



# **Abe Saperstein and the American Basketball League, 1960–1963**

*The Upstarts Who Shot for Three and Lost to the NBA*

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On the cover: (top) Publicity photo of ABL Commissioner Abe Saperstein; (bottom) team photograph of the Pittsburgh Rens (both courtesy of the Dolph Briscoe Collection, University of Texas Archives)

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To the players of the American Basketball League, too soon forgotten

## **Table of Contents**

*Acknowledgments*

*Introduction: An American Basketball League Overview*

**One.** *The ABL—the “Run Up”*

**Two.** *The Formation of a New League, Rules, Constitution, Referees and More*

**Three.** *ABL Financing—Expectations, Hopes, Realities*

**Four.** *The Exiles and the Deserters*

**Five.** *The Coaches and the Starting Fives*

**Six.** *Chicago, Battleground of the ABL and the NBA*

**Seven.** *The 1961–1962 Season (First Half)*

**Eight.** *The 1961–1962 Season (Second Half)*

**Nine.** *The ABL Begins a Second Year, 1962–1963*

**Ten.** *The ABL, and Then What?*

*Appendix 1. Team Standings, 1961–1962*

*Appendix 2. ABL Scoring, 1961–1962*

*Appendix 3. Team Standings, 1962–1963*

*Appendix 4. ABL Scoring, 1962–1963*

*Appendix 5. ABL Most Valuable Player and All-League Teams, 1961–1962*

*Chapter Notes*

*Bibliography*

*List of Names and Terms*

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## **Introduction: An American Basketball League Overview**

When I told people with a modicum of knowledge regarding professional basketball history that I was writing a book on the American Basketball League (ABL), there were a number of reactions, most of which indicated that there was very little familiarity with the subject. Some people immediately thought that the book was on the American Basketball Association (ABA), the league that existed from 1967 to 1976 before agreeing to disband in the latter year, with four of their teams, San Antonio, Indiana, the New York Nets and Denver, becoming members of the NBA. No, that wasn't the league I meant.

Some thought that I might be referring to the American Basketball League that began in 1925 and folded in 1933, later to return as a regional league, which became the Eastern League. That league had as members the Original Celtics for two years, years in which they dominated the league and were forced to disband for the good of the league. No, not that league.

And there were those who were totally perplexed, having no idea whatsoever who or what the American Basketball League might be. These people far outnumbered those who actually were aware of the league's brief existence, although even those folks were hard pressed to name a team or player in the ABL. And that is very sad, considering the effect that the ABL ultimately had on professional basketball and, later, by extension, on all of basketball, through the ABL's unique rules.

In the late 1950s Abe Saperstein may have been the most influential, if not the most powerful, person in professional basketball. That influence was a result of his ownership of the Harlem Globetrotters, the only consistently successful economic engine in professional basketball. No team could be assured of selling out a "game" (really a show/event) more than the Globetrotters. Such a realization had led to the NBA working with Saperstein through the 1950s in a cooperative arrangement that found the Globetrotters playing the opening games of many doubleheaders in which the second game was a clash of two NBA teams, most often in an NBA arena, but not always.

By the late 1950s the NBA had come to stand on its own two feet, but the league was now playing doubleheaders involving four NBA teams, and often playing NBA games in arenas other than those of the NBA. The league was still economically challenged; the draw of the Globetrotters was still greater than that of the NBA.

In August of 1960 Abe Saperstein and his partners formed the American Basketball League. Teams were drawn from the National Industrial Basketball League (NIBL), a semi-professional league, some independent professional teams and some that were formed for the new league season. The creation of the league was coincidental with the

collapse of the NIBL,<sup>1</sup> and a number of players were drawn from that league.

