

## Ball Hawks: The Arrival and Departure of the NBA in Iowa

Curtis Harris  
*American University*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

Harris, Curtis. "Ball Hawks: The Arrival and Departure of the NBA in Iowa." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 228-229.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12577>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

*Ball Hawks: The Arrival and Departure of the NBA in Iowa*, by Tim Harwood. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018. x, 217 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Curtis Harris is a Ph.D. candidate in history at American University. His research and writing have focused on the relationships among race/ethnicity, labor rights, and social activism in professional basketball.

In *Ball Hawks*, Tim Harwood details the brief yet compelling history of the Waterloo Hawks. As Harwood admits in his preface, “Major league basketball did not survive long in northeast Iowa” (x). Nonetheless, the presence of professional basketball in Waterloo is worth remembering because it helps piece together the larger tapestry of major league basketball in the United States. Indeed, Harwood’s chronicle joins a growing body of historical work—such as *The National Basketball League* by Murry R. Nelson and *Ball Don’t Lie* by Yago Colas—reexamining the NBA’s origins and properly crediting the role communities like Waterloo had in the process of creating that league.

Notably, Harwood’s research is not limited to the confines of the basketball court. His book opens with an overview of early twentieth-century Waterloo, so readers can understand why the community and its leaders would invest in major league basketball during the 1940s. Throughout *Ball Hawks*, Harwood continues these important observations on larger social issues—including race, labor strife, war, and technology—alongside his chronicle of athletic exploits during the golden era of Waterloo basketball.

These insights are provided by Harwood interpreting contemporary coverage of the Hawks—particularly by *Waterloo Courier* sports editor Al Ney. Those news sources are supplemented by the research of other scholars as well as oral history interviews with former Waterloo players Wayne See and Leo Kubiak. One wishes that even more oral history could have been included to capture the thoughts and emotions of other people involved in the Hawks saga. Nonetheless, from this research process, readers can catch a laugh with the hardwood hijinks of player-coach Charlie Shipp, marvel at the scoring exploits of Kubiak, or wince at the grind players endured traveling through treacherous winter weather.

The transiency and chaos of pro basketball was not limited to travel. The Hawks participated in a different league every season of their existence: PBLA (1948), NBL (1949), NBA (1950), and NBPL (1951). This alphabet soup of disorder could overwhelm even seasoned sports readers, but one of Harwood’s great achievements is his ability to prudently explain the rise and demise of these leagues as well as their connections to one another. The transiency of pro hoops makes the

determination of Waterloo's community and basketball leaders more notable in hindsight. They concocted scheme after scheme to maintain a toehold in pro basketball that outlasted franchises in larger cities, such as Chicago or St. Louis.

To be sure, the Hawks were not a routine sell-out, but Harwood ably demonstrates that financial destitution did not cause their demise, as it did so many other clubs (and leagues) of the era. Instead, the NBA commissioner in 1950 bluntly declared cities like Waterloo undesirable and summarily ousted the Hawks. That hostile maneuver tipped the scales against Waterloo, despite its relative financial stability, and still stings Danny Steiber. One of the few people left who witnessed the Hawks play, the elderly Steiber ruefully believes that "Waterloo could have been the Green Bay of basketball, if they had been able to play a second and third year in the NBA" (181). Without a permanent league to call their own, the Hawks folded in the fall of 1951.

*Ball Hawks* crisply captures Waterloo's resolve to assert itself in the postwar era via professional basketball. Current and future sports writers should look upon Harwood's text as an excellent template chronicling the role that smaller communities play in the development of professional sports—past and present. That Harwood ably imbues this sports story with all the humanity it is due makes reading it all the more enjoyable.

*Great Plains Literature*, by Linda Ray Pratt. Discover the Great Plains Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xi, 168 pp. Illustrations, map, appendix, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Molly P. Rozum is Ronald R. Nelson Chair of Great Plains and South Dakota History and associate professor at the University of South Dakota. She is the author of *Grasslands Grown: Sense of Place and Regional Identity on North America's Canadian Prairies and American Plains, 1870–1950* (forthcoming).

In *Great Plains Literature* Linda Ray Pratt surveys historical and contemporary regional authors with depth and complexity. A joy to read, Pratt's study offers scholarly insight while maintaining popular accessibility. The study is one in a series of thematic introductions to the region as conceptualized by the Center for Great Plains Studies, joining volumes focused on geology, bison, Indians, and politics. Pratt selected literary works driven by the history and culture of, not merely set on, the Great Plains. Each chapter focuses on several thoughtfully selected authors who explore particular topics: First People, the Great