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January 2012

Book Review: National Title: The Unlikely Tale of the NAIB Tournament

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Recommended Citation

Carlson, Chad R., "Book Review: National Title: The Unlikely Tale of the NAIB Tournament" (2012). *Faculty Research and Creative Activity*. 20.

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BOOK REVIEW

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STOOKSBURY, DANNY. *National Title: The Unlikely Tale of the NAIB Tournament*. Bradenton Beach, Fla.: Higher Level Publishing, 2010. Pp. viii+210. Listing of source materials and index. \$22.95 pb.

Journal of Sport History, Volume 39, Number 1, Spring 2012, pp. 199-200

Sadly, the oldest intercollegiate basketball tournament, the National Intercollegiate Basketball Championship Tournament sponsored by the National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball (NAIB, or National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics—NAIA—since 1952) has largely been forgotten in the annals of college basketball history. This may be, in part, because the large, powerhouse basketball schools have essentially ignored this tournament. It may be, in part, because the tournament has not tried to compete with the NCAA and NIT championships by inviting large schools and negotiating lucrative national television rights packages. And it may be, in part, because this tournament did not make it through World War II uninterrupted like its peers did.

Yet Danny Stooksbury, the author of *National Title: The Unlikely Tale of the NAIB Tournament*, does not mention any of these obvious historical arguments in his chronicling of the historical prominence of the NAIB tournament. Stooksbury writes an enjoyable narrative of the origins of the Kansas City-hosted tournament as the brainchild of Baker (Kan.) University's Emil Liston in 1937 through the association's name change in 1952. This narrative includes research from various local and national news outlets along with many sources from Liston's personal papers. Stooksbury often highlights within his text lengthy newspaper quotations and entire missives from or to Liston.

The archived materials add great detail to a fascinating and previously untold history of a tournament worth remembering: such tidbits of information as the fact that it was the first "national" championship; it was based on the moral ideals of basketball's founder and Liston's mentor, James Naismith, who participated in its organization; it was aided by Liston's friend Forrest "Phog" Allen, coach of Kansas University, outspoken proponent of the NCAA tournament and critic of its biggest competitor, the NIT championship; it was attended by Coach John Wooden's Indiana State squad before he became a legend at UCLA; and John Wooden's 1948 Sycamore team (which lost in the championship game) racially integrated the NAIB before the larger NCAA tournament had black participants.

While Stooksbury's detailed narrative describes these interesting NAIB accomplishments, two issues leave this book as less than satisfying. First, Stooksbury makes some mistakes in the details of his narrative. The text is riddled with spelling and grammatical mistakes, but those are often found in books and can be overlooked. Unfortunately, the author includes some prominent data inaccuracies. For instance, he refers to Roanoke (Va.) College as "West Virginians" (p. 32) and states that the first NCAA championship game occurred in "Evansville, Il." instead of Evanston, Ill. (p. 35). While these mistakes are not necessarily harmful by themselves, they beg two questions: how many other inaccuracies have been printed, and how did the editors and publishers miss these egregious errors?

The first question is difficult to answer since Stooksbury is the one who pored through the NAIA archives to find his facts. The answer to the second question is that Stooksbury runs his own publishing company—Higher Level Publishing. This one-man company has published two books, both of which Stooksbury wrote. While the mission of Higher Level is noble—giving a portion of the proceeds back to organizations about which the book has

been written—Stooksbury unfortunately had little editorial accountability from his publisher (himself).

The second issue that leaves this book less than satisfying is the lack of historical objectivity. The author is so fervent about promoting the history of the NAIB tournament that he often loses sight of the larger historical context and reasons why this, the first national collegiate basketball tournament, has become largely forgotten. The author seems to have caught the “gee whiz” fever of the contemporaneous local Kansas City sportswriters whom he documents. The unmitigated praise for Emil Liston and everything NAIB sounds as naïve as Naismith’s proclamations that basketball builds character—hollow ethical ideals that Stooksbury uses to preface every chapter.

Unfortunately, these two issues partially cloud this chronicle that otherwise has fascinating elements. The NAIB should be remembered for its early reversal of race-prohibiting rules; it should be remembered as John Wooden’s training grounds; it should be remembered for its early connections to NCAA tournament organizers; and it should be remembered as a tournament championed by Naismith that continues to (nominally, at least) espouse the values he thought fit so well with basketball. The NAIB should also be remembered for the decisions it made that unfortunately have led to its second-class status—an inferiority complex that comes through loud and clear in the text.