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Review of Shooting Threes and Shaking the Basketball Establishment: The Short, Chaotic Run of the American Basketball League by Bob Lieb

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Lieb, Bob. *Shooting Threes and Shaking the Basketball Establishment: The Short, Chaotic Run of the American Basketball League*. Haworth, NJ: St. Johann Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 134. Twelve pages of photos, complete ABL statistics, index, short biographical introductions. \$29.95.

In 1960, the NBA was vulnerable for a competitive rival. The league comprised only eight teams, was just over ten years old with the average salary below \$10,000, television revenue was minor, and notable attendance was mainly reached when an NBA game was preceded by a highly popular Harlem Globetrotters contest, a former barnstorming team that switched to entertainment when the NBA integrated. Because of the NBA's reliance on the Globetrotters, its owner, Abe Saperstein, wanted to own an expansion franchise and maintained he had been promised such. When the NBA expanded in 1960 to Los Angeles and Saperstein was bypassed, he quickly launched the American Basketball League (ABL), a professional basketball competitor, which played its first game in October 1960. He served as commissioner and owned the Chicago team.

Although only in existence for a season and a half, the ABL influenced the future direction of the game. Under Saperstein, the new league introduced the three-point basket, trapezoid free-throw lane, and an African American head coach, and implemented an up-beat, fast-break tempo that favored shooters over the lumbering big men who dominated the NBA. The ABL began with eight teams, including a squad in Hawaii, divided into East and West divisions. It also had an intricate playoff system featuring a split season with the first-half champ playing the second-half winner for the overall championship.

The ABL faced problems from the beginning, including the cost of travel to Hawaii, inadequate arenas, no television contract, a few franchises switching cities in mid-season, and constant rumors of instability; but the main albatross was lack of attendance and revenue. Like the NBA in previous years, the largest crowds came when a doubleheader featuring the Globetrotters was scheduled. Overall, announced attendance numbers were low—and still had been inflated by owners. One franchise experienced paid attendance as low as thirty-one people for a game.

Slightly below the caliber of play in the NBA, the ABL, nevertheless, had marquee personalities. When the ABL started, nineteen players with NBA credentials switched leagues. Stars included, among others, Dick Barnett, Ken Sears, Connie Hawkins, and Bill Bridges, along with coaches Bill Sharman and Andy Phillip. Hawkins, declared a hardship exemption because he was too young to play professionally under the accepted guideline requiring players to be college-graduate age, was one of several players available because they had been accused of point shaving in college. He went on to become the league's MVP at age twenty. George Steinbrenner, owning his first professional team, forecast his future escapades running baseball's New York Yankees. While his Cleveland Pipers squad was winning the only ABL full-season championship, Steinbrenner publicly fought with the commissioner, fired a coach in mid-season and then rehired him as a vice president, initially refused to send his team to Hawaii, and openly undermined the ABL by campaigning to merge his team with an NBA club. Steinbrenner, however, stunned the NBA by signing Jerry Lucas, NCAA player of the year, but who never appeared in an ABL game. Lucas became a focal point of the rivalry between the two leagues and ended up being paid while sitting out a year to complete his degree before joining the NBA.

With only six teams left, the ABL folded on New Year's Eve 1962, crushed by its mounting debt. Twenty-one ABL players eventually signed to play in the NBA. The short-lived ABL probably lent encouragement to the more successful American Basketball Association (ABA), which would again challenge the NBA in the late 1960s.

Bob Lieb's account of the ABL relies on interviews he conducted with eleven former players and two relatives of an owner, as well as research of newspaper accounts and other works. Lieb, a Northeastern University professor who has written several business books, was a fan of his hometown Pittsburgh Rens, which inspired him to take on the project. The player recollections and insights add depth to the story and capture the essence of the ABL by highlighting the many personalities that drove it. Lieb's work is a solid account, but a few typographical errors detract.

For a league that existed for only a season and a half, Lieb's book is the second recent historical account. In 2013, Murry Nelson's *Abe Saperstein and the American Basketball League, 1960–1963: The Upstarts Who Shot for Three and Lost to the NBA* was well received. Utilizing Saperstein's archived papers, Nelson's book gave greater emphasis to the ABL's founder.

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