

6-4-2005

## In memory of George Mikan

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "In memory of George Mikan" (2005). *On Sport and Society*. 694.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/694>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
In memory of George Mikan  
JUNE 4, 2005

He made the number 99 on his jersey famous decades before Wayne Gretzky wore it on his hockey sweater. George Mikan, the 6'10" center of the Minneapolis Lakers died on Thursday at the age of 80. He was the first big man in professional basketball, the first in college basketball, and he was a key reason the NBA succeeded when other leagues had failed. Leonard Koppett in his history of the NBA called the first eight years of league existence the "The Mikan Era." That is certainly how I remember those years as a boy in Minneapolis.

George Mikan led the Minneapolis Lakers to championship level play from 1947 through 1954, with a curtain call a bit later. As a boy who grew from age six to thirteen in those years, Mikan dominates my early memory of basketball. I grew up as a basketball fan, a fan of the NBA rather than the college game. My memory of the early Lakers' dynasty is filled with George Mikan images.

He was the tallest human I knew of, he was a dominating basketball player, and he looked improbable in the role. Never gifted with great speed and wearing those thick horn-rimmed glasses, he was not my athletic idol. Although clearly the force that made the Lakers great, he was never my favorite player. That designation moved from Slater Martin to Jim Pollard over the course of the Mikan years.

What I remember most of George Mikan was his enormous physical presence on the court. When Al McGuire coined the term "aircraft carrier," I thought it would have been best applied to Mikan. I remember also the majestic sweep--and it was majestic--of his hook shot. Ten or eleven year old boys throughout the city worked on that shot over and over again out behind the garage. In your fantasy world, you replicated the sweeping hook, while in reality it must have looked ridiculous for a five-foot something boy of little physical presence trying to perfect such a shot.

After his retirement George Mikan could occasionally be seen at adult AAU games at the Ascension Church gymnasium on the north side of the city. Still the major physical presence, still wearing those horn-rimmed glasses, he carried himself with a

quiet dignity worthy of the man known as the "Gentle Giant." I was awestruck whenever he passed by, and lost for words when my father once introduced me to him.

His basketball life is an amazing story in any number of ways. In his first contact with the game, Mikan was told by his prep school coach that he could not play because no one played with glasses and Mikan could not see well enough without them. The thick glasses and then his size led to taunting by other boys. In addition he was clumsy. The catcalls of "four-eyes" and "freak" followed him onto the court at DePaul University where he became the first great big man of the college game. Ray Meyer, his coach, spent the first summer of Mikan's years at DePaul working with the big man on agility, shooting, and jumping. By the time he left DePaul, Mikan was on course to becoming the "greatest player of the first half of the twentieth century." He led the nation in scoring three times and was a three-time All-American.

Mikan led DePaul to the 1945 NIT championship, considered then the national college basketball championship. He scored 120 points in his three NIT games, and in one of those games he matched the opponents total of 53. He also left the college game transformed by his presence. The goal tending rule was created to offset his height, just as the NBA would change the lane in 1951 from six to twelve feet to keep Mikan from clogging the middle by moving him away from the basket.

After DePaul Mikan joined the Chicago Gear of the National Basketball League in 1946 while attending law school at DePaul. The Gear left the NBL the following year and the rights to Mikan passed to the new Minneapolis Lakers of the NBL for the 1947-48 season. The next season the Lakers played in the Basketball Association of America as the NBL was challenged by the BAA for professional supremacy. The BAA was a twelve-team league and contained the larger cities with the larger arenas.

Mikan became the BAA's most dominant player on a dominant team, and its biggest attraction filling arenas across the league. He was the leading scorer in the regular season averaging 28.3 points a game, and in the playoffs in ten games when he averaged 30.3 points a game. The following year the BAA absorbed the remains of the NBL to become the National Basketball Association, a seventeen-team behemoth that shrunk to eleven teams the next year, and a few years later settled in at eight teams.

Led by George Mikan, a large supporting front line of Jim Pollard at 6'5" and Vern Mikklesen at 6'8" combined with the ball-handling of Slater Martin to take the Lakers to NBA titles in 1950, '52, '53, and '54. The team was molded together under the superb direction of Coach John Kundla. With Mikan as the centerpiece, the Lakers transformed the game of basketball. The big man became commonplace and the height of all players moved upward. It was also transformed by the introduction of the 24-second clock, done to prevent teams from holding the ball, a tactic first used to counter the presence of Mikan.

Before one game at Madison Square Garden, the marquee read simply, "Tonight: Geo. Mikan v. Knicks." It was a bit of an exaggeration, but only a bit, like saying that George Mikan was the man who invented the NBA.

He played the game with skill and intelligence, and conducted himself with modesty and dignity. When he left the game, he conducted his life in the same manner.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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