

'It was the place to go' for college hoops

By Jack Carey
USA TODAY

When the NCAA championship is decided April 1 at East Rutherford, N.J., it will not be the first time a national champion has been crowned in the metropolitan New York area.

But almost a half-century has passed since the last one.

From 1943 to 1950, seven NCAA championship games were played at the old Madison Square Garden at Eighth Avenue and 49th Street in Manhattan. The Garden was the site of some of the most exciting and history-making games in tournament history.

The National Invitation Tournament held five tournaments at the Garden by 1943 and was recognized as the pre-eminent postseason event.

The NCAA, which had held one final in Evanston, Ill., and three in Kansas City, Mo., wanted in on the big-city action.

"By 1943, the idea was, the tournament ought to be moved in order to have it available to fans on a national basis," says Jack Waters, former NCAA director of licensing. As a teenager, he saw three of the Garden's championship games.

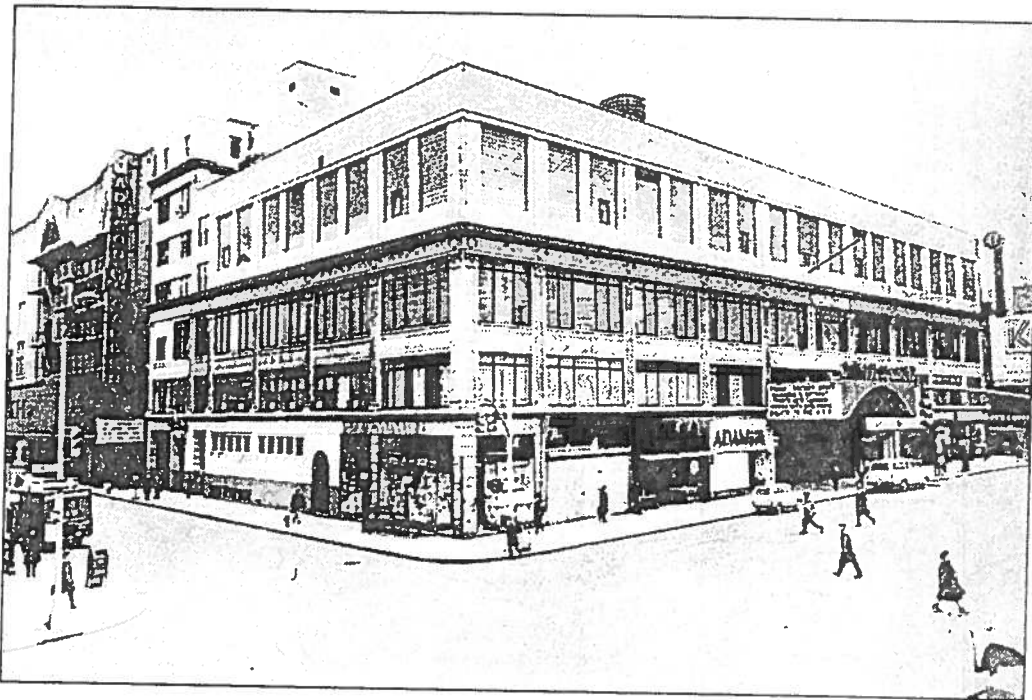
"The Garden had become the mecca of college basketball through the doubleheaders they were putting on. The tournament added to the aura. It was the place to go in the '40s. Plus, you had a capacity that probably exceeded everything on college campuses."

With eight teams in the tournament in those days, there wasn't a Final Four format, although the Garden also hosted East Regional games. The West Regionals were held in Kansas City, with the regional winners meeting in the final.

Wyoming won the first final at the Garden, beating Georgetown 46-34 as All-American Kenny Sailors scored 16 points.

"Georgetown was a tough team," Sailors recalls. "We never had a chance to scout them. We just heard it was a good ballclub. They beat DePaul to win the East, and our coach, Ev Shelton, might have got some information on them from Ray Meyer, the DePaul coach. We just managed to beat them late in the game."

Sailors is believed to be one of the first players, if not the first, to use the jump shot. "I started it when I was a kid in junior high, trying to get off



Home to the finals: In the 1940s, the old Madison Square Garden at Eighth Avenue and 49th Street in Manhattan was home to the NCAA and National Invitation tournament title games.

Garden spot in the '40s

The NCAA Final Four enjoyed a six-year run at New York's Madison Square Garden in the 1940s, leaving in 1949 but returning the following year. Overall, MSG ranks No. 2 to Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, Mo., for most tournament games (71) and most national championship games (7). The last NCAA tournament game there was in 1961. A breakdown of the Garden's glory years:

Year	Teams	Games	Final attendance	Total attendance
1943	8	5	13,300	56,876
1944	8	5	15,000	59,369
1945	8	5	18,035	67,780
1946	8	6	18,479	73,116
1947	8	6	18,445	72,959
1948	8	6	16,174	72,523
1950	8	6	18,142	75,464

shots over my brother, who was 6-5 and a good player," he says. "I was 5 years younger so I had to jump."

The next year, 1944, Utah won the title after getting to the final in a roundabout way.

Utah first turned down a bid to the NCAA, which would have sent it to Kansas City for the West Regional. The team opted for the NIT in New York.

"Only two players had ever been to New York," NCAA tournament MVP Arnie Ferrin says. "That's where basketball was king and that was why you'd want to go there and be a part of the NIT."

But Utah lost in the first round to Kentucky 46-38, spoiling its plans. Arkansas had been extended Utah's NCAA

slot, but when several Razorbacks were injured in a car accident, they had to turn down the bid. Utah, while still in New York, got another invitation from the NCAA and the players decided to go to Kansas City after all.

The Utes won the West, came back to New York and beat Dartmouth 42-40 in overtime as Ferrin scored 22.

"The team's attitude was, 'Why not go to Kansas City and if we win there, we can come back and spend more days in New York,'" Ferrin says. "We had a good team and we hated to end what had really been a good season with a loss."

With the NIT and NAAs in New York, debate intensified as to which was better. Red

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