hands on and we got a franchise...I think it was \$25,000."¹ Harrison was now assuming financial responsibility for introducing a major-league sport to Rochester. Basketball would be his sole business as he coached and managed the new squad while Jack, a lawyer, handled all legal affairs for the franchise. Harrison's team would fit in well with the small-city format of the NBL, but he was unique in that he was the league's sole one-man operation (coach, owner, manager) and had no outside financial interests. For a second time, Les Harrison brought to the Rochester community a new level of basketball competition, but now he would assume personal risks.

The new Rochester franchise needed to be christened and a city-wide competition was launched. Fifteen year-old Richard Paeth won the prize, a \$100 victory bond. His winning essay recommended the name 'Royals,' because "what could be more fitting than this as a name for the team Les

Harrison is going to send out to bring the crown to Rochester?"²

This prophecy came true immediately. In their first NBL season, Rochester captured the league title, defeating Sheboygan 66-48 to sweep the final series in three straight games. The Royals were declared world champions by the national press. This intriguing squad featured such names as Otto Graham, future Hall of Fame quarterback for the Cleveland Browns, and Chuck Connors, soon to be known as the television star of *The Rifleman* and *Branded*. Further success came in a flood for Harrison and his club. The Royals won division titles in '46-'47 and '47-'48, although they were defeated in the league finals both seasons. While Harrison's squad was enjoying great sports success, seeds were also being planted for future disappointment. The city experienced winning seasons from the Royals' inception, never having to endure a down year for the team's first decade. Therefore, fan support had not been tempered through the fire of hard times on the basketball court. Winning appeared to come easily to the franchise and was probably expected as a matter of course by Rochesterians. Although community *interest* in the team was at first considerable, local *commitment* to the Royals was probably shallow.

In the meantime, Harrison's club attracted large crowds. The Royals sold out most of their games at Edgerton, and consistently averaged over 100,000: in attendance for NBL games during the late forties. But Harrison also scheduled exhibition games on league off days, an important source of revenue for all NBL clubs. According to Red Holzman, a guard on the Royals' at this time and now a hall-of-famer, "we played a lot of exhibition games and drew like crazy...(In 1945-46) we must have played a hundred exhibition games in addition to 34 league games."³ Club profits for the 1946-47 season were \$40,000. For now, Harrison was succeeding at the box office as well as in the win column.

Just as semi-pro teams had done, NBL clubs assembled their teams by competing for players who were free to seek employment with other clubs once their contracts had expired. Many players "jumped" contracts to play for another NBL squad, a continuing problem for a league without a strong central authority to prevent it. Therefore, it was imperative that team owners have great basketball sense, the ability to properly assess a player's current skills as well as his future potential. But they also needed to know where to search for such talent. Harrison excelled in his scouting ability, and his network of personal relationships throughout the basketball world informed him where the best players were to be found. An example of this 'nose' for talent was the acquisition of Andrew 'Fuzzy' Levane. Although a former St. John's standout, by 1945 Levane was in the Coast Guard. Harrison spotted him playing for a service team and hired him for the Royals.

Three players provided a strong foundation for the early Royals: Bob

Davies and Bobby Wanzer at guard, and Arnie Risen at center. The formation of this team core is a further example of Harrison's skilled exploitation of old-fashioned team building. As Davies related, "In 1945 on my way home...after being discharged from the Navy, a Seton Hall teammate of mine was asked by Les Harrison...whether he knew of any good ballplayers. This friend told him he knew the best offensive player in basketball (Davies)."⁴ Harrison's network of contacts also served him well in netting Wanzer. The year following his signing, Davies coached