On March 18, 1961, the league announced ownership and franchise locations. There would be eight teams in two four-team divisions. The East would be the Washington Tapers, the Pittsburgh Rens, the Cleveland Pipers and the Chicago Majors. The West would consist of the Kansas City Steers, the Los Angeles Jets, the San Francisco Saints and the Hawaii Chiefs. The key locations would be where the ABL would compete directly with the NBA—in L.A. and Chicago, where the NBA had located its first expansion franchise since the formation of the league in 1949. The Tapers would be owned by Harry Lynn of Washington, D.C., and would be a continuance, to a degree, of the Tuck Tapers of the NIBL, sponsored by the Technical Tape Corporation. Paul Cohen, the president of Technical Tape, would be a director of the team. The Rens chose a name to honor the great New York Renaissance teams of the 1920s–1940s and would be owned by Lenny Litman. The Pipers would be almost wholly formed from the Cleveland Pipers team of the NIBL and would be owned by George Steinbrenner and coached by John McClendon, longtime coach of Tennessee A&I and the first African American coach of a major professional, integrated basketball league. The Chicago Majors were initially assigned to Morrie Schneer as owner. There were financial problems, and Schneer dropped out almost immediately. The team ownership was swapped with the owner of the San Francisco Saints, Abe Saperstein, also the league commissioner, and George McKeon took over the San Francisco franchise. The Steers would be owned by Ken Krueger of St. Louis and coached by Jack McMahon, a former NBA player who had recently retired because of injuries. The Jets would be owned by Len Corbosiero and coached by Bill Sharman, late of the Celtics, who would also play a bit. The Hawaii franchise was owned by Art Kim. Kim had called his franchise the Hawaii Aliis, a name for Hawaiian royalty, but in June he informed the league that the name would be Chiefs. The reason Kim gave was that “members of the Hawaiian royalty had informed him that it was taboo to use the name of Aliis in conjunction with ordinary people as it could only be associated with the ancient Hawaiian royalty.”<sup>2</sup>

One issue for all of the franchises was getting a decent venue in which to play. The Chicago Stadium was the best and biggest available in that city, and it was initially assumed that the NBA’s new franchise, the Packers, would want to play there, but Saperstein had an edge in that pursuit, the Globetrotters. Were he to be denied the use of the stadium by the owner, Art Wirtz, he would no longer have his Globies appear there, where they regularly drew 15,000 to 18,000 fans.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, Saperstein prevailed and the new NBA Chicago franchise would start off having to play in the International Amphitheatre, located by the city’s stockyards and built, initially, for livestock exhibitions.

In April of 1961 Robert Sturman, law partner of Allan Bloch, league vice-commissioner, sent a memo to all clubs regarding contract types. One was a tryout contract, which gave the right of termination at any time during the training season. Form A contracts were binding and offered no right of termination (except for breach by the player). Form B gave right of termination if the player did not have “the ability

to engage in League competition as a member of your team.” Sturman went on to offer some tips on contractual signings and urged owners to contact him with questions or comments.<sup>4</sup>

There were those who believed that the ABL would never begin play or would fold within weeks, and some NBA owners were among that group. Walter Brown, the owner of the Boston Celtics, predicted a failure “by Christmas” and referred to the ABL as “a bunch of pirates.” He was mostly concerned about Bill Sharman, who had quit the Celtics to coach, but had played and scored 26 points in the Los Angeles Jets’ first two games.<sup>5</sup>

The ABL decided to experiment with new rules to make the game more appealing to fans. Their major alterations were:

1. A 3-point field goal from 25 feet
2. An 18-foot-wide center lane at its base in a trapezoidal shape.
3. A 30-second shot clock, rather than a 24-second one, on offense.
4. A split season with a first-half play-off, and the winner of that meeting the winner of the second-half play-offs for the championship in April.
5. Visiting teams would split gate receipts with the home team, a practice not followed in the NBA.
6. Unusual travel schedules that involved Hawaii and the creation of teams playing a series in order to keep travel costs more reasonable.

