

# THE BUFFALO GERMANS AND THE 1904 OLYMPIC BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT IN ST. LOUIS



by Annette R. Hoffmann

At the beginning of the historical exhibition of the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts, the attentive visitor runs across a board with the title *Buffalo Germans*. Besides others there is a photo with nine basketball players dressed in striped tops and socks and white pants, two other men are wearing a black suit. Between the players there are several cups, a basketball and a banner hinting at participation in the *Pan American Basketball Championships 1901*. Behind the team a huge flag with the words, "*St. Louis 1904 Olympic Games Olympic Worlds Basket Ball Championship*", is capturing the eye of the observer. The description of this and the other photos is quite short and not very informative. However, one can gather from it that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the *Buffalo Germans* were not only one of the most successful basketball teams and they were also the winners of the *Olympic Basketball Game 1904*.

Although this team is one of the few which have been admitted to the *Hall of Fame*, it is not an easy undertaking to find information on them. The *Buffalo Germans* are not mentioned in current overview publications of American sport history; however in literature that specifically focuses on the history of basketball one can occasionally find out more about this team. Especially Robert W. PETERSON has done some intensive research, as is obvious in his publication on the beginnings of professional basketball.<sup>1</sup> He devoted six pages to Buffalo Germans. Moreover, a few sources can be found in the Historical Society of Buffalo.

In the following I will first introduce the Buffalo Germans before I take up the Olympic Basketball Tournament of 1904 in St. Louis.

## Who were the Buffalo Germans?

In 1891 the young Canadian minister and



Buffalo  
Germans  
1904

physical educator Dr. James NAISMITH invented basketball at the YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts. His original purpose was to create a suitable indoor ball game for the winter. The new game soon became popular and spread from a leisure-time activity to a competitive sport. Already in 1898 the first regional basketball leagues developed in the northeastern parts of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Only four years after NAISMITH had invented the new ball games, five juveniles came together in Buffalo, N.Y., under the leadership of Fred BURKHARD, the Physical Director of the German YMCA, who had learned the game from NAISMITH himself.<sup>3</sup> Soon more persons joined the group. Most of them were Americans with a German or Dutch background. In the literature this team is simply called the "Germans".<sup>4</sup> Until 1898 the 16- to 18-year-olds played against other junior teams, but because of their very good results they soon competed against men. They could chalk up their first success in 1901 when the AAU organized the first national basketball tournament during the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. The Buffalo Germans won this tournament against the seven competing

- 1 PETERSON, R.W., *Cages to Jump Shots. Pro Basketball's Early Years*, New York/Oxford 1990.
- 2 RADER, B.G., *American Sports. From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, Upper Saddle River 1999, p. 103; REDECKER, W., *Basketball in den USA - die Anfänge der Professionalisierung des Basketballs in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika*, state examination thesis, Institute for Sport Science, University of Münster, Münster 2003, p. 18.
- 3 HAUSAUER, K., *The Second Fifty Years. A History of the Young Men's Christian's Association of Buffalo and Erie County. 1902-1952*, Manuscript, Buffalo Historical Society A 92-9, p. 25; NUSSBAUM, P., "Our Best Team Ever", in: *Buffalo Magazine* (16.02.1992), pp. 7-9, p. 9; PETERSON, *Cages*, p.56.
- 4 REDECKER, *Basketball*, p. 22.
- 5 NUSSBAUM, "Team", p. 9; PETERSON, *Cages*, p. 56.

teams without a single loss.<sup>5</sup>

The Germans' series of wins lasted for quite some time. Not only did they win the 1904 Olympic Basketball Tournament, which will be described below, but they won 111 games in a row between 1908 and 1911. At this time - supposedly due to some arguments with the management - the Buffalo Germans no longer belonged to the YMCA; they had separated in 1904 or 1905.<sup>6</sup> According to Peterson they then were an independent team, so-called "Barnstorming Team" or simply traveling team, and traveled through the Northeast and sometimes as far as Ohio to play against local teams. The Buffalo Germans dominated their opponents and attracted many spectators.<sup>7</sup> In 1915 the team officially changed its name into "Orioles", borrowed from the sponsor, Nest No. 1 of the Fraternal Order of Orioles. However within the basketball community they remained known under their original name.<sup>8</sup> A guess might also be that during the years of World War I when feelings of hatred were directed against everything that was German, they were forced to change their name to make their German background less obvious.

#### The 1904 Olympic Basketball Tournament

The third modern Olympic Games took part during the Louisiana Purchase International Exposition from April 30 to December 1, 1904 in St. Louis, Missouri. This world fair was organized in honor of the centennial of the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. The American President Thomas JEFFERSON had purchased this area in 1803 from NAPOLEON. In the beginning the world's fair was planned for 1903; however, due to



organizational problems, it had to be postponed for a year.<sup>9</sup> Twelve nations participated at the Olympic Games organized under the umbrella of the Department of Physical Culture and its chair, James E. Sullivan, who also was the president of the American Athletic Union (AAU).

