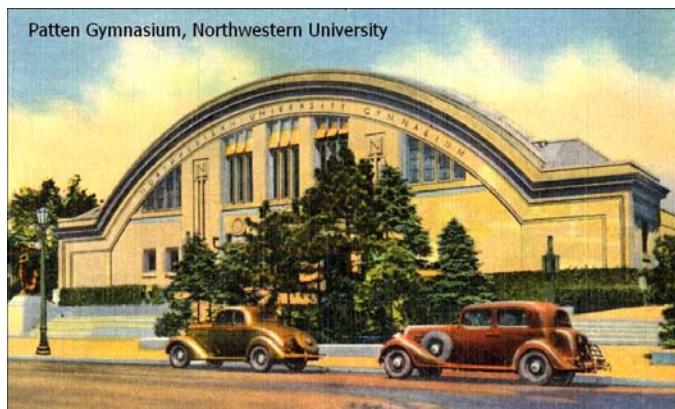


NCAA BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT CELEBRATES 50TH BIRTHDAY: FIRST TOURNAMENT HELD AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY, MARCH, 1939

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1989 marked the 50th anniversary of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. Of the many thousands who attended the "Final Four" playoffs, and the additional millions who watched the events on television, probably few recalled that the first NCAA basketball tournament finale was played in the old Patten Gymnasium on the Northwestern University campus in Evanston, Illinois on March 27, 1939. In that inaugural contest, the University of Oregon Ducks beat the Ohio State Buckeyes of the powerful Big Ten Conference by a score of 46-33.

The initial NCAA tournament was a modest affair contrasted with 1989's field of 64 teams. Only eight teams competed for the championship and there were only two rounds of offsite playoffs before the "Final Two" game was held at Northwestern. In San Francisco on Monday night March 20th, 1939, in the first round, the University of Oklahoma defeated Utah State, 50-39 and the University of Oregon beat the University of Texas, 56-41. Oregon had qualified for the playoffs by defeating the University of California two nights earlier on March 18th in a game played in Berkeley. On Tuesday March 21st, Oregon trounced Oklahoma, 55-37, to qualify for the championship game in Evanston six days later. Meanwhile, in Philadelphia other contenders vied for the trip to Northwestern. On March 17, Ohio State beat Wake Forest 64-52, and Villanova beat Brown, 42-30. On the following day, Saturday, March 18, Ohio State defeated Villanova, 53-36, to win the eastern sectional championship and advance to Evanston for the national championship game nine days later.

Thus, the stage was set for the first NCAA national championship game, which would occur before a near-capacity audience in the old Patten Gymnasium located on the east side of Sheridan Road on Northwestern University's Evanston Campus. The Patten Gymnasium, constructed in 1910 with funds donated by the famous Chicago commodities broker and Northwestern Trustee, James A. Patten, was considered

by many contemporaries to be one of the finest athletic facilities in the world. Designed by the renowned architect George Maher, the cavernous structure accommodated track meets and music festivals as well as basketball games. The NCAA championship game would be the last basketball contest played in Patten; it would shortly be demolished to make way for construction of Northwestern's new multi-million dollar engineering building.

Gametime on Monday March 27, 1939, was 8:30 PM. At 8PM, however, the assembled crowd was treated to an exhibition basketball game played under original basketball rules and conditions. Two 12-man teams comprised of Northwestern intramural all-stars played the game as it had been invented in 1891. Members of Northwestern's varsity team stood under each peach basket with broomsticks and poked out the ball after each basket had been made. Robert Voights, Northwestern football star, Captain of the 1938-39 basketball team, and later varsity football coach at Northwestern, was one of the two youths who poked balls out of the peach basket. Among the honored guests in the audience for this was Dr. James Naismith, the man who had invented the game of basketball in Springfield, Massachusetts, 48 years earlier.

As the first NCAA championship game got under way, the tall Oregon team jumped into the lead, which it never relinquished. Most of the Oregon players were 6' 4" or taller and they easily dominated the boards. Ohio State, captained by All-Big Ten guard and scoring champion, Jimmy Hull, had placed its hopes on maintaining its season-long high shooting percentage, but Oregon's height and shifting zone defense shut down the Buckeyes' scoring machine. Oregon prevailed at the half, 21-16, and went on to win 46-33. John Dick was high scorer for Oregon, whose uniforms were adorned with a picture of Donald Duck, netting 15 points, while Jimmy Hull bagged 12 points for Ohio State.

Thus ended the very first NCAA championship tournament. The next day, Francesco Franco seized Madrid and became dictator of Spain. During the tournament Czechoslovakia had been dismembered by Hitler. The beginning of World War Two was just a few months away.

On March 31, four days after Oregon had become the first NCAA basketball champion, Bobby Riggs and Jimmy Evert were among tennis stars who played matches in Patten Gym.

(March, 1989)