**The Chicago situation.** The NBA awarded a franchise to Dave Trager and his partners for the 1961-62 season, after what were claimed to be 15 months of negotiation with the NBA.<sup>6</sup> The team was unable to use Chicago Stadium and gained access to the International Amphitheatre at 42nd and Halsted for most of their home games, although like all NBA franchises at the time, regional games would be played at other venues such as Milwaukee to promote interest in the team and the NBA. Playing at the International Amphitheatre made a team name of “Packers” logical, since it reflected both the team’s location (adjacent to the Union Stockyards) and heritage (“Hog Butcher for the world,” as Carl Sandburg said in his poem, “Chicago” in 1916). The new team paid \$200,000 to join the NBA, and each of the established teams were allowed to protect seven players as the Packers chose players off the other rosters, with no more than one per team. The new franchise then received the first pick in the NBA draft and six successive picks in the second round of the draft. The Packers were also hamstrung by a league proviso that did not allow them to trade any of the players drafted on NBA rosters without first securing the approval of four of the seven teams not involved in any potential transaction. (This was invoked in late November in a Packers–St. Louis Hawks trade.)<sup>7</sup>

The NBA Packers lost the venue battle, but won the first-draft pick battle. The Packers selected Walt Bellamy as the first NBA pick, and the Chicago Majors received him in a trade with the Cleveland Pipers after they procured him as their territorial pick.<sup>8</sup> Bellamy signed with the Packers, but Saperstein had a plan for enhancing his Chicago ABL roster that no other team could match. He would use the Globetrotters roster as a kind of “farm team” from which to select players for his ABL squad and then send ABL players to the Trotters or cut them loose as free agents. In addition, the Majors made a number of trades, as did most of the other ABL teams.

**The Los Angeles situation.** The Lakers had one season in Los Angeles in which to draw fans, and they had some great players to watch, most specifically Elgin Baylor and Jerry West, but the team finished second in the Western Division, with a record just under .500. It was clear that they would improve as their players gained more experience, and the next year they burst into first and remained there the entire season. The new Los Angeles Jets hoped that they could pull fans from the Lakers, but the Lakers had too much glitz, were too good a team and played in too good a venue to aid the Jets in their quest.

The Jets had an excellent roster, but there were financial problems on the part of owner Corbosiero; roster problems in that George Yardley, who had retired from the NBA, would play at home games, but few away games because of his engineering business; venue problems in playing at the Olympic Auditorium, which was not an arena fans would flock to. In addition, Los Angelenos don't have the same need to be indoors in the winter because of the weather, and professional basketball took quite a while to build interest there.

The Jets were a good team with Hal Lear (formerly of the NBA Warriors and an All-American at Temple), Bill Spivey (the seven-foot all-American from the early 1950s at Kentucky, blacklisted by the NBA for not reporting a bribe), Dan Swartz (the scoring leader from the defunct NIBL), Larry Friend (who had played in the NBA and starred at Cal), George Yardley (an NBA Hall of Famer who retired at 33) and Bill Sharman (another Hall of Famer who retired early from the Celtics to be the player-coach of the Jets). Nevertheless, the team drew only 33,957 for 16 home dates before rumors began flying of the team relocating to suburban Los Angeles (Long Beach or Pasadena) or even moving to Ft. Worth, Houston or Portland.<sup>9</sup> In mid-January, it was announced that the Jets' games scheduled for January 19 and 21 would be postponed, and the next day the Jets' league exit was announced. A league spokesman (unidentified, probably Saperstein, himself) also said that the Jets would reorganize for 1962-1963 and return to the league, probably in Long Beach, and that the players would “go out on option.” This was viewed with skepticism by most media observers. The Jets had lost approximately \$189,000 in the half season, and their owner, Len Corbosiero, was ill. Abe Saperstein claimed that his illness was the source of the withdrawal and that the team had plenty of money in the bank, but needed to “get their house in order.”<sup>10</sup> It was at this time that Dave Trager, the Chicago Packers' owner, said that his club had lost \$150,000 in the first half of the season and blamed it on the bad record of the team (9–31), bad weather and a bad schedule (only 12 home games) with an average of

3,370 per game. He said that they needed to average 4,500 to break even.

As noted, the Globetrotters would also serve as a gate attraction for ABL games, being the other team in ABL doubleheaders. The Trotters would play as part of doubleheaders in most, if not all, of the ABL cities to boost attendance across the league.

