

Chapter 3

Basketball

While the leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints played several sports, basketball drew the largest participation. Mormons and non-Mormons frequently connected the LDS Church with the American-invented sport. Two examples demonstrate this unique relationship between Mormons and basketball. In 1971, Gary W. Bowie and James A. P. Day reported that Mormons dominated basketball in the Canadian province of Alberta. Mormon immigrants first came to Canada to escape federal marshals arresting polygamists in the 1880s; they settled just across the United States border and established Cardston. At the turn of the twentieth century others followed to establish farms and to find a better life. And the better life included basketball. The first recorded game in Alberta was in 1901. The Mormon community of Stirling played a team from the province's capital city Edmonton. Stirling won 107 to 7. Of fifty-nine school championships in boys and girls basketball between 1956 and 1971, teams (mostly Mormon) from south of Calgary won thirty-two. A few of these schools' players achieved national fame. In 1971 three LDS Raymond men were on the Canadian National team.¹

In the 1950s Germans related American basketball to Mormons even if no Latter-day Saints were involved. Local newspapers advertised in May 1954 that the Mormon House of David would be playing the Harlem Globetrotters. The team of ten men, according to the report, was traveling with sixty wives. The LDS West German mission president Kenneth R. Dyer was shocked. He had just arrived in Germany in December 1953, and the previous mission president told him that the German government had officially recognized the Mormon Church as a religion and not a sect. Dyer did not expect to deal with sixty thousand posters that said a Mormon polygamous team was in Germany. When the church leader threatened to sue, the general manager agreed to correct the posters and send a disclaimer to the newspapers. Dyer told the United Press, "The German public should know that it is false and almost laughable. U.S. laws forbid polygamy."²

Why was there a misunderstanding over polygamy? The House of David was a religious group who believed they were among the select 144,000 that would see Christ's Second Coming. They gathered in Benton Harbor, Michigan where they built an amusement park and summer homes for wealthy Chicago residents. The House of David was best known in the mid-twentieth century for its sports teams, mainly baseball but also basketball. The teams traveled throughout the United States and played local teams. Players for the House of David teams were easy to recognize; the men did not cut their hair. They played very well, but most fans remembered their tricks such as baseball pepper ball (throwing the ball very fast between bases). The group did not practice polygamy, but it was easy to confuse them with another unusual American religion.

And that is probably why the publicist wanted to draw a connection between the House of David and the Mormons. The Mormons were an unusual American religion that some people knew about only because of polygamy and basketball. In fact, during the 1936 Olympics, LDS missionaries helped train a German team and even officiated during the Olympic games.³

Move ahead almost twenty years. The German people knew Mormons but not the House of David. As an added twist, Mormon missionaries were using basketball as a way to spread their message. With this combination, the promoters for the House of David team attached the Mormon name. The team was from the United States, they played basketball, and polygamy was always a draw. The promoter just wanted to attract a large crowd.⁴

Basketball in the LDS church goes beyond those two examples though. From 1928 to 1971 the Church sponsored an all-church basketball tournament in Salt Lake City. It drew teams from throughout the United States, and some Mormon publications called it the largest basketball tournament in the world. This chapter explains the history of basketball and the LDS Church's all-church basketball tournament.

History

James Naismith invented basketball at the School for Christian Workers, later the International Young Men's Christian Association Training School, in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1891. Twenty-five-year-old Luther Gulick, the school superintendent, encouraged thirty-year-old Naismith, a Canadian native, to teach a class and develop his idea for an indoor winter sport. Naismith considered adapting several outdoor sports such as football, soccer, or lacrosse, but the class disliked the ideas. One day he thought up a game, developed some rules, and then asked the building superintendent for boxes. He did not have any but offered peach baskets instead. Naismith took a football and the baskets to class. The men were reluctant to try one more new game, but from the first jump ball, they enjoyed the experience.⁵

For the fiftieth anniversary of the game in 1941, Naismith outlined his development of the game in *Basketball*. His five "fundamental principles" were:

1. A large, light ball for play.
2. No running with the ball.
3. Anyone could get the ball at any time.
4. Both teams were on the same floor at the same time but had no physical contact.
5. A high horizontal goal for the ball.⁶

While the game rules changed, the basic concepts remained. The number of players, out-of-bounds rules, and penalty shots evolved in response to play situations. While Naismith agreed with many of these changes, he was unhappy that there was not a jump ball after each basket.⁷

The sport spread quickly. The first game was on December 21, 1891. The YMCA published the rules on January 15, 1892. The University of Chicago started playing in 1893, and the first intercollegiate game was in 1895 when the Minnesota State School of Agriculture beat Hamline. In 1896 the YMCA held a national championship tournament. Within a decade, colleges formed leagues and Christian missionaries took the game to Asia.⁸

Naismith started college as a theology major but left the ministry to study recreation. His sister never saw a basketball game and was a little ashamed that her brother invented the game. The Naismith family believed that athletics and religion should not mix. However, James disagreed, commenting in 1941, “It has only been in comparatively recent years that the churches have accepted athletics as an aid.” He added that church basketball started early but slow. A Dr. Hall in New York City formed the first church team in 1897. Four churches there established a league in 1904. The next year Cleveland churches started a league. By 1941 there were church leagues throughout the United States and Canada. While Naismith was still surprised when church officials announced sports events from the pulpit, he concluded, “Whenever I witness games in a church league, I feel that my vision, almost half a century ago, of the time when the Christian people would recognize the true value of athletics, has become a reality.”⁹

Naismith explained that the main reason for basketball was recreation and physical exercise. But players also learned to work together.¹⁰ It became part of what Charles Kingley coined “muscular Christianity.” Sports taught moral lessons such as “reveren[ce], adventureness, courage, cooperation, loyal[ty], self-restraint, fairness, honor, [and] unenvious approbation of another’s success.”¹¹