Rochester Royals team packed up a car to open the 1946 season by practicing at Seton Hall College, New Jersey. From left to right are: George Glamack, Arnie Johnson, Manager Les Harrison, Jack Harrison, Al Cervi and Jim Quinlan. (Rochester Public Library)

his Alma mater, Seton Hall, while still playing for Harrison. One of the Seton Hall stars was Wanzer, whom Davies most probably helped steer to Rochester. The acquisition of Risen demonstrated Harrison's eye for talent. Risen was a member of the Indianapolis franchise. Although his considerable skills were recognized throughout the league, Harrison realized that his potential exceeded his asking price, \$25,000. The Royals purchased him in time for the 1947-48 season. The combined success for this trio was remarkable. During the Rochester Royals' tenure in the National Basketball Association (NBA, to be examined presently) each one was distinguished numerous times as a member of All-Star and All-NBA teams. These three popular players were critical to Harrison's success and provided his club with nationally known stars.

The Basketball Association of America (BAA) developed beside the NBL in the late forties but was created by a different class of owner than that of the older league. BAA franchises were founded by wealthy arena owners in large eastern cities, all but one of whom also ran professional hockey clubs. Their objective was to fill seats on nights their hockey team was not playing and no ice show was in town, and basketball had proven itself as a popular entertainment. Madison Square Garden in New York and other coliseums had hosted college tournaments for years with capacity crowds. The BAA's founders were experienced promoters of the major sport of hockey, adept at drawing an audience from a sophisticated big city population that had many activities competing for its leisure time. As has been seen, the majority of NBL owners were not excessively wealthy and operated their teams on a tight budget. If their clubs were not financially successful, they often did not have sufficient other income to absorb the loss. In contrast, most BAA owners had ample capital reserves outside of basketball. For example, Walter Brown, owner of the Boston Celtics, was able to survive a loss of \$350,000 during the first three years of the BAA.

The BAA lacked one thing, however, that the NBL had in abundance talented players. Its answer was to entice the Indianapolis and Fort Wayne NBL franchises to switch leagues, using the larger arenas as bait. The NBL clubs jumped at the chance for greater revenues and increased exposure for their products (the Indianapolis owner was a florist and Zollner, of course, produced pistons). Right on their heels came the NBL's Minneapolis Lakers and Harrison's Royals. The NBL continued on for another year before merging completely with the BAA. The enlarged league then took on the well-known name of today: National Basketball Association. Again, Harrison had moved Rochester professional basketball into the next evolutionary phase of the games' development.

The new NBA was in reality two leagues in one: an eastern division consisting almost entirely of the original big-city BAA franchises, and a western division made up of former NBL clubs. It was soon clear that the eastern clubs would benefit most from the merger. Teams were scheduled to play a majority of games within their own divisions, thus limiting the opportunities for small-city western division teams to be seen in the eastern arenas. NBL franchises had shared gate receipts between the home and visiting teams. In the NBA however, in a carry over from the BAA's charter, the host team kept all receipts. This meant that even when the Royals played their few games in the coliseums of the east, they did not benefit financially from the potentially larger crowds. Former NBL clubs were further hurt by a league policy that banned exhibition games. The small capacity of their gyms had made such extra contests necessary, but eastern owners viewed the practice as unbecoming a major sports league. Harrison, therefore, had a significant source of his total revenues wiped out.

Still, the Royals continued to win. From the 1948-49 through the 1953-54 seasons, the Royals never finished lower than second in their division and captured two divisional championships. In 1950-51 they won the NBA title and stood again atop the basketball world. Harrison was at the peak of his career and his praises were sung by *Democrat and Chronicle* sportswriter Matt Jackson:

As an owner he has bucked some of the biggest sports promotional bankrolls in the country. As a purchaser of basketball talent he has matched his skills in securing college and semi-pro prospects with experts...It's been quite an experience for a guy playing around with his own bankroll, stymied by a town which hasn't an adequate sized arena in which to parade his high-priced and talented performers...If there is any man in pro basketball who can match Harrison's record as a promoter, coach and owner it would be a good investment to get him under contract.⁵

By the mid-1950's, the team Harrison had formed in the pre-NBA years would prove unequal to the task as the league continued to evolve. The Royals' style of play as well as the age of its starting lineup gave Harrison a franchise ill-suited to the new fast-breaking style of competition. In addition, the process he had used to create the Royals was no longer possible. The result was an aging team that began, for the first time, to lose more than it won.