Without the “use” of the Globetrotters, the nine NBA teams played a number of doubleheaders with four NBA teams at one site, hoping to generate more interest and attendance for NBA games. There would also be the “home” games played at arenas or gymnasiums throughout the NBA and ABL territories. Thus, the following sites had NBA games in 1961–62: Dayton, Hershey (PA), Milwaukee, Ft. Wayne, East Chicago (Washington High School), Providence, Utica, Rochester, Moline (IL), Indianapolis, Green Bay, Louisville, DePaul Alumni Gym in Chicago and Seattle. This was the *established* league; the new ABL played home games in Norfolk (VA), Steubenville (OH), Richmond, Muskegon (MI), Lansing (MI), Milwaukee, Rockford (IL), Wichita, Detroit, Columbus, Lorain (OH), Oklahoma City, Miami Beach, Oakland, Jacksonville, Ashtabula (OH), New Haven and Rochester. Some of these sites drew well, while others drew in the hundreds. Both leagues were struggling, but the new ABL was struggling more.

During the 1960-1961 season, the NBA had set a new attendance record with over 700,000, which is just under 2,500 per game. Attendance in 1961–1962 was much higher, but still less than 5,000 per game on average. The NBA had a small television contract with NBC for Sundays, but not all NBC-affiliated stations picked up the games. Most teams would lose money but were in better shape than the ABL, which had lower attendance, no television income and owners who did not have “deep pockets” to absorb losses for long.

The ABL’s first season began with good crowds in Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Chicago and Cleveland and with adequate crowds in San Francisco and Hawaii. Washington and Los Angeles started with small crowds and things got worse. By the end of December there were rumors of the Tapers moving to Camden, a story denied by the owner Harry Lynn, also the owner of the Washington Coliseum where the team played. The rumor was only partly true, as the team moved to Commack, Long Island, within a week.<sup>11</sup> Lynn also yielded control of the team to Paul Cohen. Unfortunately, the move to Commack did not lead to increased attendance, with many “crowds” numbering in the hundreds, rather than thousands.

Player disputes. The ABL followed the lead of the new American Football League and contacted NBA players who might be interested in jumping to the new league. A number of players did so, since the NBA rosters, even after expanding, were still only 12, meaning that there would only be 108 active players in the NBA. In addition, some players who felt that they weren’t playing enough or wanted to be in a different environment signed with the new league. The most noted were Dick Barnett of the Syracuse Nationals and Ken Sears from the New York Knicks, who signed with the

Cleveland Pipers and San Francisco Saints, respectively. Barnett wanted to play more, and he wished to join former teammates and his former college coach from Tennessee A&I, John McClendon, on the Cleveland Pipers. Sears, a native of Northern California and college star at Santa Clara, wanted to return to the Bay Area. Both moves resulted in lawsuits, ultimately settled on behalf of the players allowing them to play in the ABL, unencumbered.

The ABL also signed players who had been blacklisted by the NBA for not reporting bribes in the wake of college basketball scandals of the period. Bill Spivey, mentioned earlier, was the first seven-footer in professional basketball and helped Los Angeles (and Hawaii after the Jets folded) greatly, finishing second in the league in scoring and third in rebounding. Tony Jackson, from St. Johns, played initially for the Tapers, then was traded to the Chicago Majors and led the league in three-point shots with 141. The biggest star, however, was Connie Hawkins, from Brooklyn, who had spent part of his freshman year at the University of Iowa. The 19-year-old (who turned 20 during the season) led the league in scoring, with over 27 points per game, was second in rebounding and was voted the most valuable player in the league. Despite his age, the league owners agreed to allow him to play as a “hardship case.”<sup>12</sup>

Other top stars came from the NIBL or were rookies that the ABL managed to snag ahead of the NBA. The two most noted of the latter were Larry Siegfried from Ohio State, signed by the Pipers, and Bill Bridges of Kansas, signed by the Steers, and who led the league in rebounding.