Mormons and Basketball

Almost from the beginning, Mormons caught the spirit of basketball. In 1906 the Twentieth Ward in the Salt Lake City Ensign Stake created an athletic program in the junior department. The ward leaders formed two teams with the young men in the ward, and the teams played for a pennant based on attendance at meetings and recruitment of new members. The program expanded to the stake in 1908. The junior boys met two times a month for physical training and then lessons. Combining sports and spiritual training increased attendance. That year the Ensign Stake formed a basketball league and the Twentieth Ward defeated the Eighteenth Ward 28 to 23 for the first championship.¹²

E. J. Milne, a physical education professor at the University of Utah, worked with the athletic committee for the Ensign Stake. In 1908 he wrote about “ward and gymnasium halls” in the *Improvement Era* because of “numerous inquiries [about] adopting a course in physical education or athletics.” While some ward leaders feared high costs, Milne explained that wards could make an “attractive room” for “basket ball, hand ball and gymnastic work” with little expense. The article focused on basketball because, according to Milne, it was “the greatest of all indoor games in the country, and especially in the state of Utah.” He spelled out room size, window protection, and basketball hoops. While the rules said the basketball floor should not be larger than thirty-five by seventy feet, he explained the game could be played in a smaller area.¹³

Athletic programs in the recreation halls were very successful. In 1909 the Twenty-seventh Ward in the Ensign Stake reported a 50 percent increase in attendance which included nonmembers because of sports. But the program did not continue. In 1916 the YMMIA General Board suggested that athletics be discontinued because the newly formed high schools in Utah were so involved in the game. The matter was referred to the church’s Committee on Athletics and Scout Work, and while the minutes did not include the discussion the net result was the end of sports for three years.¹⁴

The Church leaders soon recognized that they needed to provide a program for young men after Boy Scouts to keep them involved. The first M Men program was formed in the Eighteenth Ward in 1919. The YMMIA General Board adopted the M Men program in 1920 which included basketball. In September 1921 the superintendent of the Ensign Stake met with his counterparts in other Salt Lake stakes, Granite, Liberty, and Pioneer, and they decided to sponsor a tournament. The first year there were no rules, and high school and university players competed. John D. Giles who played on the Ensign Ward team recalled there were high school players on the team for the championship. But their opponent, the Thirty-third Ward of the Liberty Stake, had University of Utah players. The Thirty-third Ward won 98 to 2.¹⁵

Edward Snow, who wrote a master’s thesis on LDS all-church basketball tournaments,

claimed that 1922 was the first tournament, but church leaders did not count it because there were no rules. That year the Thirty-third Ward beat the Twenty-fourth Ward from the Salt Lake Stake 28 to 25. The Salt Lake stakes decided the program was so successful that they would hold an annual tournament. Soon thereafter, the stake leaders drew up a constitution with rules. In 1923 eight Salt Lake Valley wards took part in what became the all-church tournament. In 1929, the YMMIA General Board took over the tournament. From then until 1971 the YMMIA Athletic Committee sponsored an ever-increasing-in-size basketball tournament.¹⁶

Preliminary Play

By the time the all-church basketball tournament ended in 1971, teams from throughout the United States (including Hawaii), northern Mexico, and Alberta, Canada, came to Salt Lake City to participate. To be able to make it to the “big dance,” ward teams had to first win in stake competition. The stake winners then played in a regional competition. Stakes consisted of eight to ten wards. Regions were geographical areas that had ten to twelve stakes. The regions varied in geographical size; in the Salt Lake Valley, for example, there were many stakes and therefore more than one region. As the LDS Church grew, however, more men played basketball and church leaders added more regions. Eventually there were too many regions to allow the winner of each to come to the all-church tournament. So the leaders added another level of competition, the zone, which consisted of several regions—the number varied on the location. The all-church tournament eventually had three categories—senior, junior, and college levels.

With all the levels of play, church leaders bragged that it was the largest basketball program in the world. There are no figures to prove this claim true or false. For the 1929-30 season, for example, church magazines explained that eight thousand M Men “who never had a chance to perform on the court [in school had] a chance for competitive physical activity.” Another two thousand junior M Men or Vanguarders also “played . . . under the same supervision” of the senior men.¹⁷ By 1932, ten thousand men participated from five states.¹⁸ After that year the Church stopped

counting individual players and instead referred to the number of teams. The following table shows the total number of teams registered for each year starting with 1952 when this data is available. While women and girls played basketball, they did not participate in the all-church tournaments so there are no numbers on how many played.¹⁹

| Yr | 1952 | 1953 | 1954 | 1955 | 1956 | 1957 | 1962 | 1963 | 1966 | 1967 | 1968 | 1970 | 1971 |
|----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Sr | 970 | 1032 | 1204 | 1211 | 1105 | 1049 | 1751 | 1823 | 1507 | 1709 | 1944 | 2016 | 2358 |
| Jr | n/a | n/a | n/a | 1161 | 1284 | 1386 | 1855 | 2039 | 2262 | 2262 | 2453 | 2603 | 2814 |

Local play was important because it was where men learned the game and developed the desirable character traits. Teams also had to win on that level to make it to the all-church tournament. To encourage this development, the YMMIA athletic department suggested in 1950 that stakes and wards start play by November 1 and that each ward team play others in the stake at least three times. The season could be divided into two halves so that more teams could have an opportunity to win a stake championship.²⁰

