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THE BROWN/RISD WEEKLY | OCTOBER 28 2010 | VOLUME XXI ISSUE VII
6 WHAT'S WRONG WITH LIBERALS?
7 MENSTRUATING WOMEN ARE RACIST
12 ART YOU CAN SMELL
16 PVD, PROFESSIONAL BASKETBALL, AND THE INVENTION OF THE JUMP-SHOT
A POLICEMAN, WHEN ASKED WHAT HIS JOB CONSISTED OF, SAID THAT MOSTLY HE STANDS AROUND AND OCCASIONALLY DEALS WITH SMALL CHILDREN VOMITTING.
-p.11

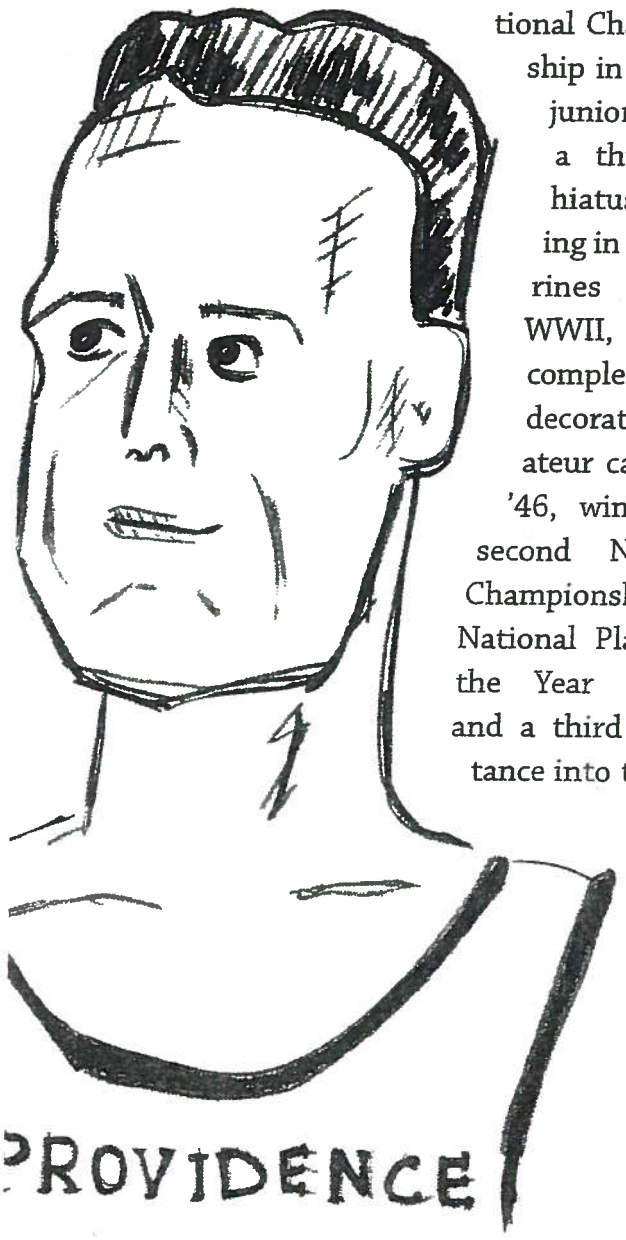
SAILORS AND STEAMROLLERS

Inventor of the jump-shot touches down in Providence

by Malcolm Burnley, Illustration by Andrew Seiden

To trace the origins of modern basketball, and you'll come across a rural road in Hillsdale, Wyoming. There is no landmark or statue, but on a family farm there, eighty years ago, a sibling rivalry forever transformed the sport. Bud was the oldest by four years, and his 6'5 frame towered over his younger sibling, Kenny, when they played one-on-one out back. Kenny routinely lost, forcing him to craft a new strategy against his dominant brother. So he invented and slowly patented the shot that carried him to college, to the pros, and into basketball lore. At a time when the two-handed set shot was the game's pre-eminent offensive weapon, when players' feet scarcely left the hardwood, Kenny Sailors used a 36-inch vertical leap to rise above his flat-footed opponents and release the ball at a superior trajectory. His trick was given many names at first, but soon became popularized as the "jump-shot."

Sailors surpassed his brother, and then took time to foster his jump-shot: "It started on the farm, but I'll tell you, it wasn't developed then," he recalls, speaking from his current home in Laramie. Sailors honed his skills as a collegiate player at the University of Wyoming and became an immediate star. He established himself as an unstoppable scorer with an exotic new technique, leading the team to the National Championship in '43 as a junior. After a three-year hiatus, serving in the Marines during WWII, Sailors completed his decorated amateur career in '46, winning a second National Championship, a National Player of the Year trophy, and a third acceptance into the All-



American team. Sailors graduated from UW as a local hero, but when he turned pro later that year, there was no warm welcome.

BEGINNING PRO BALL

In the fall of '46, the Basketball Association of America (BAA) held its inaugural season. Sailors was 26 and just coming off military duty, "an old man by their standards," he says, when he entered the BAA. The league—which preceded the NBA, but laid the foundation for its establishment in '49—began with eleven teams, including the Pittsburgh Ironmen, the New York Knickerbockers (the Knicks of today), and the Cleveland Rebels, Sailors's first club. Red Dehnert, the Rebels' coach, nearly blackballed Sailors as a rookie, keeping the 5'10, 175 lb guard on the bench in stubborn protest of his radical jump-shot. "He was scared of my jump-shot," Sailors remembers.

Despite Sailors's prestigious résumé, Dehnert dismissed him as an unwelcomed magician or abstract artist. His inventive technique represented a revolution to the game, and Dehnert was not one to broaden his ways. He ordered the rookie to conform to the set-shot or ride the pine. "Where you get that leaping one-hander?" he would taunt Sailors, "you's need me to teach you a good two hander, it'll never go in this league...." Time would prove otherwise.