The ABL gained early credibility by signing top coaches, most of whom had played or coached in the NBA. In the West, Kansas City selected Jack McMahon, a former Cincinnati Royal, forced to retire because of injury; the Jets chose Bill Sharman as player-coach; the Saints signed Phil Woolpert, the former University of San Francisco coach whose team won NCAA titles in 1955 and 1956; and Hawaii was led by Red Rocha, former BAA and NBA player. In the East, the Rens chose Neil Johnston, who had retired from the Warriors in 1959 at the age of 31; the Tapers selected Stan Stutz (*né* Stan Modzelewski), who had played in the Basketball Association of America (BAA); Chicago signed former Illini whiz kid and NBA guard, Andy Phillip; and the Pipers chose John McLendon, making him the first African American coach in a professional basketball league.

By December, the standings showed Kansas City as the top team in the West and Cleveland and Pittsburgh the top teams in the East. There were interesting events and actions during this period. Stan Musial signed on as a minority owner of the Steers; the ABL owners began discussing expansion when the season was barely a month old<sup>13</sup>; Neil Johnston returned to the court as a player for the Rens; Phil Woolpert was fired as coach of the Saints<sup>14</sup>; bad weather (which closed airports) forced teams to get to some games by renting cars; George Steinbrenner failed to pay his players one week because of cash flow problems and the players publicly complained and were defended by their coach, John McClendon, who “resigned” within a week under pressure; the Los Angeles Jets folded and their players were redistributed within the league;

Steinbrenner signed Bill Sharman as the new Pipers coach.

As noted earlier, the Tapers moved to New York in early January, but there were other minor incidents that were interesting during that period. In San Francisco, the Steers lost to the Saints in a close contest, delayed, with five seconds left, when a teenager sneaked onto the floor at a time-out and absconded with the game ball. After finally finding another acceptable ball, the game resumed. Snowstorms delayed games in Kansas City, Wichita and Chicago. A player signed by the Steers was unable to play because his employer, the Fort Worth School District, prohibited their coaches from playing professional basketball, baseball or football.

The innovative play-offs (best two of three) set to begin on January 12 with all games played in the Eastern city, were rescheduled at the last minute to allow the first game to be played in the West. Kansas City defeated Cleveland in Game 1 in the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium. Tickets were \$3 for boxes, \$2 for lower balcony and \$1 for upper balcony and 5,286 fans attended. Back in Cleveland, the Pipers won Game 2 before 4,276 fans, but the Steers came back to defeat the Pipers in Game 3 and claimed the First Half Title on January 14.<sup>15</sup>

The second half season began with just seven teams. The Tapers were strengthened by the addition of Dan Swartz and became a winning squad, despite their inability to draw fans. The Pipers started slowly, but as Dick Barnett rounded into scoring shape after being held out because of the legal restraints, they began winning again. Pittsburgh began to fade, despite Hawkins scoring more than 50 points in a game more than once. Chicago led the East most of the second half as Tony Jackson went on three-point shooting sprees, getting 12 in one game and more than 5 in a number of others.

In the West, the Steers and Saints played evenly and well most of the second half, while Hawaii was near .500. Hawaii played home games in Miami Beach, Oklahoma City, Jacksonville and Long Beach in order to lessen the travel burden for themselves and their opponents. When teams came to Hawaii, they usually played a three-game series with the Chiefs, and Hawaii would have 9-to-12-game home stands.

In early February, George Wilson, the owner of the Buffalo Bills football team, purchased the majority interest in the Pipers, but Steinbrenner remained as president of the team.<sup>16</sup> He then rehired John McClendon as vice president of personnel and public relations.

A few weeks later, the ABL owners met to decide if they should expel the Pipers because of their failure to comply with the ABL Constitution. They also discussed adding two franchises for 1962–63, probably in Portland and Dallas.<sup>17</sup> The Cleveland issues, involving communication with the league office, payment of gate receipts to the league and submission of financial reports were settled at the league meeting, but more troubles would arise with the Pipers at the end of the year.