The athletic events during the Louisiana Exposition, which also included sport-related exhibitions and lectures on physical education and sport, lasted more than half a year - from May until November. It is

not always clear which activities actually were part of the Olympic Games and which not. Actually the Games were to last from August 29 until September 3. During these six days competitions in track and field, weight lifting and tug of war were to be held.<sup>10</sup> However, sport historian and Olympic specialist Bill Mallon<sup>11</sup>, who intensely discussed the question which of the many athletic events were Olympic and which not. He argues that the actual Olympic Games lasted from July 1 until November 23, 1904.

Officially basketball did not become an Olympic sport until 1936. But according to the statements by the head organizer, SULLIVAN, during the Louisiana Exposition a variety of basketball tournaments were held, such as an Athletic League Basketball, College, YMCA, and an Olympic tournament.<sup>12</sup> Nowadays the last mentioned would be called a demonstration tournament.

The Olympic Basketball Tournament took part from July 11 till 12, 1904. Only six American teams entered this competition: Buffalo Germans, West Side and Central YMCA from Chicago, *Turner's Tigers* of San Francisco, *Missouri Athletic Club*, Central YMCA of St. Louis and *Xavier Athletic Club* of

6 HAUSAUER, *Years*, p. 25.

7 REDECKER, *Basketball*, pp. 21f; PETERSON, *Cages*, p. 59.

8 PETERSON, *Cages*, pp. 60f.

9 MALLON, B., *The 1904 Olympic Games. Results for All Competitors*, Jefferson, N.C./London 1999, p. 3; N.N., *Amtlicher Bericht über die Weltausstellung von Saint Louis 1904. Erstattet vom Reichskommissar*, Berlin 1906, p. 1.

10 LENNARTZ, K., *Die Beteiligung Deutschlands an den Olympischen Spielen 1900 in Paris und 1904 in St. Louis*, Bonn 1983, p. 122.

11 MALLON, *Games*.

12 SULLIVAN, J.E., *Spalding's Official Athletic Almanac*, 1904, pp. 15, 207, 217.

New York. Each team had to play five games within these two days. Unfortunately, except for the results, there is not much information available about this tournament. The *Buffalo Germans*<sup>13</sup> did not lose a single game, and were clearly the winners. After their two outstanding titles of 1901 and 1904 the Germans called themselves World Champions.<sup>14</sup>

Turner's Tigers	78-6
Central YMCA of St. Louis	87-35
Missouri Athletic Club	97-8
New York Xavier	38-29
Chicago YMCA	38-29

But was this basketball tournament really an Olympic event? In Spalding's Official Athletic Almanac, written by Sullivan, the tournament is clearly put down as an Olympic one. However Mallon does not support this, since international competition was missing. Besides the fact that basketball was not very well known internationally at this point of time, the rule that only teams from the same home club could participate in team sports made it even more difficult for athletes from other countries to compete.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

The Buffalo Germans existed 29 years in different configurations. The first nine years of their career they were amateurs; otherwise participation in the Olympic Games could not have been possible. In 1904, presumably after the Games, they became professionals. In the three decades of their existence they won 762 games versus 85 losses. Thus it is no wonder that Don Sayenga called the them "the Original Dream Team".<sup>16</sup> However Peterson mentions that during their winning streak between 1908 and 1911 the Germans were lucky not to have played – probably because of

their remote location – against teams of the professional Eastern League, and they never joined a professional league.

As mentioned above, there are only a few sources on the *Buffalo Germans*. A great deal is known about the success of the team, but not much on the background of the players. It would be quite interesting to know whether they considered themselves German-Americans or whether they only carried their name without a link to the German ethnic group. This team existed during a period of anti-German sentiments due to World War I. Did they suffer any disadvantages due to these sentiments? If yes, how did they survive as a team?

With regard to ethnicity, the athletic success of the Buffalo Germans shows that the immigrant Germans not only were successful in those sport activities which they had brought along to the United States, such as turnen, but that they also participated in purely American sport and in American organizations such as the Buffalo YMCA, thus demonstrating a certain degree of assimilation to American culture and identification with the American nation. The American nation thanked them for this by admitting them in the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1961.

Results of Games of the *Buffalo Germans* during the 1904 Olympic Basketball Tournament

## The Basketball Hall of Fame



### CERTIFICATE OF ELECTION

The **Buffalo German Team**  
 WORLD CHAMPIONS 1904  
*has been elected by the Honors Committee to the*  
**Basketball Hall of Fame**

*Dr. Fred Burkhardt, Coach, Alfred A. Heerd, Capt., Philip Dinsinger  
 Henry J. Faust, Edward Linneborn, John J. Maier, Albert W. Manweiler  
 Edward C. Miller, Harry J. Miller, Charles P. Monahan, George L. Redlein  
 Dr. Edmond Reimann, William C. Rohde, George Schell*

*April 1961*  
 Date of Election

Chairman Honors Committee

13 On the Olympic Team the following men played for the Buffalo Germans: Alfred Heerd (Captain), Albert Manweiler, George Redlein, William Rhode, Edward Miller, Charles Monohan. Cf. MALLON, *Games*, p. 216.

14 PETERSON, *Cages*, pp. 58-59.

15 MALLON, *Games*, p. 213.

16 See his article SAYENGA, D., "The 1904 Basketball Championship ... or... Were the 'Buffalo Germans' the Original Team?", in: *Citius, Altius, Fortius* 4(1996)3, pp. 7-8.