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Report From Britain, 5 December 1949

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN

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Aberdeen, Scotland
December 5, 1949

This is written only for those people over forty who realize they're on the down hill stretch but who sometimes furtively grasp at a straw which gives promise of one more fling at youth.

Several weeks ago I was blessed with a very formal letter from the secretary of the Basketball Club of the Aberdeen University Athletic Association announcing my unanimous selection as honorary president for the coming season. I took in blow in stride and read further: "Although it was imported about ten years ago, Basketball has not yet established itself as a major sport in the country, still being in its infancy. Aberdeen University can claim to be a most diligent wet-nurse (perhaps one of the wettest) to this puking infant.....It was thought fitting that, as an American coming from the home of basketball, you should be asked to accept this hon. presidency."

In such fashion was shattered an illusion which had been rapidly forming in my mind. At first I thought my reputation as the coach of the famous Ellerbe, N. C. high school team of 1927-28 (without my services the boys would have been state champions), or as the star standing forward of the Ole Miss faculty club of the late thirties, had preceded me into this land of soccer and Gay Gordon reels. I was completely ignorant of the rights and duties of a "hon. president," though I suspected that these uncanny Scots could do with a new ball or were anticipating a free dinner at the end of the campaign.

After a period of modest indecision, I accepted the sacred trust in the interest of cordial British-American relations and dashed off one cold rainy Saturday afternoon to see my gladiators take on the University of Glasgow.

The game I saw simply could not happen in America. It had been advertised in obscure fashion and it took me thirty minutes to find the only open door to the Aberdeen Training School where there was an improvised court. I use that word advisedly for here was a narrow old gymnasium with exercise bars of another era from floor to ceiling and a regulation blackboard replete with a

frail little basket at each end. Fifteen to twenty benumbed spectators (who probably wanted to get out of the rain) and the substitutes scrambled to the top of the exercise bars to keep from being trampled under foot in the game, for the walls were out-of-bounds.

The Glasgow outfit sported a half-dozen jerseys which gave them the glow you would expect from the second team of junior boys in a Christian endeavor league. Stalwart Aberdeen fielded a conglomeration of swimming trunks, gym pants of various colors, and regulation tennis sneakers. The young man who had written me was draped in a gray wooler handknitted slipover which would have brought on considerable scratching in the heat of battle, but it was evident from the start that his chief attainments were strictly of a secretarial nature. Both teams were shooting at one of the goals with a single ball.

Upon my arrival the players stopped practise long enough for me to be introduced all around. The captain of Aberdeen's team turned out to be a well knit colored boy from the West Indies, an old timer in his third year of basketball. Neither team had a coach. A couple of bystanders were chosen as referees and they did a bang-up job without discarding coats or ties. At no time was a referee's decision disputed -- in fact, the most amiable of spirits prevailed on both sides even though the lads played fast and furiously. Only occasionally did the ball reach the vicinity of the basket. Glasgow led at the half 6-4, but pulled away as Aberdeen wilted to win easily at about 16-9. At the half, one of the referees kindly explained to the grateful audience that each basket brought two points and the fouls one apiece. Afterwards we all repaired to Steathdee's for tea and a discussion of the finer points of the game.

As suggested in the beginning, such a game made me aware of my own potentialities. Here I was in the land of the heathen with a well nigh unlimited opportunity of spreading the gospel. I flexed my muscles and listened to my bones creak.

My boys only practice once a week (when they can find an available gym) so I had to wait in breathless anticipation until the following Tuesday night to display my wares. Outfitted in a strange garb, I sneaked through the back streets to the scene of execution. For an hour I demonstrated the miracles of the feint, the slow-motion pivot, and the screen play. Believe it or not, these fellows listened to me. My enthusiasm even carried me into a slight

scrimmage without fatality.

We're going to practice again next week, provided we come across a day without rain so that we can run the Grammar School boys outdoors while we take over their calisthenics room. Then we play the University of Edinburgh.

I still think that the Club had an ulterior motive in electing me, unseen and unheralded, honorary president. Its members could hardly have suspected that they were getting a live-wire, if partly shop-worn, coach as well. Our ball is of uncertain vintage and lopsided and we could certainly use five jerseys of the same color. The morale is high and there is no need to worry about training rules because over here no one has ever heard of such nonsense. These amateurs would never be accused of playing for anything except a love for the game. Obviously, they get a bang out of it. And, until the rude awakening comes, it is beyond my power to put on paper any conception of the lift which stems from being young once again. Watch out, Edinburgh!
