

Hot Potato



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"The players today are much better than we were.... But there is one thing that we could do better. We could pass the ball better than they can now. Man, we used to pass that basketball around like it was a hot potato." -- Sam "Buck" Covington, former member of the Washington Bruins
In a nation distinguished by a great black athletic heritage, there is perhaps no sport that has felt the impact of African American culture more than basketball. Most people assume that the rise of black basketball was a fortuitous accident of the inner-city playgrounds. In "Hot Potato," Bob Kuska shows that it was in fact a consciously organized movement with very specific goals. When Edwin Henderson introduced the game to Washington, D.C., in 1907, he envisioned basketball not as an end in itself but as a public-health and civil-rights tool. Henderson believed that, by organizing black athletics, including basketball, it would be possible to send more outstanding black student athletes to excel at northern white colleges and debunk negative stereotypes of the race. He reasoned that in sports, unlike politics and business, the black race would get a fair chance to succeed. Henderson chose basketball as his marquee sport, and he soon found that the game was a big hit on Washington's segregated U Street. Almost simultaneously, black basketball was catching on quickly in New York, and the book establishes that these two cities served as the birthplace of the black game. "Hot Potato" chronicles the many successes and

failures of the early years of black amateur basketball. It also recounts the emergence of black college basketball in America, documenting the origins of the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association, or CIAA, which would become the Big Ten of black collegiate sports. The book also details for the first time the rise of black professional basketball in America, with a particular emphasis on the New York Renaissance, a team considered by experts to be as important in the development of black basketball as the Harlem Globetrotters. Kuska recounts the Renaissance's first victory over the white world champion Original Celtics in 1925, and he evaluates the significance of this win in advancing equality in American sports. By the late 1920s, the Renaissance became one of the sport's top draws in white and black America alike, setting the stage for the team's undisputed world championship in 1939. As Edwin Henderson had hoped -- and as any fan of the modern-day game can tell you -- the triumphs certainly did not end there.

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