Despite the ABL's stated intention to expand, some writers who followed the league saw continued difficulties unless the ABL could sign more impact players like Hawkins and Bridges. Attendance had not been phenomenal and recognition had been slow; the ABL was at a critical juncture.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of March the league announced a play-off structure as well as the all-league teams. The First Team consisted of Larry Staverman and Bill Bridges of the Kansas City Steers, Connie Hawkins of the Pittsburgh Rens, Dan Swartz of the New York Tapers and Dick Barnett of the Cleveland Pipers. The Second Team was Johnny Cox of the Pipers, Hershell Turner of the Chicago Majors, Kenny Sears of the San Francisco Saints, Bill Spivey of the Hawaii Chiefs and a tie for the tenth spot between Tony Jackson of Chicago and Nick Mantis of Kansas City.

As for the play-offs, the Steers would play the winner of a six-team tournament in which the Pipers and the Majors would have first-round byes. In the first round, the Tapers defeated the Chiefs, and the Saints topped the Rens, with both games being decided in overtime. New York then upset Chicago, and Cleveland topped San Francisco. The Tapers and Pipers then traveled to Kansas City, where they would play for the right to meet the Steers for the title. The Steers had drawn 99,000 fans for their home games, including one play-off contest, and the hope was that fans would flock to the final semi-final game, plus the finals contests.

In the Semi-Final, the Pipers defeated the Tapers 107 to 84, sending the Pipers into the best-of-five Finals. Games 1 and 2 went to the Steers, with Bridges and Staverman leading in scoring and rebounding. Then the series shifted to Cleveland, where the Pipers won two close games. The first drew almost 8,000 fans since it was coupled with a Globetrotters game. Bridges continued his hot shooting, but Dick Barnett and Connie Dierking led Cleveland to victories.

Then more uncertainty and controversy arose. Steinbrenner and Pittsburgh owner Len Litman claimed that the fifth game was to be played in the East. Saperstein said there was a misunderstanding and that it was to be played in the West. Steinbrenner declared that the Pipers would not play in Kansas City and wanted a neutral site, like St. Louis. The Pipers failed to come to Kansas City for the game on April 9, but they finally agreed and arrived the next day for the game in Kansas City. Unfortunately, the game had to be played in the Rockhurst College gym because the Municipal Auditorium had been previously booked. Steinbrenner complained that the gym only held 4,000, but the game only drew 3,000. Cleveland, led by Barnett and Dierking, won once again and were the first ABL champions.

The season had proven that a second major professional basketball league could appeal to fans, particularly those in cities that had no NBA team. Almost all of the teams lost money; any successful league would have to have owners who were patient and had deep pockets from other enterprises. The new rules, particularly the three-point shot, proved to be very popular with fans, despite the fact that "traditionalists" said that there was no room in the game for such "gimmicks." There were enough

good players to make for a top game, although it was difficult to compare it to the NBA just then. ABL teams issued challenges to the NBA, but the NBA, wisely, did not respond, feeling that doing so in any manner would legitimize the ABL. Saperstein and the other owners looked forward to a 1962-1963 season with an expanded league, more publicity and respect and, they hoped, some sort of television contract. Little of that would materialize, and the league would struggle to stay afloat in 1962-63 and would ultimately fail.

# One

## The ABL—the “Run Up”

The post-war period brought renewed and excited interest in professional sports, most particularly major league baseball and football. The All-American Football Conference began in 1946 and merged with the NFL in 1949 as the National-American Football League. This was one of the first indicators that there was room for other professional leagues, under the right conditions. In addition it was important to note that professional football was far less popular than major league baseball in terms of both total attendance and professed favorites. In 1960 a Gallup poll indicated that baseball was still the most popular sport by far, with 34 percent ranking it first, 21 percent naming football and 10 percent basketball.<sup>1</sup> In the immediate post-war period, baseball’s popularity was even higher although there was not the same “official” designation.