The traditional Rochester style of play, and indeed that of most NBA teams, had always been a methodical passing game that focused on defense. The Royals won not by overwhelming their opponents with field goals but by applying relentless defensive pressure in a low-scoring contest. The core of Harrison's team consisted of the veterans Risen, Wanzer and Davies. As already described, these and other players were brought together by Harrison prior to Rochester's entrance into the NBA. The Royal's owner either signed them as free agents or purchased them from another franchise. Rochester's trio of stars accounted for at least 40% of the team's total scoring for each season from 1948-49 through 1954-55, with a high of 58% in 1948-49. During these years, the Royals never experienced a losing season. Their composite winning percentage trailed only that of the Minneapolis Lakers.

1954 marked a watershed in the history of the NBA. The slow, almost brutally physical competition had been a concern of team owners and fans for years. Prior seasons had been played without a shot-clock, which would have provided a time limit within which a team was required to attempt a field goal. In a typical contest, the losing squad would be forced to foul an opposing player in the hope of regaining possession after a foul shot. Many games degenerated into an endless march to the foul lines between short periods of rough play. In an attempt to speed up

the action and improve pro basketball's image as a major sport in the same class as baseball, the league instituted two major rule changes in 1954. A 24 second shot-clock was installed and a fouled player was awarded an additional free-throw once the opposing team had fouled six times. These changes did, in fact, result in smoother, higher-scoring contests. The league scoring average jumped over thirteen points to 93.1 points per game (ppg). But the effect on the Royals was anything but beneficial. Rochester's scoring went up as well, increasing by about the same margin to 92.2. This was far less, however, than the pace setting Boston Celtics' 101.4 ppg and the averages of other fast teams. The more deliberate strategy of Harrison's Royals now seemed to belong in a slower, outmoded era. Part of the problem was the aging of the club's star



(From left to right) Rochester Royals Frank (Pep) Saul, Bob Davies and Bob Wanzer relaxed in a dormitory at Toledo University where the team was practicing for the 1949 season. Royals veteran player Davies had coached Saul and Wanzer at Seton Hall. (Rochester Public Library)

performers. At the season's start, Davies was 34 and the other leaders were 30, advanced ages for pro athletes of the fifties. Harrison experienced his first professional losing season in 1954-55. Rochester would never again experience a winning season. The painful reality was that the

club's NBA success lasted only as long as Harrison's pre-NBA starting lineup held together. Extending franchise success beyond that group's tenure would be a major challenge for Harrison.

However, the Royals' owner was again willing to take whatever measures necessary to bring professional sports success to the city. Twice in the past he had taken financial risks to give Rochester the highest level of basketball competition, obtaining first an NBL franchise and then an NBA team. He now realized that the team desperately needed a youth movement and took dramatic action. He knew, however that his team's historical success was now an ironic liability, and that he could no longer rely on the opportunistic signing of free agents. In contrast to the widespread free agency of the NBL era, NBA teams gained exclusive rights to recently graduated college athletes through a sequential draft, with clubs selecting in the reverse order of the league standings. Teams were also granted exclusive first rights to "territorial" draft picks. These were collegiates graduating from a school within a 50 miles radius of a franchise. A drafted player became the exclusive property of the team that drafted him until he was traded or released. Harrison thus turned to the only modern blueprint for assembling a competitive squad: the draft and the trade. Here too, however, the Royals' chances for success appeared dim. Rochester's previous year-by-year success had left Harrison with the low end of the draft choices. Rochester also lacked a prestigious local collegiate program that could give them quality territorial drafts, an advantage held by cities such as Boston and New York. Prior to the 1955-56 season, Harrison had not gained a true star through the draft in six years. Still, he moved boldly to create a younger team.

