

Plainfield's Weber - A Starter in the First NBA Game

Written by Del Harris



On November 1, 1946 in Toronto, Canada, the New York Knickerbockers were in town to play the Toronto Huskies in what is now considered the first NBA game, even though the league was actually named the Basketball Association of America (BAA) for the first four seasons. That was a

momentous event, considering how much a part of American life the NBA has become. While Indiana is proud of its role in propagating the game of basketball nation-wide, its fame came more from its pioneering in the first state high school basketball tournament than from ABA/NBA history. And then there is the claim to the first national collegiate champions, the 1932 Purdue Boilermakers of Piggy Lambert and famed star, John Wooden.

Of course, there are other Hoosier claims of pre-eminence such as being the first state to begin hosting competitive basketball games between two separate entities as opposed to recreational, as were the initial games in the Springfield YMCA in Massachusetts. It has generally been held by Hoosiers that the first game between teams from separate communities occurred when the Crawfordsville YMCA played the Lafayette Y in 1894, or was it? Hoosiers are extremely proud of our basketball history and the names of the many people who have dominated the game in one form or another within our borders and world-wide such as Wooden, Robertson, Bird and even Chuck Taylor of sneakers fame. And, certainly, no town wants to give up its claim to having started the competitive impetus that gave birth to seemingly forever rivalries. A blog by Chandler Lighty in 2016 in his Basketball History presentation cited notes from newspapers around the state that had recently been digitalized which showed that several other towns set up competitive games as early as 1892

in Evansville; and then in February of 1893, Earlham College students conducted a game. Soon after in 1893 the Indianapolis News reported a competitive game at the local Y; in the same year there was a game in Connersville, and in December of that year Columbus was calling basketball the "city's favorite game." Portland, Terre Haute and some Indiana University students reported games being played before that celebrated Crawfordsville/Lafayette game. It likely depends on a point of view of what constituted a competitive game. Still, there is no question that Montgomery County was the true incubator of basketball in the state with the massive contributions made by the Crawfordsville Y, Wabash College and the little town of Wingate. Of course folks in Lebanon, Thorntown, Franklin and several other outposts will be upset at seeing such a notion in print. This is simply to establish the point of the importance of the history of our game in our state to those who love the game dearly. Thus, the reason for this article.

For many years I had the honor of being the only Plainfield graduate in the HOF, and then another local took the "only" out of that distinction. Bob Lovell was inducted in the 2018 class for his many accomplishments in and for the game, and to think, I used to deliver the Indianapolis Star to his parents when he was a little boy. It got me to thinking about a man who had gained limited notoriety in our town when I was a young boy, a giant of a man in those days, Jake Weber. I had heard he was a very good player and I knew him personally and fairly well, I thought. Well, I should have, but in reality I did not. How could that be, as I look back on it now? I say that because I worked for him the summer of 1952 when he was building National Homes to catch up with the need for more affordable housing after World War 2. I helped put up about 10 of those homes that summer, though he would ultimately put up quite a lot more. And they are still standing and doing well after all this time. But here is the point: not once did I ever hear him say anything about playing basketball, or what the coach or I should be doing to be as good as he and his teams were just 15 years previously. And

even in a town of about 2000 at that time, no one ever came around and asked him anything about our basketball team, which was not very good at that time, and when they would ever get back to being a dominant team in Hendricks County again. This is incredible to me in retrospect.

So, for some reason unknown to me other than the stimulus to think about Plainfield at Bob Lovell's induction, I decided to check into how good Jake Weber may have been. I started by calling old friends in seeking to find a contact to one of his daughters that I remembered. I found that Judy, the firstborn, passed away in 2006. Of the three living girls—Jane, Carol and Cathie, I was told how I could contact Carol, the only one still living in the home town. Fortunately, their mother had kept a scrapbook that contained some good information which was in the hands of the youngest of the three remaining daughters. These were very enlightening and the ladies were quite enthusiastic about my quest. And then I scraped up some information on my own as well.

I came to believe strongly that Jake and his family are certainly due some level of recognition for his incredible exploits. I hope to do credit to Jake in this article, and hope I can convey to the reader how regretful I am that I did not get to talk to him about his marvelous career in what became a forgotten era, having been so overshadowed by the horrors of the Great Depression and the impending World War 2 for all of us who endured it, when Jake had such a remarkable career.

Born in Rushville in 1918, but moving to Plainfield for his high school years, Jake was big as a 6-3 freshman and was a starter on the varsity team from the beginning. He became a giant, the tallest player in Indiana high school hoop at the time, at just under 6-7 by his senior year. At that time six feet was still the standard for "tall," and most people assumed players that big just couldn't keep up

with the game, just too clumsy. Of course, Indiana had seen exceptions such as Homer Stonebraker of Wingate and Purdue fame, but it was indeed rare for such a big man to be outstanding at the game.

But Jake was a true athlete, not just an overgrown boy. We are here to talk of basketball, but it should be stated that he was an All-State end in football two years, and was an outstanding track performer in shot put, pole vault and high hurdles. His shot put record held for 40 years at Plainfield and he was second at the state meet each of his last three years and held the record for a time. He also held the county record for the high hurdles for a number of years, reportedly. One clipping showed that he was the leading scorer at a track meet at Southport in which he won all three of his events, even though his team fell far short of the title. And he was first baseman on the baseball team.



