

Pro Basketball Players Helped Build Local VFW Home

Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

With the return of hundreds of Fairport and Perinton veterans at the close of WWII, the establishment of a local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter soon followed. An early goal of the Perinton VFW Memorial Post No. 8495 was the establishment of a place of their own. Local VFW Commander John Ellis led a committee to raise funds for construction of the new clubhouse. Land on Macedon Center Road was secured, and by 1948, the organization began fundraising. Among those supporting the effort was a professional basketball team from Syracuse, who agreed to hold a benefit game at Fairport High School on West Avenue. Those in attendance were fortunate to see some of this town's finest hoopsters take on some of the best basketball players anywhere.



An exhibition game held at Fairport High School on West Avenue in 1949 helped to raise funds for the construction of VFW Memorial Post No. 8495 on Macedon Center Road.

The Syracuse Nationals were in their final year in the old National Basketball League, before a merger created the National Basketball Association (NBA) for the 1949-1950 season. They competed successfully for many years in the NBA, until investors purchased the team and relocated the franchise to Philadelphia, and renamed the team the 76ers.

The Nats, as they were called, were a talented team, led by former Rochester Royal star, Al Cervi, who served as both player and coach. The entire Syracuse Nats roster came to Fairport for the

charity game, including “Billy the bullet” Gabor, Jim Homer, and a twenty-one year old kid from the Bronx, named Dolph Schayes.

A local team was recruited, and held nightly workouts in preparation for the big game against the pro ballers from Syracuse. Among those on the Fairport squad were Mike and Ralph Woods, Tony and Herman Stolt, Jack Kinney, Red Phillips. Fairport High School coach Joe Cummings was also on the roster. Mike Barrett served as both player and coach.

Newspapers reported an estimated crowd of 1,100 in the basement gym at the West Avenue School. Those in attendance had no idea that 6’ 7” Dolph Schayes, tall for the times, would go on to become one of the sport’s brightest stars. Schayes was one of the last to utilize the old set-shot while others adopted the jump shot. The young man who played in the benefit game at Fairport on February 11, 1949 went on to a spectacular career. He was a twelve time NBA All-Star, was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame, and in 1996 was named one of the fifty greatest players in NBA history.

The Syracuse Nats won the game, 61 to 57, but the final score was a bit deceiving. The professional team took an early lead, and published reports indicate they took it easy on the boys from Fairport in the second half. The game helped to raise funds for the construction of the VFW building on Macedon Center Road, dedicated on September 7, 1952. The game and its purpose probably had special meaning for Nats player and Coach Al Cervi. Prior to playing for the Rochester Royals from 1945 to 1948, Cervi served his country. He enlisted on May 2, 1941, six months prior to the invasion of Pearl Harbor.

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