



# Eddie Gottlieb

By Rich Westcott

In the long and distinguished history of Philadelphia sports, there have been many Jewish participants whose work had a lasting effect on the games with which they were associated. Some were prominent on a local level while others enjoyed a national reputation.

Some of them, of course, were players. Others were nonuniformed participants who did their main work away from the playing field. In this category, no one was more prominent than Eddie Gottlieb.

Unquestionably, Gottlieb ranks as one of the most important sports figures ever to come out of Philadelphia. But for this member of the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts, his success wasn't restricted to the city where he grew up. It had an enormous impact at a national level. In fact, as one of the pioneers of professional basketball, Gottlieb is without a doubt a major reason that the sport has reached its current level of success.

Although Gottlieb is most closely associated with basketball, he also attained a high level of prominence in other sports, especially baseball. Accordingly, he ranks nationally among the greatest Jewish sports figures of all time.

Gottlieb's story is a complex one. Over the course of his life, he wore many hats: owner, general manager, coach, inventor, player, entrepreneur, promoter, booking agent, school teacher, and sporting goods salesman. He was wise, yet cautious, a stickler for details, loyal, honest, frugal, opinionated, gruff, profane, and cunning. Although he insisted on being the boss—today he might be called a “control freak”—he had legions of friends who included the rare mix of members of his team, opponents, league officials, fans, and the media.

“Eddie was one of the brightest people I've ever been around,” said Bill Campbell, a prominent local sportscaster for more than 70 years who broadcast Warriors games in the club's early years. “He was very opinionated, very stubborn, but very honest. He was a very interesting guy, and one who was just a brilliant, brilliant person.”

Gottlieb's connection with sports went back to his youth. Born in 1898 in Kiev, Ukraine, he immigrated with his parents to the United States at the age of four. By the time he was 10, Gottlieb was playing on a grade school basketball team. He attended South Philadelphia High School where he played basketball, baseball, and football before graduating in 1916. Gottlieb then attended the School of Pedagogy (later to become part of Temple University) in Philadelphia, playing basketball for two years and serving as captain in his final year. He graduated in 1918 and soon thereafter launched a career as a teacher.

Along the way, he also became part owner of a sporting goods business, a sports promoter, and a person who was deeply involved in professional basketball and baseball. His most highly acclaimed accomplishments came from his connection with pro basketball.

Appropriately called “The Mogul” by almost everybody, Gottlieb was one of the founders in 1946 of the Basketball Association of America, which a few years later merged with the National Basketball League to form the National Basketball Association. Because of his vital role in that process, Gottlieb has been called “The Father of Pro Basketball.” It has often been said that without Gottlieb, there would be no NBA.

He was the coach of the city's first major league basketball team, the Philadelphia Warriors, which he formed in 1946. Later, he purchased the team for \$25,000 in 1952, owning it until 1962 when he sold the franchise to a group in San Francisco for \$850,000.

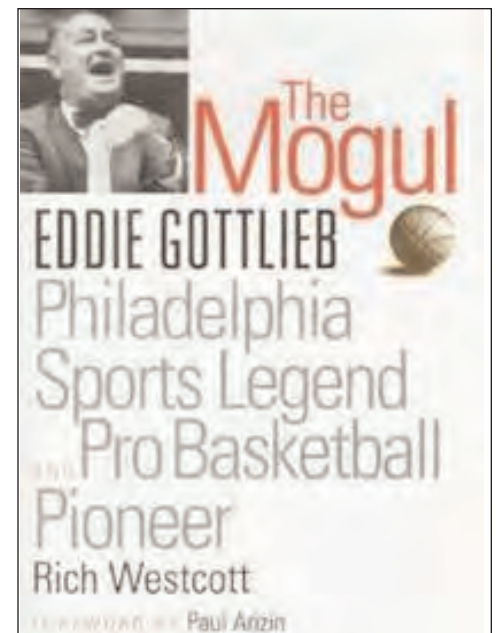
While the Warriors were winning two professional basketball championships, including one in the BAA in its first year of operation, Gottlieb was a dominant figure in the sport. He was chairman of

the NBA rules committee for 26 years. He also strongly supported the creation of the 24-second clock, while initiating numerous other new rules.

