

## ***THE 1904 BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP. . . OR. . . WERE THE “BUFFALO GERMANS” THE ORIGINAL, DREAM TEAM?***

*by Donald Sayenga*

The Olympic basketball tournaments were supposed to have begun in 1936, but there *was* an Olympic basketball championship in 1904, and it *was* won by the best basketball team in the whole world, the “Buffalo Germans.” Why then is this record omitted from almost every standard history of the Modern Olympic Games? Sports historians are long overdue in their obligation to restore the prestige of this exceptional group of young athletes.

“The Germans” were an American YMCA team from Buffalo, New York. One of the greatest ironies of basketball history is that the game invented for YMCAs was *actually declining* in YMCA popularity around the time of the 1904 Olympic Games. The fall-off was understandable: basketball had been intended as a gym game which any number could play. Participants soon realized that when games involved more than a dozen players on each side, the action soon became too chaotic.

Soon the basketball rules stipulated a maximum number of players per square-footage of gym floor. Lastly, (in 1895) teams were fixed at five players, because at that time it was the number specified for the average gym floor in the United States. Limiting action on a gym floor to only ten people at a time defeated the whole purpose of having an open association gym for recreation of the general membership. So, the YMCAs turned away from basketball, which boosted volleyball as a side-effect.

Another irony of the pre-1936 posture in the IOC is that basketball had grown to great popularity in the United States without ever drawing much attention from Olympic officials prior to 1904. By then, however, the game had already begun to spread to the rest of the world. During the 1920-1940 cooperation between the United States and Japan, basketball had become an important part of cultural exchange because it was then a low-scoring “little man’s game,” with heavy emphasis on foul shots. Thus, it was a joint USA-Japan petition to the IOC which resulted in the 1936 Olympic basketball revival, and the “first official Olympic basketball championship” in 1936.

### **Why the 1904 Champions were called Buffalo Germans**

The Buffalo Germans were a very small group of German-speaking men who played together as one of several teams sponsored by the Buffalo (New York) Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). The new Buffalo Central YMCA (which opened in 1903) was a huge organization with thousands of members, one of the world’s largest YMCA associations.

According to the Buffalo YMCA’s official history: “Buffalo was a lusty, growing industrial and transportation center in 1903 with a population of 352,387, ranking eighth in size in the country . . . Six percent of all the men in Buffalo in these age groups (16-40) held membership in the Young Men’s Christian Association . . . The German department had a membership of 847 . . . These figures will help to understand the way in which the Association touched the lives of men in depth in 1903. 2,942 members held tickets covering gymnasium privileges, a gain of 572 over the previous year. The Young Men’s Christian

Association then led every other organization in the city in the direction of the physical training and athletic life of young men.”<sup>1</sup>

Hausauer’s Buffalo YMCA official history touches only very briefly on the “Buffalo Germans”: Page 9 - “. . . the famous Buffalo Germans basketball team . . . had carried away all honors at the Pan-American Exposition [in 1901] . . . At that Exposition eight of the country’s leading basketball teams were entered in competition and the Buffalo Germans won the championship by defeating all of the others. They scored a total of 81 points in the tournament to their opponents’ 27. This is more remarkable because the average age of this team in the Pan-American year was only 18. In 1903, they were continuing to win games, causing membership in the German department ‘to reach a saturation point’ . . .”

Page 13 - “The East Side for many years was made up of a highly segregated German population and in the middle of this was located the German YMCA where, since its beginning meeting, board minutes and all business was carried on in German. With the growth of industrialism the city in this section began to change . . . Realizing they were no longer a department in a segregated community, the German YMCA changed its name to the Genessee department on May 1, 1905 . . .”

Page 19 - “In 1904 they [Buffalo Germans] participated in the Olympic Games tournament held in St. Louis during July and won the championship against the leading teams in the country. Following this spectacular record, the team manager arranged a country-wide tour which included the playing of 87 games and of these they won 69 and lost 18. In 1907 the team started the greatest winning streak of their career, playing 111 games from then through the season of 1910- 11 without a single loss. During all these years the team included only nine different men and they carried only six on their tours. This great team began its career in the gymnasium of the German department of the YMCA and played games and practised there until 1905. An unfortunate misunderstanding with the administration of the German department forced them to leave the YMCA just as they were beginning the greatest years of their career. They reluctantly moved across the street to Orioles Hall and continued there for the rest of their career. In retrospect, it seems that the YMCA gave up a tremendous asset through this action.”

## **Historical Significance of the 1904 “Dream Team”**

The Buffalo Germans represent a rare case of a whole team which has been inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. As single individuals, however, they remain obscure. Historian William G. Mokray credits the Buffalo Germans as perhaps being the first great professional basketball team; did they “turn pro” because of their 1905 eviction from the Buffalo YMCA German Department? I suggest our Olympic basketball historians ought to make a concerted effort to fill the blank record about this spectacular team and their 1904 Olympic victory.

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Hausauer, *The Second Fifty Years*. (Buffalo 1970).