Dolph Schayes and the Rise of Professional Basketball

By Dolph Grundman. Published in 2014 by Syracuse University Press
(193 pp., $24.95 USD, clothback)

Reviewed by Chad Carlson, Hope College, Michigan

Dolph Grundman has earned his reputation as a top-notch researcher of basketball history. Indeed, his work on the National Amateur Athletic Union tournament, The Golden Age of Amateur Basketball, has been well received for its deep research, flowing prose, and insightful content. The Golden Age provides a rich and critical history of amateur basketball.

Grundman’s latest book, Dolph Schayes and the Rise of Professional Basketball, does not have the contextual depth and all-encompassing scope of the author’s previous work, despite its ambitious title. Nor does the author seem to have the same goals in this recent work. Dolph Schayes is a shorter volume: five chapters span only 163 pages of narrative—far too brief to detail the multiphased rise of professional basketball (Dolph Schayes retired from professional basketball coaching in 1972—two years before the critical phase when the National Basketball Association [NBA] merged with the American Basketball Association).

In certain parts of the book, Grundman is reflective, as he inserts his interview experiences into the prose. The author transparently explains that Schayes was a player who “intrigued me” (p. xiii) when the author was a child, in part because the two shared an uncommon and unpopular first name. Indeed, the introduction is titled, “My Day with Dolph Schayes.” Grundman introduces some of his quotes in unique historical style, using such phrases as, “he told me . . .” (p. 38), “Dolph said to me . . .” (p. 45), and “When I asked . . .” (p. 44). This trope is atypical, and its sporadic use pulls the reader out of the kind of compelling narrative that makes The Golden Age such an insightful read.

In certain parts of the book, Dolph Schayes seems like a history of the Syracuse Nationals. Grundman’s entire second chapter focuses on this franchise for two reasons. First, this is the team for which Schayes played his entire professional career. Second, this franchise symbolizes a major shift in the growth of the NBA. Schayes joined the team in the fall of 1948—one year before the National Basketball League and Basketball Association of America merged to form the NBA. The new league included teams from such small-market towns as Anderson, Indiana; Sheboygan, Wisconsin; and Waterloo, Iowa. When the owner of the Syracuse Nationals sold his franchise to Philadelphia businessmen in 1963, all nine NBA teams played within major metropolitan areas.

Syracuse was the last remaining small market NBA team, and Grundman makes a number of comparisons to the National Football League’s only small market team—the Green Bay Packers. Thus, in certain parts of the book, Dolph Schayes seems like a history of the NBA’s early years. The author chronicles the Nationals throughout each season of its existence and describes the voluminous statistics of
its star forward (Schayes) while summarizing its annual trips to the league playoffs. Grundman helpfully spices this narrative with extensive sidebars revealing interesting biographies of a number of early NBA stars such as Johnny Kerr, Hal Greer, and Wilt Chamberlain. These interstitials help contextualize the league, its teams, and its growth while the author sticks closely to the season-by-season account.

*Dolphins Schayes*, however, is mostly about its title character. Grundman’s first chapter details Schayes’ rise within New York City basketball; his third chapter describes all of Schayes’ NBA records; the fourth describes his transition from player to coach; and the fifth describes Schayes’ “Life Well Lived.” The interviews Grundman conducted with Schayes and his contemporaries drive the narrative. As such, the author contributes a great deal to the history of professional basketball through the previously unexplored lens of one of the NBA’s top 50 players of all time. Schayes and Grundman spent lots of time together in conversation, and *Dolph Schayes* benefits from this firsthand knowledge. After all, Schayes represents the NBA’s most consistently successful early franchise, and the Syracuse Nationals represent a crucial period in the history of the NBA.

Grundman explores this player, this franchise, and this league through the eyes of the player and his acquaintances. However, this brief monograph provides less insight into its topic than the author’s previous work gave to amateur basketball. While *The Golden Age* provided answers to more questions than this reader could even think to ask and, consequently, sparked piles of new research ideas, *Dolph Schayes* unfortunately leaves this reader with less inspiration.

The connection among the subtopics of *Dolph Schayes* is clear and the narrative promotes an underappreciated early NBA star, but the manuscript lacks the deep and critical insight gained from intense archival discovery and analysis that Grundman has provided in the past.

**NFL Football: A History of America’s New National Pastime**

By Richard C. Crepeau. Published in 2014 by the University of Illinois Press (256 pp, $19.95 USD, paperback)

*Reviewed by Brad Congelio, Keystone College, Pennsylvania*

Writing the story of the National Football League is a tall order. Any author of such a history has to tackle not only the narrative account of the spectacular growth of the league, but also the personalities, the rivalries, the business aspect, the cultural meaning, and the labor relations that make the NFL’s history such a compelling topic. Doing so while still making the book manageable is a task worth praise. Richard C. Crepeau’s *NFL Football: A History of America’s New National Pastime*—despite several shortcomings—is certainly a welcomed edition to the family of books chronicling the history of football in America.