For 30 years, he was also responsible for drawing up the NBA schedule, which he did by hand, often making notes on a rumpled sheet of paper that he carried around in his back pocket. “Sometimes, he'd even make notes on a napkin in a restaurant,” said Harvey Pollack, who worked for nearly 70 years for the Warriors and 76ers. When the job was finally switched to a computer, the machine couldn't handle it and the assignment was returned to Gotty.

Certainly, one of the crowning achievements of Gottlieb's career came when he drafted Philadelphia native Wilt Chamberlain for the Warriors after almost single-handedly pushing through a rule that allowed teams to select high school players who played in their areas. Ultimately, Chamberlain broke in with the Warriors and later led both the 76ers and Los Angeles Lakers to NBA championships while becoming arguably the greatest player in pro basketball history.

During his career, Gottlieb always worked out of tiny offices in center city, handling his many duties over the years with the help of just a few other people.



One was the legendary public address announcer Dave Zinkoff, who spent 42 years working with Gotty. Another was ticket manager Mike Iannarella, a Gotty associate for 48 years. Pollack, active with the 76ers until his passing in 2015, served as Gottlieb's publicity director, starting in 1946.

Gottlieb was a keen judge of talent. He was also extremely innovative. He disliked excessive dribbling, preferring instead that his players pass the ball. To make his point, he occasionally held drills with a partially deflated ball.

Always aware of the fans' feelings, he once said: "The customers demand action, and we try to see that they get it."

While they existed, the Philadelphia Warriors were one of pro basketball's most colorful—and interesting—teams. They played at both the Arena and Convention Hall (both in West Philadelphia), sometimes taking the court in the second game of a doubleheader in which four different pro teams participated. Symbolic of the unpretentious conditions of early pro basketball, the Warriors also sometimes played games at local high schools.



*Philadelphia Warriors owner Eddie Gottlieb with Wilt Chamberlain in 1960 holding his NBA "Outstanding Player of 1959-60" award. (AP)*

Believing that it helped to attract fans, Gottlieb usually built the Warriors around local players, a group that over the years included All-Americans such as Chamberlain, Paul Arizin of Villanova, George Senesky of St. Joseph's, Tom Gola of La Salle, Ernie Beck of Penn, and Guy Rodgers of Temple. During their 16 years in Philadelphia, Warriors players Joe Fulks, Neil Johnston, Arizin, and Chamberlain, led the league in scoring a combined total of nine times. It was during one of those years (1962) that Chamberlain staged the phenomenal achievement of scoring 100 points in one game.

"Gottlieb was one of the most important people in

my life," said Arizin many years later. "I looked upon him not only as an employer and a coach, but as a true friend, maybe even sort of a surrogate uncle."

Before they left town, the Warriors not only beat the Chicago Stags in five games in 1946-47 for the league title, they also captured the NBA crown in 1955-56 with a four games to one verdict over the Ft. Wayne Pistons.



*Gottlieb, president of the Philadelphia Warriors, signed Temple All-American Guy Rodgers to a contract.*

The Mogul was more than the driving force behind the Warriors and the NBA. Two years after he sold the Warriors where they eventually became known as the Golden State Warriors, he led the effort to relocate the Syracuse Nationals to Philadelphia where the team became the 76ers and still remains a strong force in the city.

Gotty was also a key figure in Negro League baseball. He was a promoter and booking agent for African American teams dating from the 1920s to the late 1940s, in effect controlling who played where and when in Eastern Pennsylvania. He also booked games outside of the state in places such as New York City. In 1933, Gottlieb became the principal owner and financier of the newly formed Philadelphia Stars, a Negro League team. The following season, the Stars won the Negro National League championship, defeating the Chicago American Giants. Gottlieb would be connected with the Stars until they disbanded in the early 1950s, thus ending some 50 years of black baseball in Philadelphia.

"As long as we were winning, he was happy," said Mahlon Duckett, who played for the Stars in the 1940s. "He'd call a meeting once in a while to talk about things, but most of the time he'd come to games and sit in the stands."

During their existence, the Stars took the field at



*Eddie Gottlieb (center) with Warriors assistant coach Cy Kaselman (left) and Howie Dallmar.*

various times with future Hall of Famers such as Judy Johnson, Biz Mackey, Buck Leonard, Norm ((Turkey) Stearns, and Oscar Charleston in their lineup. Satchel Paige even had a brief stint pitching for the Stars.