Competition also varied depending on the wards and stakes. Some local units took basketball very seriously, and the players on these teams remembered the local play led to their participation in the all-church tournament. For example, the Edgehill Ward in Salt Lake County focused on basketball and was a magnet not only for the ward members but also others in the area. Paul Hansen, a professor at the University of Utah, ran a tight program all year using an excellent church gym that he remodeled in 1945, complete with a concession stand and locker rooms with showers. Player Brent Eagar explained, “We had a great facility and we used it.” Basketball was so popular that the ward had three teams, A, B, and C. Hansen started teaching young boys to play basketball when they were between ten and fourteen years old. They started on the C team and then worked up the ladder. For Allen Brown, playing basketball was “a confidence builder.” As he worked up through the

teams, Hansen helped him improve his skills and by the time he got to the A team he “felt absolutely the moment I hit the floor with those college guys I was every bit as good as they were.” The A team competed against other wards and even some high school teams during the preseason for practice. Then the A team moved on to the stake play. All the wards in the stake “were organized . . . and had some kind of athletic program. . . . The Church provided the foundation, the coordination, and the organizations so that stake play was good.” Brent Eagar recalled, “For seven or eight years our M Men team went undefeated in stake play.”²¹

In addition to organized games, Hansen sponsored twenty-two pickup games each Saturday to which men from throughout the area came. The men paid a nickel to participate and then waited hours to play on a rotating basis. The winners of a free throw contest made up the teams. The money was used to pay for the ward’s athletic programs. For example, the Edgehill Ward sponsored an invitational Christmas tournament. Hansen invited top teams from the Salt Lake area to prepare for the all-church tournament.²²

Other stakes in the Salt Lake area also sponsored tournaments. Thomas Bagley from the Salt Lake Thirty-third Ward said those tournaments “were almost as fun as the all-church.” He described several: “There was always one out in Taylorsville and there was always one in Rose Park. A couple of years there was one in the East High area. . . . There was always one right out by where we lived in Holladay. It was put on at the Olympus Stake Center.” The local tournaments usually had sixteen teams, so each team could play three or four games. Bagley’s team also played in the county recreation program besides the stake games.²³

The Grayson Ward in Blanding, Utah, also had an outstanding basketball team. It started out as a town team and competed against local junior colleges. It switched to a church team and competed on the stake level traveling to the other wards in the area, which included Monticello (thirty miles away) and Moab (eighty miles away). The team wanted more opportunities to play, so it continued to play junior colleges, traveling to Grand Junction and Durango, Colorado and Price

and St. George, Utah for games.

Because of all the practice plus having an excellent team, Grayson easily won its stake tournament and went on to the regional tournaments. At first the team traveled to Spanish Fork, Utah, where coach LeRay Alexander grew up. Alexander recalled, “We won all of our regional games. We were in region five the first four years.” One time he invited the region to hold the tournament in Blanding, but those in charge complained, “We can’t do it. Some of the boys go to the BYU and some work for the steel plant. We just couldn’t get away [to travel that far.]” Alexander’s response was, “What do you think about these guys? Some of them are in the livestock business. Some of them are in the uranium business, mining or driving trucks.”²⁴

As the church grew and the regions changed, Blanding became part of a Colorado region. Alexander and one of the players, Richard Perkins, felt that the change was made because “since we’d won all those, they got tired of us and sent us over to Denver which was three or four hundred miles further to play the churches in Wyoming and Colorado.” The Grayson team won there as well and advanced to all-church.²⁵

Getting to all-church was not always easy though. The Grantsville, Utah, Second Ward won its stake championship and the Tooele Region regularly, but it lost in the South Salt Lake Area tournament, usually to an arch-rival, Wandamere. In 1944 the Grantsville team finally won the right to go to the all-church tournament. Years later the Grantsville participants recalled they came back from an eleven point deficit to win. The team members were proud that they won with style and received the regional sportsmanship trophy as well as the championship.²⁶

Outside of the Intermountain area, travel could be even more involved. In the 1960s the Cincinnati Stake included wards in southern Ohio and northern Kentucky. Wards like Fairborn and Kettering were nearly fifty miles away. After playing each ward in the stake twice, the stake held a weekend tournament in Cincinnati. The games started on Friday night and continued all day Saturday. The stake leaders presented the trophies at a stake dance later in the year.²⁷

The biggest competition on the stake level in the late 1960s was between the two wards in Cincinnati. The Cincinnati Second Ward had the strongest team and went to the all-church tournament during most of the decade. In 1969 though the Cincinnati First Ward also had a good team. Player Randy Wardwell recalled, “The closest game we had that year that we actually were the all-church champions was with the [Cincinnati Second Ward].” The game went into three overtimes before the First Ward finally won. Wardwell continued, “The only overtime game we had en route to becoming the championship team of the Church was against our rival inside of our stake. . . . It was very competitive and very intense.”²⁸

From the stake tournament, the Cincinnati First Ward junior team went on to the regional and then to the next level, the zone, in the 1960s. One year the regionals were in the Cincinnati stake center. Wardwell remembered there were four teams; one from Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and Ohio. Fans filled chairs around the gym, on the stage, and in the overflow of the chapel. The Relief Society and Young Women sold candy, popcorn, and hot dogs to raise money for their organizations. The tournament was well organized and “a step up in the competition.” Church leaders hired high school officials to officiate.²⁹

From there the First Ward team went to St. Louis, Missouri, for the zone tournament, a ten-hour drive. Forty or fifty people loaded up in cars and drove down for the Friday and Saturday competition. The young women formed a cheering group and wore uniforms of white blouses, red skirts, and colored shoelaces. The setup was the same as the regional tournaments, with fans in chairs and concessions. Wardwell remembered four teams, but he was not sure where they came from. He remembered a team from Minnesota and one from Iowa. He recalled, “We did pretty well in St. Louis. I wouldn’t say we blew these teams away, but we were just a really good team. . . . For a church team we were pretty amazing, and I don’t think we had a real close game.”³⁰