By early in the next season, 1955-56, his club featured seven rookies. Harrison had turned over the coaching reigns to Wanzer, but Davies had retired prior to the season and Risen had been traded for younger players. Surprisingly, the Risen deal was the team's first major player trade since Harrison had purchased Risen in 1948. Two of the first year players, Maurice Stokes and Jack Twyman, would soon become league stars, but the team as a whole remained inferior to past Royals squads. The losing continued and exacerbated an old problem, fan attendance.

A franchise's ticket sales can rise and fall for many reasons. The factors that hurt the Royals' attendance were connected to the transformation of the Rochester community, the Royals initial on-court successes, and, later, the team's failures.

Interestingly, ticket sales were disappointing even in the glory days of the team. As early as 1953, the local press bemoaned the lack of fan support even as the Royals continued to win on the court. Local sportswriter

Al Weber speculated in his column that:

Perhaps the team won so often that mere victory no longer satisfies the fans. Perhaps the fans of the early lush years have had their fill of basketball and the younger element has not yet taken to it. Perhaps people are fed up with the inadequate Edgerton Sports Arena. True, T.V. has kept many fans indoors on chilly winter evenings...Usually there are three prime requisites for a major basketball operation: a big bankroll, a name coach and a big arena in which to play. Les Harrison had none of these.⁶

Weber had touched on several possible root causes for the franchise's eventual failure. But first, was the city itself no longer able to afford the team?

Census figures show a rising suburban population while the city total remained static. Precise population statistics for the years 1945 through 1949 are not available. However, the decennial census statistics for 1950 and 1960 reveal much concerning suburban growth. Between 1940 and 1950, the county as a whole gained 50,000 residents, with 85% of this total appearing in the suburbs. The largest portion of this gain most certainly occurred in the last half of the forties as the war ended and servicemen returned home, the economy boomed, and the birth rate rose. During this period, the rising metropolitan population would have benefited the Royals since entertainments were still relatively limited during television's infancy. A comparison of income for the city and suburbs shows a significant difference. Median income for a suburban family was \$502 greater than its city counterpart. The suburbs of 1950 were clearly more prosperous than the city, but Rochester still held the majority of County population.

The migration of affluent residents from Rochester to the surrounding county appeared to accelerate in the fifties. In the eight years following 1947, suburban construction flourished as 24,000 new homes were completed. At the close of the fifties, 34% of Monroe suburbanites over five years of age had moved into their present home within the past half-decade, reflecting, at least in part, a flight from downtown. Between 1950 and 1960, the suburbs gained 113,000 residents, a 73% increase. However, in the same ten year span the *city* population actually *decreased* by 13,000. Rochester proper was shrinking while the surrounding towns boomed. The income gap had continued to expand, with the difference between median incomes of suburban and city families reaching \$1,924 by 1960. However, Rochester income was still comparable to that of other cities with NBA franchises. The citizens of Rochester could still afford to attend games as well as their counterparts in other areas. (These figures, of course, represent Monroe County of 1960, several years after the Royals had moved on. But it is clear that the trends previously noted – expand-

ing suburbs with faster growing incomes than the city proper – were well in progress while Harrison struggled at the box office.) Indeed, the Syracuse franchise, with a smaller population pool, had led the NBA in attendance for '50-'51, and had financial losses only one-third that of Harrison's during the fifties. Clearly, the urban community was still large enough and sufficiently wealthy to support the franchise. The growth of the suburbs did not by itself have a fatal effect on the pool of residents who could afford to attend games and do so conveniently. The complete answer to the mystery of the empty seats lies in the decline of pro basketball interest throughout all of Monroe County.



