

DAVE ANDERSON

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Recalling Final Four's Roots in The Garden

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It is all taken for granted now in college basketball. Jump shots. Seven-footers. Black players. The wide foul lane. Racehorse fast breaks. The behind-the-back dribble. Teams throughout the nation with kids from high schools in the New York-New Jersey area. Kentucky.

But as the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament moves into the Meadowlands and the National Invitation Tournament awaits its title game tonight at Madison Square Garden, it's time to remember that these taken-for-granted elements developed here roughly half a century ago when the Garden was the site of both tourneys.

Not many people paid much attention then to pro basketball, an infant that couldn't even dunk. The Knicks didn't play their first game until late 1946.

In contrast, college basketball was a quickly maturing youngster with sold-out Garden doubleheaders. In the post-season, the N.I.T. had more stature. It originated in 1938, a year before the N.C.A.A. tournament began. It was also center stage in the Garden, the nation's most famous arena.

The first four N.C.A.A. title games were held in the quiet of Evanston, Ill., and Kansas City, but in 1943 the championship game was moved to the Garden, where it would be held for six of the next seven years. During that era the Garden's two tournaments would showcase:

The first jump-shooter, Kenny Sailors, a willowy guard on Wyoming's 1943 N.C.A.A. championships.

The first 7-footer, Bob Kurland, who prompted the goal-tending rule as a shot-blocking center on the Oklahoma State teams that won the N.C.A.A. titles in 1945, in a final with New York University, and in 1946 against North Carolina.

The first prominent black player, Dolly King, a member of Long Island University's 1939 and 1941 N.I.T. champions.



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George Mikan in 1946

The first high-scoring center, George Mikan, whose 53 points for DePaul in the 1945 N.I.T. prompted rule makers to widen the foul lane from 6 feet to 12 feet.

The first race-horse fast-break team, Rhode Island State, remembered best for Ernie Calverley's 62-foot shot against Bowling Green in the 1946 N.I.T.

The first behind-the-back dribble, which Bob Davies, a Seton Hall guard, displayed in the 1941 N.I.T.

The first team, Holy Cross in 1947, to win the N.C.A.A. title with imported New York-New Jersey players, notably George Kaftan from Xavier High School and the freshman Bob Cousy from Andrew Jackson.

The first Adolph Rupp-coached Kentucky team to win the N.C.A.A. title, in 1948; it won again in 1949 in Seattle.

The first (and only) team, City College of New York, to sweep both the N.I.T. and N.C.A.A. titles in the same year, 1950.

Players on those Kentucky and C.C.N.Y. teams would scar college basketball when the point-fixing scandal broke; the N.C.A.A. would yank its title game out of the Garden. Although the N.I.T. remained, its stature gradually diminished, especially when Coach John Wooden's U.C.L.A. teams won 10 N.C.A.A. titles in 12 years.

But the 40's were college basketball's formative years. Only eight teams were in the N.I.T., which St. John's won in both 1943 and 1944 with Harry Boykoff at center. Only eight teams were in the N.C.A.A. tournament, one from each of eight geographical regions.

Although the N.I.T. was considered stronger, its winner lost to the N.C.A.A. winner during World War II in each of the three Red Cross charity games at the Garden involving the two champions — the only three times that the two tournament winners met to determine an undisputed national champion.

In 1943, Wyoming, with Kenny Sailors, defeated St. John's, 52-47. In 1944, Utah, which had been eliminated in the first round of the N.I.T., stopped St. John's, 42-36. In 1945, in a duel between Bob Kurland and George Mikan, Oklahoma State (then Oklahoma A&M) won from DePaul, 52-44.

In an era when some industrial companies had powerful Amateur Athletic Union teams, Kurland, the best player that hardly anybody talks about now, preferred to work for the Phillips 66 oil company and play for its A.A.U. team. He was a member of two United States Olympic gold-medal teams, in 1948 and 1952.

Now, roughly half a century later, the N.C.A.A. championship has finally returned to the area of its roots.