The All-Church Tournament Over the Years

Very few of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies interviewees remembered the stake

and regional games; their memories focused on the “big dance,” the all-church tournament. Newspapers responded the same way. Even local papers rarely—if ever—reported stake tournaments. A few carried articles about regional play. But once all-church started, the Salt Lake City newspapers—the *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune*--coverage of the Mormon tournament rivaled their reports of the local high school and college games. While the Mormon-owned *Deseret News* carried more articles, the tournament was so big that the non-Mormon paper, the *Tribune*, also carried game reports. These papers along with the LDS magazines provide a historical framework of the church-wide tournament. For example, the Lincoln Railsplitters from the Granite Stake in the Salt Lake Valley won the tournament in 1930, according to a newspaper report, because of their “justice, temperance, and courage.” That year the winner of a Pocatello, Idaho division, came, the first non-Utah team.³¹ The next year, Ogden Fourth from Weber County, Utah, beat Lincoln. Lincoln came back the following year (1932) after winning an interstake tournament and beat Ogden Seventeenth 55 to 26 in the championship.

A 1932 *Improvement Era* article explained, “Season upon season [the M-Men basketball program] reaches into new territory.”³² In 1933 a team from Glendale, California, won the all-church tournament, and the *Improvement Era* proudly announced, “M Men Court Crown moves to coast.”³³ An Oakland, California, team won in 1939, and the magazine showed the coach shaking Elder George Albert Smith’s hand. A Lovell West Ward team from Wyoming won the championship and sportsmanship trophies in 1940. According to one of the players, Brownie J. Brown, many young men stayed in Lovell between 1938 and 1949 and did not go to college. They created a very successful basketball team that won the all-church tournament three times. The 1940 team also won the Jaycees championship in Atlanta, Georgia.³⁴ The *Improvement Era* bragged that the “coaches and critics” saw that year’s play as “the cleanest and most scientific brand of ball” with “intricate art of screening, checking, and pivoting.”³⁵

Unlike other amateur sports, the tournament continued during World War II, though with

limited participation. When Canadian teams could not travel to Utah in 1942, the organizers substituted local second or third place teams to fill the slots. Radio station KUTA broadcast the tournament, and the newspaper bragged about a team from St. Johns, Arizona, where the men had learned the game at church; none of the players had played high school or college ball. The team was, according to the paper, “the spirit of M Men basketball.”³⁶ Lovell West won the championship over Edgehill 40 to 27 and claimed the “coveted sportsmanship” trophy. As a wartime fund raiser, the church teams from Lovell West and Davis Stake played high school champions from Utah and Idaho. The Lovell West team lost to a Utah team from Granite, and the Davis team beat the Idaho champions from Pocatello in overtime. The newspaper explained the high school teams “were consistently drilled and better conditioned.”³⁷

How good were these wartime teams? The newspapers and the *Improvement Era* disagreed. In 1944 the magazine said the tournament was not the best because some teams did not have enough players. Conversely, the *Deseret News* declared it the finest tournament despite the wartime conditions. It was the “best attended” and “one of the most successful.” The paper did recognize the wartime problems, but added that having “enough teams to hold a tournament at all is good enough for our M Men fans.”³⁸

After the war, the tournament returned to full strength. In 1946 the *Deseret News* reported, “With the return of service men and more enthusiasm the church joust should top all other tournaments.”³⁹ A 1947 *Improvement Era* article bragged that those participating had to meet “the most exacting requirements of any league in the country.” They included age, residence, medical, church attendance, and Word of Wisdom requirements that members and nonmembers had to follow.⁴⁰ Church President George Albert Smith told the 1950 champions from the Brigham City Fourth Ward, “You represent thousands of the finest boys to be found anywhere in all the world. You should prize this trophy not for its intrinsic value, but rather because it stands for all that is good and righteous. Always remember that you could not have won it except for the clean lives you have

led.”⁴¹

In 1954 the tournament expanded from sixteen to thirty-two teams in the junior and senior divisions. In 1958 the Church added a college division. Television provided an opportunity for a larger audience. In 1951 the Church’s television station, KSL, carried eight games. While 3,500 attended the games, an estimated 160,000 watched.⁴² Not everyone was happy with the coverage though. One viewer complained to KSL in 1954 that the station had replaced his/her favorite television shows to air the regional game that s/he had no interest in. “Did it ever occur to you people that you might do a little investigating as to TV viewers’ interests?” the viewer wrote. Instead of showing “some of the best programs of the week,” KSL showed “hours and hours of that damned stupid basketball.” This viewer’s example was not completely accurate, but it showed frustration, explaining that “plenty . . . don’t give one damn in hell whether the Fourth LDS Mormon Ward of Nephiville beat the Sixth LDS Mormon Ward of Mantiville.” After a complaint about airing LDS General Conference on KSL, the viewer concluded, “So WAKE UP. You may be more diluted.”⁴³ Still, for many Mormons the tournament was very important and very large. In 1970, eighty teams competed in the three divisions.

All Church Tournament–The Logistics

Planning and carrying out such a large tournament followed a pattern. A YMMIA committee mapped the details all year long. Judy Donaldson, the committee’s secretary in the 1960s, attended weekly meetings and typed up minutes. Each committee member had an assignment to work with an area such as referees, physical facilities, and trophies.⁴⁴ There was plenty of work assigning sponsors (cheerleaders/hostesses), arranging housing, setting up firesides and banquets, purchasing trophies, seeding the teams, and deciding where and when to play games.

The Church covered the costs of rooms and meals for all the players, officials for all the games, tie tacs for the participants, and trophies for all the winners along with other smaller costs. But the tournament was also a big draw. The committee members sold advertisements for a program

and then sold copies to fans. Spectators paid admission. When television started broadcasting the games, the stations paid a royalty. While the entire tournament cost around \$15,000 a year, the income was around \$20,000.⁴⁵

Before the Tournament

Sponsors

While women did not play in the all-church basketball tournament, they served as cheerleaders, tour directors, and social chairpersons for the teams. The committee assigned each team—especially those from out of town—two young women sponsors from a local stake. The women and their stake “adopted” the visiting team. The young women attended the team’s games and sat on the bench. The committee told potential volunteers, “A sponsor is love, faith, hope, and gratitude all rolled up into one pretty package and tied with a beautiful banner that she wears with pride to let the world know who her team is.” Another handout explained, “A sponsor is always prepared—she may be found at every ball game, at a variety of parties, from a full-course dinner to an ice-cream-sundae spree, at devotionals, MIAs, and testimony meetings; and constantly going to, coming from, rushing into, and flying out of every kind of activity connected with good, clean wholesome fun.”⁴⁶

Sponsors had to follow rules similar to the young men. They had to obey the Word of Wisdom and attend two MIAs and two sacrament meetings a month. A 1947 bulletin stressed, “Under no circumstances are exceptions to be made to the rules.”⁴⁷ But there were some unique guidelines. Young women were warned not to date young men from their assigned team.⁴⁸ Usually two girls worked together, and other members of their Laurel class could help. Suggested activities included food activities or house parties with games or dancing. The sponsors had to wear a white blouse and dark skirt and seamless hose in a natural color. They also wore a gold and green banner. They could not chew gum. They were encouraged to “let [their] personality radiate to others” and if they did, they would have a “choice, long remembered experience.”⁴⁹ Volunteering was a one-time opportunity. Sponsors could not repeat so other girls had a chance.⁵⁰

This social interaction was an added bonus to the tournament. Bary Gammell helped coach his Las Vegas junior team because he was too old to play. The team sponsors were two high school juniors who attended East High School in Salt Lake City. The young women invited their girlfriends and the team to their homes. Gammell recalled, “There was one girl who caught my eye, Jan Schulze.” The two wrote, and when Gammell came to Weber State College his sophomore year, they started dating. After his mission, they married. He summarized, “Through the all-church tournament we came together. Now we’ve been married for thirty-five years.” For him “my most exciting thing for all-church was meeting my wife.”⁵¹

Richard Hirtzel from southern California enjoyed seeing Salt Lake City with his team’s sponsor. She came to California to visit, and the team took her to the beach. Ray Messegee’s team enjoyed the dances and social activities that the sponsors provided for them. Over the years other players received Christmas cards from the girls. He added having the cheerleaders “was fascinating. That social part of the program was something we didn’t expect. We were all expecting to play basketball, not to have such a rich social life while we were in Salt Lake City.”⁵²

The young women also enjoyed the experience. Helen Gee always wanted to be a sponsor, and she was excited to be selected in 1962. Her aunt made her a black dress to wear to the opening program, but it fell apart on the way to the opening tournament meeting. She had to be pinned in and then had to replace the dress. To add to her misery, her team did not come to the tournament. She cried, so basketball committee member Ned Winder found a Springville, Utah, team that she could work with. Gee went to the team’s games and showed them around town with her father’s assistance since she could not drive. The team’s ward was impressed, and the bishop invited her to speak at a sacrament meeting in Springville.⁵³

Facilities

The general committee had to find places to play the games. While the tournament was usually held in Salt Lake City, during some years in the 1950s the senior tournament was held at

Brigham Young University in Provo and the junior tournament at Utah State University in Logan. These tournaments used the university fieldhouses and stake centers.⁵⁴

When the tournament was in Salt Lake City, Richard Ball, the tournament director and a member of the YMMIA General Board, remembered, “We used at least twelve or more stake centers.”⁵⁵ Even though they were all church owned, the wards and stakes rented them for special activities, and the YMMIA paid for the use. According to the 1962 Polk City Directory, there were eight gymnasiums (including four owned by the LDS Church—Deseret Gym, Highland Stake Gymnasium, Pioneer Stake Gymnasium, and Riverside Stake Gymnasium) in the city. There were over one-hundred halls, over two-thirds of which belonged to the LDS Church. The tournament paid to use halls and gyms across the city including Edgehill (1740 South 1500 East), Liberty Wells (707 North 400 East), and Pioneer (126 West 500 South). Like the teams’ home floors, some of the courts did not have a lot of room for fans and some were not regulation size.⁵⁶

The main venue was the Church’s Deseret Gym. Church President Joseph F. Smith announced the gym’s construction in 1907, and it opened in September 1910. The building was 90 feet wide, 150 feet long, and three stories high. The gymnasium or “Main Hall” was 71 by 146 feet with a 32 foot ceiling. Over a thousand spectators watched games from the third floor. Church leaders tore down this building in the early 1960s to make room for a new church office complex and parking. In January 1965 they dedicated a new 114,000 square foot, two-level building. A large court split into two complete basketball courts or opened into one with more room for spectators. The “new” Deseret Gym gave way to the Conference Center in 1997. Unlike local LDS meetinghouses, the Conference Center does not have a basketball court.⁵⁷

The Deseret Gym was a shock to teams who came from small ward facilities. Richard Adams explained it was “huge. . . . The floor looked bigger than what we had played on before. I don’t know if before we didn’t have to run all the way or what but all of sudden the floor looked bigger than what we had played on before. It was like a real gym.”⁵⁸ William Green played for the Thirty-

third Ward in Salt Lake City, and their games were in the Hillcrest Ward. “They had a small recreation hall. It wasn’t a full size court like we had when we went to regionals . . . at the old Deseret Gym.”⁵⁹ Others were not as impressed. Richard C. Goddard remembered that the first Deseret Gym was a “pretty good size” but “it was nothing like the newer facilities. It was kind of musty inside.”⁶⁰ Richard Hirtzel came from southern California where “they didn’t heat the gyms.” As a result, the Deseret Gym “was so hot. . . . It seemed like it was about eighty degrees. We were not accustomed to playing basketball in hot gyms.”⁶¹

Fans liked to go to the Deseret Gym to play basketball and to attend the all-church tournament. Ray Hale went to the games as a boy and remembered seeing Wyoming teams win in the 1930s and 1940s. Going to the tournament was “like the Super Bowl” for Hale. “We would sit on the wrestling mats placed on the wooden bleachers under the baskets to protect the ball players from injuries. There we would sit and watch the games from morning until late at night.” In 2003, Hale still remembered the Doer boys from Lovell, Wyoming, and Royal Jensen from the Hollywood Ward who shot underhand. “What a sight to see these ‘old fashioned deadly shots.’” As Hale got older he helped with the score board that the newspaper provided. “We crawled up into the scoreboard box and watched the game through a small opening. Whenever a team scored, we turned the film to the correct score which was projected onto a glass plate which was seen by the audience.” He also changed the players’ names that were listed on the scoreboard.⁶²

Thomas Bagley remembered the Deseret Gym held “a couple of thousand people.” But attendance increased so much in the 1950s that the committee rented the University of Utah fieldhouse for the finals.⁶³ According to newspaper accounts, three thousand five hundred saw the first final at the U of U field house and an estimated one hundred sixty thousand watched it on KSL. In 1953 four thousand five hundred saw the game at the U.⁶⁴ Allen Brown from the Edgehill Ward was impressed with both the Deseret Gym and the U because of the large crowds. “None of us had ever had the experience of playing in that setting and in that kind of atmosphere. The Deseret Gym

and the fieldhouse were just filled.”⁶⁵

The players were most interested in the games and not the facilities. While a few interviewees mentioned that they played at the Deseret Gym or at another stake center, they made very few comments about the floor or the fans. The goal was to play and win, not to notice much about the surroundings.

Travel

As many teams came from outside the Salt Lake Valley and Utah, teams sometimes traveled long distances. Usually they paid their own travel expenses, but for some reason—maybe distance--Neldon Evans remembered that the Church paid for the gas (which was about fifteen cents a gallon). The team came in a car caravan from Susanville, California, in the 1930s and stayed over night in Battle Mountain, Nevada. The players bought their own meals enroute.⁶⁶

In 1962 Ray Messegee’s Fort Lewis, Washington, team of military men drove to the all-church tournament. Messegee, the coach and a player, his wife, his three-year-old daughter, and his seven team members piled into a station wagon. They hit a snowstorm at Dead Man’s Pass near Pendleton, Oregon. When Messegee noticed a “shiny thing in a kind of a ravine,” he stopped and discovered the top of a car. An LDS family with five children was trapped in the car and freezing. They had been there for a day, and they had run out of gas. There was no traffic since the road was closed after the family and the team got on the road. Messegee took the family twenty-two miles to the nearest town and left the players in the car. He then hired a tow truck and returned for the family’s car.”⁶⁷

Richard Adams’s Dallas team came on a Continental Trailways bus. A nonmember whose family belonged to the Church financed the trip with no-interest loans to the team members’ parents. Since there were no interstate highways, “we had to come [to Salt Lake City] some weird way using U.S. highways and eventually got to Denver.” Driving from Denver to Salt Lake City on Highway 40 was dangerous because of the switchbacks over Rabbit Ears Pass.⁶⁸

In 1947 the Glenwood, Alberta, team was the first Canadian team to attend the all-church tournament following World War II. The players were in their late twenties and all were married but one (and he was engaged). They raised funds and drove through icy cold conditions, sharing the road with poor drivers. The team members teased their sponsor, telling her that they came by dog sled to the U.S. border and then bought a car to get to Salt Lake City.⁶⁹

Housing and Meals

Once the teams arrived in Salt Lake City the Church paid for lodging and meals. The Grantsville team all stayed in one room at the Hotel Utah. Richard Adams's team stayed at the New Ute Hotel which had showers down the hall from the rooms. But Adams and two teammates stayed in the bridal suite, so they had their own bathroom and shower. The New Ute Hotel was torn down to construct the new Deseret Gym, which was then replaced by the Conference Center. Bary Gammell stayed in the Carlton Inn on South Temple. Gary Fish remembered, "The Church put us up when we got here in Travelodge and places like that." In 1962 teams stayed in ten Salt Lake City motels.⁷⁰

One of the hotels, the Se Rancho Motor Hotel and Coffee Shop advertised in the 1962 Polk City Directory that it had most modern conveniences. These included swimming pools, "restful grounds," and "new radios and televisions with power antenna." Covey's New American Motel (later Little America) was also up-to-date with 320 rooms, swimming, and Hot Shoppes, "food for the whole family."⁷¹ Staying in a motel was a "big time" for Dale Christensen from Blackfoot, Idaho. "We were just kids from a little farming town and we were in the big city. That was quite an experience."⁷²

The tournament was not always held in Salt Lake City. Games sometimes were played in Ogden at Weber State College, in Provo at Brigham Young University, and in Logan at Utah State University. When the tournament was held in Provo in 1957, Bob Anderson's Mesa, Arizona, team stayed in local motels with four players per room. Ray Hale's team stayed on BYU campus with six

in a dorm room.⁷³ In 1958 the teams stayed at the Hotel Roberts, a deluxe accommodation at 192 South University Avenue in Provo that advertised it was the “home of the traveler.” The rest stayed in motels including Riverside, El Rancho Uria, Lund Western, Calder, Provo, and Hillcrest motels. They were all small, locally run facilities like the family-run Lund’s Motel at 250 South University Avenue. The annual tournament report included a list of men, the number of days stayed, and the rates. Most of the rooms cost \$1.50 per night, although some were \$2.00. The total cost for housing the players in Provo that year was nearly \$2,000.⁷⁴

In Salt Lake City the teams often ate at the Harman Café at 250 West North Temple. While the first Harman’s Original Pancake House with Kentucky Fried Chicken was in Murray, the North Temple café was one of three Harman Cafes in Salt Lake City in 1962. Gary Fish enjoyed that experience. “I remember we used to eat in Harman’s Chicken. It was great. That was long before Kentucky Fried Chicken was really known about too much. We loved that.” Richard Adams remembered a punch card for meals at the coffee shop in the Hotel Utah. “It was just a first class thing.” Bruce Dickerson recalled that each player received three dollars a day for food. In 1967 players ate at Temple Square Motel, which had a restaurant connected to the motel, Hot Shoppes (Marriott-owned), at 543 South Main, and Village Grill at 1308 Foothill Drive. When the tournament was in Provo, Bob Anderson recalled that the teams ate in the Joseph Smith Building cafeteria. They had a punch card and got breakfast, lunch, and dinner.⁷⁵

As with the basketball facilities, few interviewees talked about the motels and food. Of course, local teams stayed at home; occasionally other teams stayed with family or friends. Some interviewees talked about “hanging out” in their motels as they waited for games to start. But they did not say anything else about where they stayed or what they ate. Again, the games were the major focus.

The Tournament

Running the Tournament

Once the tournament started, the athletic committee and staff worked all the time. Staff members were paid, but they worked more than forty hours a week. The committee were volunteers and took vacation time from their jobs or time away from their self-owned businesses to make sure the tournament was covered. Secretary Judy Donaldson stayed at the Deseret Gym all day, collecting scores and distributing them to newspapers. She also prepared a church bulletin for the players, coaches, and fans called the *Double Dribble*. Often she opened the door in the morning and then locked the gym at night. Richard Ball assigned officials and tickets takers. He took vacation from work and went “from early morning until the evening.”⁷⁶

Special Activities

The all-church tournament was held in March each year, usually just before the Utah high school tournament. Each year it followed the same pattern. Before the games, church leaders invited all the players and their coaches to a spiritual meeting, known as a fireside, in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on Temple Square. The players dressed up in their Sunday clothes. A church leader spoke about sportsmanship and the role of sports in the gospel. According to Judy Donaldson, “It started the tournament off on the right foot. It got them together in a setting where they were receiving instruction and guidance from someone they should look up to.”⁷⁷

Games started early Monday morning. That evening there was an opening ceremony. W. O. Robinson, the father of the Church’s activity program and the field secretary, planned a “grand entrance march.” The players came in their uniforms, led by their sponsors and entered the gym “at the sound of the trumpet.” Couples from Mexico, Canada, and the United States then appeared on the floor in costume. According to Robinson this was “a little pageant idea.” Someone sang “God Bless America” because according to Robinson it was “good march music.” The audience sang the “Star Spangled Banner.” The program was the same every year.⁷⁸

During the week, the players and their coaches attended a banquet. Some teams had already been eliminated, but the YMMIA leaders encouraged them to stay and continued to pay their

expenses so they could meet church leaders. Richard Hirtzel, a non-Mormon, was impressed when President George Albert Smith spoke, “He was a very humble man and very sincere.” Despite illness and the recent death of his wife, Smith “showed a lot of interest in us.”⁷⁹

Mormon basketball player Boyd Benson sat by YMMIA leader Oscar A. Kirkham, who told him they would win. Later Benson was sure he meant it generally, but the statement impressed him because Kirkham was interested in their success. J. Reuben Clark, a member of the Church’s First Presidency, spoke at the banquet in the Beehive House and told the players they were heroes and stars on the court but they needed to be heroes and stars in life.⁸⁰ But not everyone was impressed. Some men just wanted to play basketball and did not see the point of the activities. After listening to President Smith, Edgehill player Paul Eagar assumed the meal and program were held “just to broaden our cultural appreciation I guess.”⁸¹

When the junior tournament was in Logan, everyone was required to attend a “how-dee-do [howdy] lunch” and the opening ceremonies. The instructions explained, “This is an improved Church activity. It is a fundamental part of our religious lives. Its purpose, aside from a wholesome leisure time activity, is to bring non-church members into the realm of influence of our Church and to build faith and strengthen testimonies of those who already belong. We hope due consideration will be given your spiritual activities as you engage in the physical and social activities afforded by the tournament.”⁸²

The Games

For most participants the real memories came from playing the games. The committee attempted to “seed” the teams so that the top groups did not eliminate each other early in the rounds. But unlike the NCAA and high school tournaments, church leaders did not have records nor understand the strength of each team. Frequently an unknown team beat out the favored winners. The double-elimination format ensured that every team played at least two games. Those who lost the first night played in the consolation bracket. The second loss meant that the team’s playing time

was over. Rather than just awarding the ultimate winner, the tournament continued play and the committee announced the first through eighth place winners.

Frequently the Edgehill Ward was seeded high, probably because of its outstanding gym and program. But although it went to all-church four times that Brent Eager remembered, it never won the tournament. Still, according to Eager, the teams were good and “never an embarrassment.” Those four years Edgehill placed second twice; third once and fourth once. Eager especially recalled the “agony of defeat” one time when his team placed second. Eager fouled Preston Merrill of Brigham City Fourth in the final seconds of the game. Merrill could have won with the free throws. Fortunately for Eager, he missed them, but unfortunately for the Edgehill Ward, Brigham City won in overtime.⁸³

Although they never won the all-church title, teams in the Salt Lake Valley and throughout the Church considered Edgehill the ward to beat. Boyd Benson, a Maywood Ward, California, team member, remembered beating Edgehill in 1949. Edgehill was seeded number one. Maywood met them after beating Harrisville and Logan Fifth. The California team could not stop the Edgehill center without double teaming him. That left someone that was not guarded. But even double teaming did not stop the center, and Edgehill Ward beat Maywood. Benson was impressed that the Edgehill Ward team came to the final game and cheered for the Maywood team. “They were very good sports.”⁸⁴