At the height of his career. Gottlieb ran three pro teams, the SPHAS, the Stars, and the Warriors at once. He was always on the move, never sleeping at night for too long. Probably because of his dauntless schedule, Gotty never married, although for many years, he had a girlfriend named Carmen C. Trejo, a singer/dancer from Spain who lived quietly under the name of Alicia Romay in New York where Gottlieb paid her rent.

Certainly, Gottlieb's most significant work prior to his affiliation with the Warriors and Stars came during a long and fruitful connection with the SPHAS. A fixture in Philadelphia basketball circles for some 35 years, the SPHAS were not only the city's first major pro basketball team, but ultimately they became one of the premier cage groups in the entire United States, playing mostly in an era when the sport was enormously popular among Jewish fans.

At the age of 19, Gottlieb joined with former South Philadelphia High School basketball teammates Hughie Black and Harry Passon to form an amateur basketball team. Although originally sponsored by an organization called the Young Men's Hebrew Association, that group withdrew its sponsorship two years later. A new sponsor, the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association, was found, and in 1919 the team took the court under its new name, the SPHAS.

Initially, the SPHAS performed as an independent

team and then as a member of an amateur Philadelphia League until joining the semiprofessional Eastern League in 1925. Over the next 22 years, while playing in three different leagues, the SPHAS won 13 league championships, made 18 trips to the playoffs, and became known as the team that held hugely popular dances following Saturday night games at the Broadwood Hotel in center city Philadelphia.

The SPHAS routinely attracted 3,000 fans for their games, once they moved to the Broadwood. Often, spectators, unable to find seats, would perch on stairways leading up to the court and followed the game based on the sounds made by those watching the action. Dozens of gamblers also perched close to the action, taking bets from fans and outsiders.

In those days, basketball was primarily a Jewish man's game, and featured low-scoring contests, a leather-covered ball, two-hand set shots, and a center jump after each field goal. Players wore high-top black sneakers, leather kneepads, and sleeveless shirts, and were paid between \$5 and \$30 per game. It was a vastly different game from today's fast-paced version, so much of which is played above the rim.

Over the years, the SPHAS fielded lineups consisting of top Jewish players, some of whom were Philadelphia natives. Among the better known SPHAS stars were Ossie Schechtman, Inky Lautman, Shikey Gotthofer, Harry Litwack, Petey Rosenberg, Cy Kaselman, Mockie Bunin, Jerry Fleishman, Ralph Kaplowitz, Art Hillhouse, Red Rosan, and Red Klotz. Most of them ranked among the all-time leaders of Jewish basketball. "Players were paid on a per diem basis," remembered Schechtman. "Sometimes, you had to fight Gotty for \$5 or \$10 more per game. He wasn't cheap, but he wanted value. And he made the SPHAS the soundest financial team in the whole league."

No one would ever describe Gottlieb as being a master strategist. He knew the game backward and forward, and often gave out instructions, sometimes even donning a uniform in practice to make his point. But he wasn't big on pre-game plans or diagramming plays.

"He just let the players play," recalled Kaplowitz. "When he wanted us to play better, he would plead with us, 'My boys, my boys, give me a period, one period.'"

The SPHAS played all the best teams in the country, holding their own with other fabled teams such as the Cleveland Rosenblums, owned by future Harlem Globetrotters owner Abe Saperstein, the

Harlem Rens, and the Original Celtics.

Often, the team traveled from city to city stuffed into Gottlieb's nine-passenger sedan with Zinkoff lying on the floor. "There were times we'd play on a Saturday night in Philadelphia," said Fleishman, usually the car's driver, "then play in Wilmington on Sunday afternoon and in Trenton Sunday night. You'd keep your uniform on and never shower between games."

Gottlieb also served two stints as head basketball coach at Philadelphia Textile (now Philadelphia University). In 1922, he helped to found the



Philadelphia Baseball Association, an organization that eventually included 60 semiprofessional teams. In the 1940s and 1950s, he was the promoter and booking agent for the Harlem Globetrot-

ters during their annual summer tours in Europe.

During his career, Gottlieb was extremely active as a booking agent. Not only did he set up Negro League games, he booked as many as 500 amateur baseball games each week. In Philadelphia, it was said that a team couldn't get a field unless it had been booked there by Gotty.

Gottlieb also booked appearances for entertainers. He arranged for the first appearance of fellow South Philadelphia resident Joey Bishop in 1937. He made dates for many years for not only Bishop, but for others such as baseball comedian Max Patkin. "He was the only reason I was in the business," said Patkin, who staged his routine at sports events for some 50 years.

