

# Harlem globetrotter



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Globetrotters were the creation of Abe Saperstein of Chicago, who took over coaching duties for a team of African-American players originally known as the Savoy Big Five (after the famous Chicago ballroom where they played their early games). At a time when only whites were allowed to play on professional basketball teams, Saperstein decided to promote his new team's racial makeup by naming them after Harlem, the famous African-American neighborhood of New York City.

The son of a tailor, Saperstein sewed their red, white and blue uniforms (emblazoned with the words " New York") himself. The lineup in that first game, for which the Globetrotters were paid \$75, was Walter " Toots" Wright, Byron " Fat" Long, Willis " Kid" Oliver, Andy Washington and Al " Runt" Pullins. The Globetrotters won 101 out of 117 games that first season and introduced many Midwestern audiences to a game they had not seen played before. As owner, coach, manager, publicist and sometimes even substitute player, Saperstein worked overtime to book games for his team.

By 1936, they had played more than 1, 000 games and appeared in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Montana, Washington and North and South Dakota. (The Globetrotters didn't actually play a game in Harlem until the late 1960s. ) Their first national championship appearance came in 1939, when the Globetrotters lost to the New York Renaissance. That same year, the team began to add the silly antics they later became known for, including ball handling tricks and on-court comedic routines. The crowds loved it, and Saperstein told his team to keep up the clowning around, but only when they had achieved a solid lead.

In 1948, the Globetrotters earned a new measure of respect by beating the Minneapolis Lakers of the newly established National Basketball Association (NBA). Two years later, the NBA lifted its "whites only" ban and began to draft black players, forcing Saperstein to compete for his talent. By this time, the Globetrotters were actively touring on the international circuit, playing to audiences in post-war Berlin, Eastern Europe and Russia, among other places; they even performed once for Pope Pius XII in Rome.

Some of the Globetrotters who went on to become NBA stars include Wilt Chamberlain, Connie Hawkins and Nat Clifton. After Saperstein's death in 1966, the team was sold to a group of Chicago businessmen for \$3.7 million; they later sold it to Metro Media for \$11 million. Reaching the height of their fame in the 1970s, the Globetrotters began to lose fans during the next decade, after the departure of such longtime stars as Meadowlark Lemmon. In 1985, Olympic gold medalist Lynette Woodard became the first female Globetrotter.

Over the years, the Harlem Globetrotters have played in more than 115 countries in front of 120 million fans. They have been the subject of two feature films and numerous television shows, including two animated series in the 1970s. In honor of their entertainment value, the team was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and made the subject of a permanent exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute. Their pioneering history and considerable athletic skill over the years was honored in 2002, when they were inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame.