



Sweetwater: A Biography of Nathaniel Sweetwater Clifton

Foster Frank

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When Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey decided to break the "color line" and integrate major league baseball in the 1940s, he spent years doing exhaustive background research and interviewing players. This role could not just go to an extraordinary athlete, but one of immense character as well. Things went down with integration in the National Basketball Association a bit differently. The NBA had only formed in 1946, and was still sorting out franchises and struggling for recognition on April 25, 1950 when the basketball owners sat down for the annual player draft. When the second round began, Boston Celtics owner Walter Brown selected an African-American All-American guard out of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh named Chuck Cooper.

A few weeks after the draft, the New York Knickerbockers made a deal to purchase the contract of Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton from the Harlem Globetrotters; he became the second African-American to sign an NBA contract on May 24. So, the 1950-51 National Basketball Association season tipped off with three African-Americans on active rosters. While Robinson became one of America's greatest heroes, the stories of the black pioneers who broke down the NBA color barrier went untold. Jackie Robinson was recognized by his sport by being elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame the first year he was eligible to appear on the ballot in 1962. Not so for Clifton. He was not inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame until the Class of 2014, more than 50 years after he converted his last NBA hook shot and a quarter century after his death. Clifton's incredible journey and story is told in this biography.

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