When The Cleveland Rebels folded after Sailors's rookie year, his contract became property of the Chicago Stags. But in December, three games into the '47-48 BAA season, Sailors was traded to the Providence Steamrollers, a move that would jump-start his career. When Providence allowed Sailors to freely employ his talent, he blossomed into one of the league's best players and paved the way for modern basketball's most fundamental skill—his jump-shot. In Providence, professional basketball survived a mere three years, but during two of those, the city hosted an influential trailblazer.

PROVIDENCE GIVES BASKETBALL A SHOT

The Steamrollers struggled to draw fans during their first year in '46; according to Sailors, "Providence was more of a hockey town then." The Steamrollers played at 1111 North Main Street, the old Rhode Island Auditorium, which had a 5,000-seat capacity, but drew much smaller crowds for basketball. In '47, the BAA had just completed its inaugural season and the league's future was uncertain; it had downsized from eleven to eight teams prior to the season's start, and with little revenue being generated, it seemed inevitable that more organizations would soon become extinct.

Lou Pieri, a businessman who owned

the Auditorium and the Steamrollers, struck a deal with Walter Brown, the president of the Boston Celtics. With the BAA fighting to survive in its infancy, both franchises could not be profitable given their geographic proximity, competing for the same fan-base. In order to preserve professional basketball in the larger Rhode Island-Massachusetts region, one of the teams would have to disappear. Pieri and Brown arranged to merge the Steamrollers and Celtics into a single organization, but did not make known the nature of the deal or the date of a merger. Although the details remain unknown, Sailors hypothesizes that the two men agreed to let the BAA standings determine which team would fold and which would remain, but did not predetermine how many seasons would constitute the sample size to compare. Providence finished six games ahead of Boston in '46, with a record of 28-32, and the Steamrollers looked to stay ahead by bolstering their roster with Sailors heading into the BAA's second season.

The Steamrollers knew that Sailors could be a crowd-pleasing spectacle, and gave him ample opportunity to showcase his jump-shot. With increased playing time in Providence during the '47-48 season, Sailors returned to his UW form, marveling fans with his artistry. George Duffy, the Steamrollers' publicist and a local sports icon, chronicled his anticipated debut; the following is an excerpt from a 1947 news release following Sailors's first four games:

His jump-shot was "out of this world" as one veteran newspaper man remarked. The kids of the state began to copy the shot. In Boys' clubs, YMCAs, Church leagues, and every other youthful circuit around the state, the kids jumped and shot and always remarked, "That's the way Kenny Sailors does it!"

Yes, the "Wyoming Kid" had won his way into the hearts of every basketball fan, his cat-like defensive play, his swift dribbling, and the jump-shot all added up to real basketball entertainment.

Sailors was the team's most popular player and also the highest paid. His salary of $7,500 a season was a wealthy wage in post-WWII America; according to Sailors, you could buy a brand-new Ford for only $500. George Mikan's $10,000 deal was the only contract more lucrative in the BAA.

As a Steamroller, Sailors paired with Pawtucket native Ernie Caverley, forming an unstoppable backcourt duo, arguably the best in the league. Despite scoring 15.8 points per game (the 5th highest average for a player in the slow-paced, shot-clock-less BAA) and earning second team All-League honors in '49, Sailors could not elevate the Steamrollers out of mediocrity. His individual suc-

cess did not translate into victories.

"I had good years there in Providence," he recalls, "I was in the top ten [in scoring]. We just never had a big man, and you have to have a big man." Those were the days of the game's first giants: Big Old Mikan (6'10) for the Minneapolis Lakers, Easy Ed Macauley for the St. Louis Bombers (6'8), and Arnie Risen (6'9) for the Rochester Royals. The Steamrollers were skilled but too small, finishing in last place both of Sailors's seasons with a record of 6-42 in '47. Those six victories still stand as the all-time lowest win total for a team in the combined history of the BAA and NBA.

FRANCHISE FAREWELL

In 1949, the NBA was officially formed and the BAA was dismantled. Successful teams transitioned to the new league, forcing Pieri and Brown to determine which of their franchises would establish itself in the NBA. Although the Celtics' record was unenviable, a composite mark of 67-101 in three BAA seasons, it outpaced the Steamrollers' embarrassing 46-122. The Steamrollers, including some of its players, were swiftly incorporated into the Celtics organization, and Boston became part of the NBA's original 17-team class. Pieri succeeded Brown as Celtics president in '63, and the team progressed into the most storied franchise in basketball history, winning 17 NBA championships.

In 1989, the Rhode Island Auditorium was demolished, but generations before, the Steamrollers had already been eclipsed from memory. In the 60 years since they folded, Providence has never had another professional team from the country's four major sports leagues. Had the Steamrollers mustered even a .500 record and finished ahead of the Celtics in the '40s, it's possible the illustrious history of the Boston Celtics would instead belong to Providence.

After the Steamrollers disintegrated, Sailors played for the Denver Nuggets during the NBA's first official season, his best year, leading the team with 17.3 points per game. A year later, he would return to the East Coast, traded to the Celtics for the final term of his career in '50-51. After five professional seasons, Sailors was eligible for retirement benefits and promptly bowed out of the game. From there, he moved with his wife back to Wyoming, buying a dude-ranch in Jackson Hole. Nineteen years later, they moved 1,400 miles to a new home in Alaska, but Sailors has since circled back to Wyoming and resides there on a quiet rural road at the age of 89.

MALCOLM BURNLEY B'12 was honored to speak to Mr. Kenny Sailors by phone.