The Rochester Royals, 1950-51 Champions of the NBA. Left to right front row: Bob Davies, William Holzman, Paul Noel, Frank Saul. Back row: Bill Calhoun, Joe McNamee, Arnold Risen, Jack Coleman, Arnold Johnson. Inset Les Harrison. (Gannett Newspapers)

The burgeoning and prosperous local towns could potentially have provided a substantial share of game crowds despite the traveling distance, but such was apparently not the case. American suburbanites as a whole focused their leisure time increasingly on the home in the post-war era. In addition to an evening at home with the family, the Monroe County area began to offer other recreational activities. Non-city residents would no longer have to drive downtown for entertainment. For example, between 1946 and 1957, the number of suburban theaters increased from three to eight, and the number of golf courses outside the city limits grew from only one to three. So while the potential suburban fan base expanded, Monroe Countians also enjoyed more choices for leisure time activity. But none, of course, was more popular than television.

On opening night the season following their 1951 NBA title, attendance was a surprisingly low 2,316. For the first time at home, the Royals' action was televised. This almost surely stole some potential ticket sales. In a 1972 newspaper interview, Harrison echoes sportswriter Weber in citing television as creating attendance problems: "We played Tuesdays and Saturdays opposite Milton Berle and Imogene Coca. Attendance went down after our title year. It was just a matter of time before we had to give up".⁷ A look at the rapid growth of the television market supports his view. In 1950-51, the year the Royals were champions, only 24% of the nation's households owned a television. Six years later, the team's last season in Rochester, this percentage had risen to an astounding 79%. Monroe County shared the new national passion, with approximately 50,000 TV sets in the area by 1952. Sports fans could tune into national broadcasts of NBA games beginning that year and enjoy the league at home on Saturday afternoons.

Despite all of the above possible factors in the decline of Royals attendance, – the flight of the wealthy to the suburbs, competition from new and more numerous entertainments – a startling fact remains. In 1956-57 Harrison shared the War Memorial arena with the city's new professional hockey team, the Rochester Americans. The hockey franchise outdrew their basketball co-tenants by a ratio of a two-to-one. Clearly, the Royals suffered from the county's inability to support a pro sport.

The franchise's initial success, ironically, probably contributed to the waning of spectator interest. Bobby Wanzer blames season tickets:

I think that what happened was that in the beginning, we were in demand...And I guess we had a lot of season ticket holders. And...we couldn't build any new fans because we were sold out in the beginning, so I think what happened is that after a while people stopped trying to get tickets.⁸

In the immediate post-war years, the Royals eliminated general admission ticket sales to spare fans a long cold wait in the ticket line. Many who had stood patiently in the queue for an extended time were angry to find all tickets sold by the time they reached the box office. This, doubtlessly, alienated many potential spectators who could have filled empty seats left vacant in later years. When the War Memorial opened in 1955 and finally provided ample general admission seating, the fan base appeared to have eroded beyond salvage.

Many of the wealthier season ticket holders quite possibly moved to the suburbs and stopped attending games. Red Holzman, a member of Harrison's NBA championship team, remembers early Royals crowds as substantially upper class: "Anyone who was anyone came to our games. It was go to the game and dinner afterward – a Rochester Saturday night ritual, a dress up night. Men wore good suits and women put on their best dresses. Families came to the game and young marrieds, and politi-

cal types came to be seen.”⁹ Donald Fisher, writing in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, analyzed the advertisements appearing in Royals team programs of 1946-47, 1950-51, 1953-54. He found that ads for restaurants and night clubs declined, as did those for office equipment and airlines. Clothing advertisements shifted from stylish clothing and shoe stores to “cheaper sportswear and sneakers.” Ads for such items as alcohol and home appliances increased. In general, the advertisements illustrated a change in the audience that merchants were targeting, from white collar to blue collar. This lends support to the theory that a different class of spectator began to fill the stands as former season-pass holders moved from the city.¹⁰

The following attendance figures for the 1950s clearly illustrate Harrison’s box office troubles:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Attendance</u>	<u>Average game Attendance</u>
1950-51	81,872	2,408
1951-52	79,212	2,400
1952-53	65,535	1,872
1953-54	45,150	1,254
1954-55	58,800	1,633
1955-56	74,550	2,070
1956-57	83,330	2,315