During the early 1950s, major league baseball enjoyed great growth in popularity, but that was not always followed by box office success, often because of the location or condition of the baseball stadiums. Nowhere was this more evident than in New York where the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers were the top teams in the National League. From 1951 to 1956, either the Dodgers or the Giants won the National League pennant. The Giants, however, were not an attractive draw. Their park, the Polo Grounds, was located just north of Central Park in the Morningside Heights area of Manhattan. The ballpark was built in 1883 and was in need of significant renovation, if not replacement. Owner Horace Stoneham wanted the city to assist, and the city fathers of New York were not terribly interested. The attendance for the Giants was last in the league in both 1956 and 1957, despite the fact that the Giants had won the World Championship in 1954 and had the most exciting player in the game in Willie Mays.

The Dodgers had the second or third best attendance in the league (behind the new darling, Milwaukee), but Ebbets Field was tiny, bound in by the Flatbush neighborhood, and had almost no parking. As Dodger fans moved to Long Island, attendance looked to be going in the wrong direction. Owner Walter O’Malley wanted the city to assist him in building a new park in the Atlantic Yards area of Brooklyn, but Robert Moses wanted a park at the Flushing Meadows area and neither would budge. O’Malley was swayed by the city of Los Angeles to relocate there and convinced his friend Stoneham to move his team to San Francisco to carry their traditional rivalry to California. Thus, in August of 1957, it was announced that the Giants would move to San Francisco. It was the lead headline in all the New York daily papers. The Dodger announcement followed in September.<sup>2</sup>

The move of the two franchises was a significant blow to New York City, both in pride and economics. Almost immediately there was a call from many in the city for National League expansion in order to bring a franchise back to the city. The major leagues were not initially eager for expansion, fearing that their product would be diluted and attendance would suffer. The indecisiveness made for a perfect time for an old baseball warrior, Branch Rickey, to step into the breach. Rickey hoped to start a third major league, and he set about lining up wealthy backers interested in such an endeavor. These included Joan Whitney Payson and George Herbert Walker, Jr., initial owners of the New York Mets in 1962; Jack Kent Cooke in Toronto; Craig Cullinan in Houston; Edwin “Big Ed” Johnson in Denver; and folks from Minneapolis connected to Hamms Beer.<sup>3</sup>

Rickey was maneuvering to make his Continental League a third major league, and the established major leagues did their best to forestall that while seeming to support his plan. Most of the intended owners wanted to be in the major leagues and would (and did) abandon the Continental League once major league baseball was forced to expand in order to prevent the formation of the new league. Nevertheless, the league argued for changes in major league structure that would have “saved” the majors from themselves, contended Michael Shapiro. These actions included revenue sharing and a league television contract, rather than individual team controls.

To the major league owners this was anathema, and they managed to repel this onslaught, helping baseball to fall behind football in popularity and revenue. Interestingly, the notions were adapted and adopted by the founders of the American Football League (AFL), which came to birth in 1960. Lamar Hunt, the most influential league founder, openly acknowledged that the idea for revenue sharing and centralized media control came from Rickey and the Continental League. Hunt said, “I met Mr. Rickey only once (during a planning session regarding the Continental League) and I do recall hearing his idea about sharing TV revenue for the proposed Continental League.... I did copy this idea in relation to the start of the Football League.”<sup>4</sup>

The success of the American Football League was largely a result of this innovation. Teams could thrive in any city, no matter what the size (reasonably speaking), and this was illustrated in the success of Oakland, Kansas City and Buffalo, for example. The television contract with ABC not only ensured the success of the AFL; it also created a renaissance in that network, making it the leader in television sports.

The AFL model was based on many of the Rickey/Continental League ideas, but the AFL managed to create better “buzz” for the league by doing some things that the Continental League only dreamed of doing. First was the aforementioned television contract. It was true mutualism as the two parties both needed what the other could provide. For the AFL, it was exposure; for ABC, it was a sports product that would draw an audience.

Rickey had argued that fans wanted competition, close contests and good play. It didn’t matter if the Continental League teams were initially inferior to the American or