Gottlieb was also the commissioner of a Philadelphia-area semi-professional football league, and was involved as a promoter of professional wrestling matches. Once, he even attempted to put together a group headed by the well-known Levy family to purchase the Phillies, intending to become general manager and to add to the team star players from the Negro Leagues. While that effort proved to be unsuccessful, Gottlieb retained his interest in baseball.

In recognition of his vast knowledge of Negro League baseball, he was named in 1970 by commissioner Bowie Kuhn to a 10-member committee charged with recommending pre-Jackie Robinson Negro League players for induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. The work of that group resulted in players such as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, and many others getting inducted into the baseball shrine.

Life was always a big gamble for Gotty, who was never averse to placing a wager at various race tracks and other spots around the city. He took risks. He navigated uncharted waters. And during much of his career, he had an uncanny knack of being able to make things work.

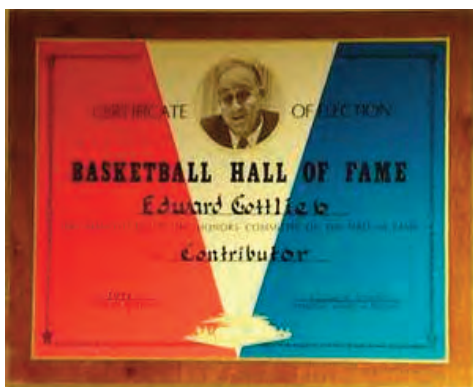
"Nobody ever won an argument with him," said former NBA star and the first coach of the 76ers, Dolph Schayes. "He was very streetwise. And very persuasive. And he coached by the seat of his pants. He didn't have a lot of strategy. He just coached based on the star theory. Get a big scorer and you'd win games and bring in fans."

Gottlieb had a fascinating and unique life. He was colorful and imaginative, relentless, enthusiastic, and indefatigable. Indeed, there are few sports figures with lives more interesting than Gottlieb's. And he knew virtually everything there was to know, not only about Philadelphia sports, past and present, but about sports on a national level.

Jerry Rullo, who came out of Temple to play with the SPHAS and Warriors called Gottlieb “a terrific businessman. And his word was as good as his bond. He had a terrific memory. And he was a very honest man.”

It was never difficult to find words to describe Gottlieb. And anyone who tried never had to rely on words that were insipid or ambivalent. Gotty was the kind of person who brought out straight-forward descriptions.

“He was not devoutly religious, but he was a dedicated Jew,” said Rabbi Amiel Novoseller, who succeeded his father, Sherman, at Congregation Beth Tovim in the Wynnefield section of Philadelphia where Gottlieb was a member. “Eddie never forgot where he came from,” added Rabbi Novoseller, who as a youth knew Gotty from a different perspective than others. “He always remembered his parents and the concept of charity that they had taught him. He was a gentleman’s gentleman. He was sincere. He had a desire to be kind. He was not a show-off and he didn’t care for status symbols. There was something exceptionally unique about Eddie.”



More than 35 years after his passing, Gottlieb continues to inspire provocative comments by those who knew him. Virtually everyone with whom he came into contact had strong opinions about The Mogul. Some are flattering. Some are not. He affected different people in different ways. And descriptions of him sometimes were contradictory. But in all cases, they helped to describe a man who throughout his life was anything but wishy-washy. “To me, he was in a class by himself,” said former Warriors player George Dempsey. “He was a brilliant guy. It was fun to sit down and talk with him because he had more stories than anybody I

ever knew. And he knew other sports like baseball and boxing as well as he knew basketball. He was a unique character with a good heart, and it was a joy to be in his presence.

He was a competitor like nobody else. He wanted to win in the worst way.”

Indeed, Gottlieb was one of a kind, a Damon Runyan kind of character who far surpassed his humble origins. From Russia to South Philadelphia, from dingy gyms to gaudy arenas, from an unknown kid to a nationally prominent sports figure, his life followed an extraordinary path that was crammed with special achievements.

*Rich Westcott is a sports writer and historian from Philadelphia. He is the author of 25 books, including The Mogul – Eddie Gottlieb, Philadelphia Sports Legend and Pro Basketball Pioneer, published in 2008 by Temple University Press. In that book, Westcott interviewed more than 60 people with connections to Gottlieb. Paul Arizin wrote the foreword.*