The dismal attendance hurt Harrison in the pocketbook terribly. The figures below reveal the heavy losses he endured during the fifties:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Franchise Net Losses</u>
1951-52	-\$10,663
1952-53	- 30,400
1953-54	- 14,500
1954-55	- 34,600
1955-56	- 23,600
1956-57	- 17,500
1957-58	- 25,000
Total	-\$156,263

Ironically, Harrison’s club had been more profitable in the NBL. Actually, only the New York franchise was significantly profitable during this period, but most of the other league owners, of course, had other profitable enterprises. It is a measure of his commitment to keeping his club in Rochester that he continued to absorb such monetary losses.

Harrison’s financial problems played a key role in one of basketball history’s greatest missed opportunities. The Royals had finished last in 1955-56 and held the first draft choice. Bill Russell had led the University of San Francisco to two straight NCAA tournament titles, but the Royals passed him over in the draft. “It was one of my few mistakes,” Harrison said. “Russell looked real bad in a game we scouted. We found out later

that he knew we were watching him and did poorly so he wouldn't end up in Rochester".¹¹ In reality, Harrison, as well as every NBA club, almost certainly knew of Russell's true abilities. Red Auerbach, then coach of the Boston Celtics, contends in his autobiography that Harrison had approached the San Francisco star and brought Dolly King with him. King was a former black player for Harrison and Russell, also black, resented what he viewed as an attempt to use a black as recruiting bait. According to the story, Russell then told Harrison that he would have to match the supposed \$25,000 he was being offered by the Harlem Globetrotters, a figure in reality closer to \$17,000. Harrison could not afford such a sum and neither could the St. Louis Hawks, who had the second pick. The Celtics, who held the third pick, traded their starting center to the Hawks to move up in the draft sequence and eventually got Russell.¹² It may be remembered that nine years previously, Harrison had the resources to part with a similar amount of money to purchase Arnie Risen who, while a fine player, was not equal to Russell. The Celtics center went onto lead Boston to eleven NBA titles in thirteen years.

For a brief moment, the financial future brightened for Harrison in 1955 when his club moved into the new Rochester War Memorial, built by the city at a cost of \$7 million. Suddenly, the crowd capacity had nearly doubled to 8,000 and the Royals had a modern facility. Opening night attracted 5,723 spectators and, although the Royals lost, eventual Rookie-of-the-Year Maurice Stokes scored 32 points in an exciting debut. Unfortunately, fan interest did not hold up and Harrison averaged only 2,070 customers for the year.

Immediately following the end of the 1956-57 season, Harrison began to quietly seek greener pastures for his franchise. he had again finished well into the red financially, but he was committed to staying in basketball. he would sell only as a last resort if he could not find the Royals a more promising home, and then sell only to a Rochester interest. His first commitment was to his hometown, but he was still a practical businessman who could not lose money indefinitely. Harrison vented his frustrations in a newspaper interview:

We blew about \$30,000 this year [actually, \$25,000]...I am a businessman. I have to operate the same as a man running a department store. My franchise is worth \$100,000 as such. I have lost \$140,000 the last five years in basketball. To sell, I need \$240,000 to get even...This is my hometown and I would take less money from a local group than from an outside interest...I operated in the Sports Arena, which was a glorified warehouse...Everybody thought the new building would be the happy answer. What happened? The bowling (ABC) moved us out last season. This season all we see is ice [due to the Rochester Americans hockey team].¹³

Harrison met with municipal leaders in Cleveland and Cincinnati, finally choosing the latter as the Royals' new home. The Queen City boasted the 14,000 seat Cincinnati Gardens. Harrison announced the move at an April 4, 1958 news conference. His statement summed up the realities and shortcomings of trying to maintain a major sport in a relatively small city:

From a survey made, it was evident that the trend of the National Basketball Association is toward larger, major-league cities, with a potential draw of approximately one-and-a-half to two million people. In addition, it is necessary to include in the successful operation of a team the radio and TV financial market. The city of Rochester, with its excellent facilities and attractiveness, however, failed to come within the scope of these qualifications.¹⁴



The Rochester Royals when they were in the BAA. Les Harrison stands at the right of the table. (Gannett Newspapers).