Having noted that, what Jake accomplished as a hoopster is absolutely stunning. His high school career alone is adequate for consideration into most state's Hall of Fame. He set the state all-time scoring record in his four years with 1,384 points, which was remarkable in those low scoring days. And led his Quaker teams to four consecutive sectional championships. Consider that Indiana had already boasted the likes of great players such as Stonebraker, Wooden and several other truly outstanding players around the state, when considering that scoring record.

But as good as Weber was, he was unable to get out of the Regional where Anderson, under the great Hall of Fame coach Archie Chadd, held sway. The Indians had won the state in 1935 and then again were standing in the way of all comers in 1937. And they were hosting the tournament! Nonetheless, Jake led all scorers in the regional, scoring 18 in the first game against Indianapolis Tech, but could not get past the home team who would go on to win the state title again. Many said that the dif-

ference was the home court. He was recognized as All-State a second time and played on the first Indiana All-Star team in 1937.

This would be a pretty good story, if it were to end there. But there is much more. Jake went to Purdue after graduating as an honor student to play for Hall of Famer Piggy Lambert. While one would expect that Weber's high scoring ways would have continued in a Boilermaker uniform, that was not the case. Still he played for three seasons on outstanding teams that went 46-16 and won the Big Ten in 1939-40, his junior year. He gained enough attention apparently through his defense and rebounding, for which Purdue has no records for that era, to be named to the International News Service Big 10 All-Star team. He caught the eye of the professional teams of the day, but then the US entered into World War 2.

Weber started his professional career with the Indianapolis Kautsky's in 1945 after the War ended, having lost some of what would have been four productive years had it not been for the War. The next year saw the start of the Basketball Association of America, which is what the NBA now claims as its initial season. The Kautskys wanted to be in the BAA, but they did not allow teams to be named for a business and so the application was withdrawn. This left Jake without a team, but he had been noted. Wikipedia states that "with no college draft in the league's initial year, there was no guarantee that the Knicks or the league itself would thrive.[14] Consequently, teams focused on signing college players from their respective cities as a way to promote the professional league.[13] The Knicks held their first training camp in the Catskill Mountains at the Nevele Country Club.[15] Twenty-five players were invited to attend the three-week camp. Players worked out twice a day and the chemistry between the New York natives was instant. [16]" But, as it turns out, the starting center would not be a New Yorker, but one Forest "Jake" Weber from Purdue University and Plainfield, Indiana.

The initial game in the NBA was scheduled to be played outside of the country, as strange as that seems now, in Toronto,

Canada. In that first game Jake Weber jumped center for the Knicks with his big number 11 on his back before a crowd of 7,090 fans in the Maple Leafs Garden hockey arena. The Knicks won that game 68-66 and they went on to finish 33-27 in that initial season. Still, the audience for that game has grown dramatically since the production of a television show that presented a History of the NBA. In fact you can be one of the millions of fans to subsequently see Jake on the opening NBA tip at website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgkCrYZBT34> for one.

Jake was sold to the Providence Steamrollers a few weeks into the season and he played the rest of that season there. Again, they did not keep track of anything but the shooting percentages, scoring, and assist statistics, so players like Jake who rebounded and defended inside did not register much in the way of stats. While he averaged only 3.5 points per game each with the Kautskys, Knicks and Steam Rollers, there wasn't a lot of scoring going on for anyone. The league shot 28% from the field and no player on the Knicks averaged as much as double figure points in the 1946-47 season. In fact only 20 of the approximately 150 players who played at least a game in the league that year were able to average as many as 10 points.

Certainly Jake lost good years of playing time since the War precluded professional basketball between 1941 and 1945, plus there was little money in it. By age 29 after the 1947 season the Webers had started a family and so Jake

<p>WEBER, (Jake) FOREST</p> <p>6'6" — 230 — 28</p> <p>Born in Rushville, Indiana. Attended Plainfield (Ind.) H. S. Held Indiana State scholastic scoring record of 1,384 points attained in 101 games. Selected on the Big Ten all-conference five in 1939. Won all-state honors in football at Plainfield during junior and senior years. Has three years of pro basketball experience, all in the mid-west. Married and has three daughters. Engaged in the coal business during off season.</p>	
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returned to Indiana where he went to Columbus to teach and do some coaching, then to Indiana University to teach in their ASTP program to help students avoid the issues associated with alcohol. From there he went to Greencastle High School to teach and finally back to Plainfield where he managed the Consumer Coal Company that his father had started. By 1951 he used his contacts from Purdue and Lafayette to build the National Homes in Plainfield as noted earlier. He later worked as an engineer for Paul Cripe Engineering and went into partnership with John Hart Development to build apartment buildings. He was an outstanding community leader in Plainfield, belonging to the Optimists, Lions, Masonic Lodge, Murat Shrine, Murat Highlanders (yes, with a kilt), and the Indianapolis FOP and PAL as well as the Retired Professional Basketball Players Association.

Thus, this was quite a life of accomplishment for one person, especially one who was too big to play basketball in his day. In the current era there are now 510 spots potentially available on NBA teams

since the rosters have been expanded to allow as many as seventeen under contract. In Jake's time there were eleven teams from major cities from Totonto to St. Louis with rosters of 12. So the chances for anyone to play at the start of the NBA were infinitesimal for a kid from small town Indiana, especially one too big to play basketball. And did I mention that he also was an outstanding tenor singer?

Del Harris, 2018

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgkCrYZBT34> is the youtube that has been watched by over 2 million people and he is number 11, jumping center for the New York Knicks that shows the first game and first basket that was scored in the NBA as the Knicks beat the Toronto Huskies, ironically played in an arena outside of the United States, but appropriately in the home country of the inventor of the game, Dr. James Naismith.