Although it seemed that the story of the Rochester Royals had ended, it nearly took an intriguing turn. Cincinnati did not turn out to be the answer Harrison had sought for his ailing wallet. The Royals had drawn only 3,700 per game in their new city and he was ready to throw in the towel. First, he negotiated a deal with a group of businessmen from Washington, D.C. who wished to purchase the franchise for \$225,000 and move it to the nation's capital. However, the deal could be submitted to

the NBA Board of Governors for approval, Harrison received another offer, one more in turn with his feelings for his hometown. Rochester businessman Norm Shapiro reached an agreement with Harrison to purchase the Royals for \$250,000 and return the team to its first home. Harrison would be retained in the organization as a scout and consultant, a deal that appeared perfect for him. The Royals would return to where they belonged and he could stay in professional basketball without the financial responsibility. The only hurdle left was the approval of three-fourths of the Board of Governors, made up of the league owners. This barrier loomed large as many owners had voiced opposition to the Royals moving anywhere but to a major city. A few days before the Board was to meet, several Rochester citizens began to circulate petitions to be sent to the Board, appealing for the team's return and promising to purchase more tickets if given a second chance. In truth, there was no reason to expect that fan support would have improved. Rochester had largely ignored the Royals at the box office year after year, whether they were winning or not. The city had been given more than a fair chance to prove they could support a major-league team.

The petitions notwithstanding, the Board refused to bless the deal with Shapiro, but okayed a sale of the club to a competing Cincinnati group. The owners had several reasons for their decision, all of which concerned their desire to build an ever greater "big-time" image for the NBA. First, a lucrative TV contract with NBC was being negotiated. Potential sponsors wanted the games to be broadcast only from "major-league" cities. Second, allowing a return of the Royals to Rochester after only a year in the team's new home would make the NBA appear less than a first-class league. Finally, the University of Cincinnati's phenomenal star Oscar Robertson would be graduated in two years, and the Royals would have territorial rights to him. While conceding that the club would continue to lose money in the meantime, the Board of Governors believed that he would be such a box office attraction that he would be worth the wait. Thus, ironically, the territorial draft, which had been of no benefit to Rochester in the past, contributed to the city's failure to regain a franchise.

Before moving his Royals to Cincinnati, Harrison was able to keep an NBA franchise in a small market because of something akin to a "grandfather clause." While most of the other NBL holdovers had eventually folded or moved on to larger markets, Harrison could remain in the Flower City as long as he was able to survive financially. No matter how much pressure the league may have exerted to have him take his club elsewhere, he was still an owner and respected as one of the founders of the league. Therefore, the Royals evolved into a greater and greater anomaly in a professional sport that increasingly restricted its clubs to metropolises. Once Harrison did finally transfer his team to Cincinnati,

Rochester lost its tenuous claim to being a major sports-caliber town. From that point on, the new requirements for NBA franchises would apply, and Rochester clearly did not qualify. Neither the Royals nor any pro basketball team could again call it home.

It is interesting to note that the Syracuse Nationals survived until 1963 in a market that was even smaller than Rochester. As a minor consolation, the Nationals played two "home" games a year in the War Memorial before the former Royals die-hards. The survival of the Syracuse franchise showed that had Harrison been able to sell more tickets, the Royals could have survived in the NBA for at least another six years, the desires of the Board of Governors notwithstanding.

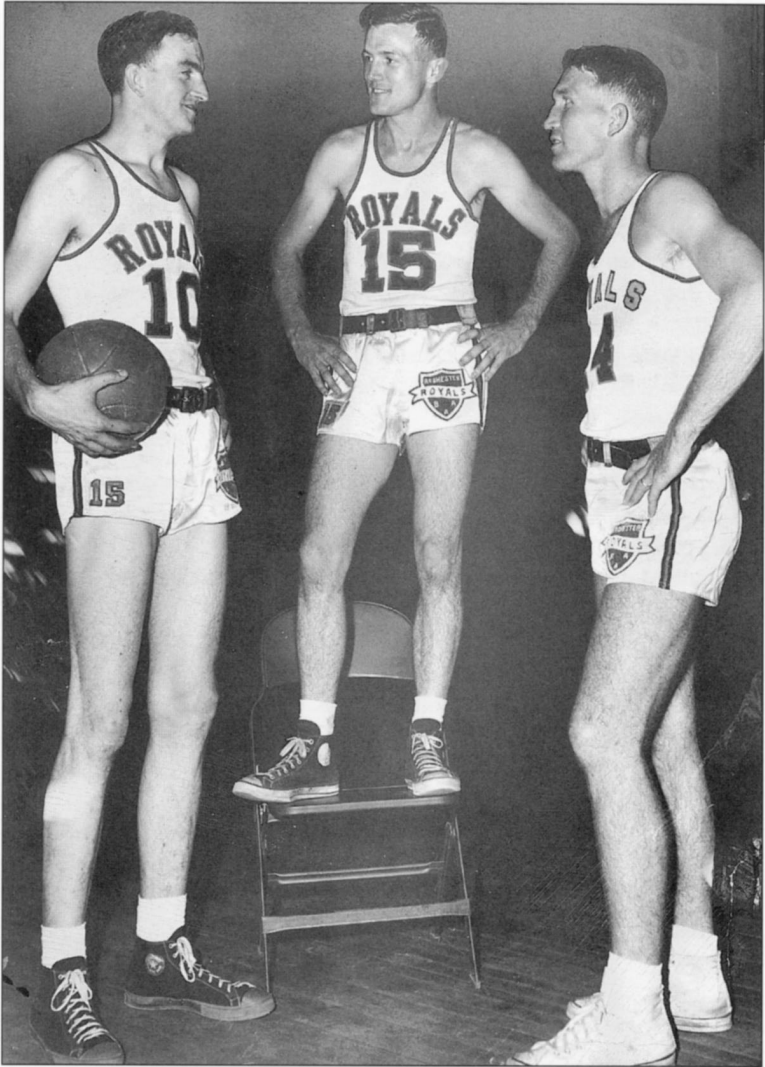
Harrison ultimately failed as a one-man franchise operator. He moved Rochester basketball to each successive level of competition but eventually moved one level too high. He had no choice, however, for it was obvious that regional leagues such as the NBL were passing. While successful as a team builder and money maker prior to joining the NBA, he was unable to sustain this success in the new league. This was due in part to constraints beyond his control and partly a result of his own shortcomings. The NBA's maturation into a major sports industry meant the end of exhibition income and other financial pressures for former NBL clubs. Harrison was also hampered by an inadequate home court until his final years in Rochester. It is not clear, however, why Harrison, an experienced basketball promoter, failed to maintain interest in his club while in the NBA. If tickets had been made available to more people for games at the Sports Arena, a wider fan base might have carried over to the new War Memorial coliseum.

Even if he had been able to draw larger crowds, the Royals almost certainly would have moved from Rochester by the mid-1960s, as did the Syracuse Nationals. By that time the popularity of pro basketball and potential for profit would have made a move to a larger city too attractive to pass up. Still, Harrison survived as a small-market owner (and more) longer than many big city franchise operators. He provided Rochester and Monroe County with a rich sports history. The memories his Royals left are still cherished by many in the community. But just as important is the example he set for others by overcoming relatively humble beginnings to reach the pinnacle of basketball success. He was truly a hometown success story.

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Frannie Curran had to stand on a chair to look 6 foot, 11 inch George Kok in the eye in September, 1949 while the team began conditioning games. Kok from the University of Arkansas and Jack Coleman (right) of the University of Louisville were new to the Royals. (Rochester Public Library)