When the Grantsville Ward team made it to all-church in 1944, they beat teams from Oregon, Idaho, and Wyoming to get into the championship game. The final game was against Plain City, Utah. The team impressed the newspapers and its opponent. The *Deseret News* called the players “a great squad of sharpshooters and nifty ball handlers.” At a banquet honoring the Plain City team a poem highlighted each player and then described the team’s final opponent. “The rub game came on Saturday night/Grantsville a team real strong/It was no disgrace to lose to them/Feeling bad would be dead wrong/So here you are ‘Church runners up.’”⁸⁵

LeRay Alexander, the coach of the Grayson Ward from Blanding, Utah, bragged that his team went to the all-church tournament six years in a row and won twenty-three out of thirty games. Because they always finished in the top eight teams, he explained, “They never could eliminate us.” Neldon Cochran, who later played on the Grayson team, turned down a basketball scholarship to Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana, to attend BYU. He did not have a scholarship to play for the university, so he played on the Provo Ninth Ward team. He remembered that his team was doing well until “we hit Grayson. That was another story. They were good ball handlers, good shooters, had good height. They were tough. They finally beat us by maybe ten points for the championship.” The *Deseret News* bragged, “This Grayson team is one of the most colorful to claim a finals berth. Coming from one of Utah’s small communities, the Grayson players have performed all the way like city slickers.”⁸⁶

Like other players, Randy Wardwell remembered every game on Cincinnati’s way to the championship in 1969. The first game was against Kearns Fourteenth. There were games at 4:30, 5:45, 7:15, and 8:30 in the gym. “You can just kind of get a mental picture of this gymnasium. It was full of people walking around and referees and whistles blowing. It was really well organized. It was awesome.” Cincinnati won by fourteen points.⁸⁷

The second night the Cincinnati First Ward juniors played a team from Phoenix. They had three players over six feet; the tallest was 6'8". The Cincinnati team’s tallest player was 6'1". “When we were warming up, it felt like David and Goliath.” But the team won 53 to 48. The third night the team played South Weber, the 1968 champions. The newspapers expected South Weber to win the championship. Cincinnati watched them the second night and saw “they were very good for a junior team. We knew it was going to be a tough match.” But Cincinnati came on strong in the second half and won 69 to 43.⁸⁸

Now the team was in the semifinals in the Deseret Gym. “It was a huge complex” with several gyms. Wardwell remembered, “It wasn’t full, but there were a good number of people there.”

Cincinnati had watched their opponent from Bountiful play, and the best player hurt his ankle. So Wardwell remembered his team thought, “These guys are going to be easy.” The game was tied with thirty seconds left, and although the Cincinnati players were concerned “we actually pulled it out. I did steal the ball and make the basket that gave us a two point lead.” After a foul, Cincinnati made two free throws and won by four. But it was a “nervous” moment. “We really thought we were going down there. We learned a real lesson about humility and overconfidence that night.” The championship game, held at the University of Utah fieldhouse, was televised. Cincinnati played a team from Westminster, California, and won. Melvin Fish from the Cincinnati team was named most valuable player.⁸⁹

Some teams showed up regularly at all-church tournaments, and people recalled similar stories about them. For many teams, playing teams from Hawaii was a highlight. The gracious islanders brought leis and performed a Hawaiian ceremony.⁹⁰ Bruce Dickerson’s Logan Fifth-Eighteenth Ward team played a Hawaiian team when he was a senior in high school in 1970. The Logan team took the leis and pineapples and then beat the Hawaiian team. Some fans were upset that Hawaii lost since they had come so far. But Dickerson wondered about the gift. After eating the pineapple, the Logan team was “two-step[ping] to the bathroom.” He wondered if the Hawaii team’s plan was to make them sick.⁹¹ Others remembered a deaf team from a ward in the Salt Lake Valley that could not hear the whistles. Boyd Benson recalled, “The whistle would blow and they’d keep going and they’d score.” They could not understand why the basket did not count. Benson explained, “That was one of the tougher teams that we played over the years.”⁹²

Awards

After the championship game on Saturday, church leaders handed out trophies and awards. YMMIA leaders and Church General Authorities gave trophies to the top teams, the most valuable player, the all-star team, and the team with the best sportsmanship. Committee member W. McKinley “Mickey” Oswald and his wife fixed a table with gold and green trimmings, the MIA

colors, for the trophies. General Authorities posed for pictures with the players and the trophies. It was a grand climax.⁹³

While the teams focused on winning, the church leaders' main goal was to have the men play fair and politely. Some players recognized that; others saw the sportsmanship trophy as a poor second. As Judy Donaldson explained, "The committee really stressed sportsmanship, and they made a big deal out of the team that won." She continued, "How can you not have good sportsmanlike conduct on the floor and then be at the sacrament table on Sunday?" So the sportsmanship trophy was larger than first place and the team received it along with the other winners. The most valuable player was not the one who always scored the most points but "the one that had the utmost value to their team's success."⁹⁴

The Edgehill Ward, for example, won the sportsmanship award twice at all-church. Brent Eagar recalled, "They called the sportsmanship the most coveted award. In other words, it was given for good sportsmanship. We were not only winning, but we were considered good sports. It meant a lot to us." Another player, Allen Brown, found the sportsmanship "a very, very poor substitute" for winning.⁹⁵

The Cincinnati First Ward junior team won the sportsmanship and the championship in 1969. Randy Wardwell recalled, "Our bishop gave us a good talking to and our priesthood leaders talked to us about the fact that we had this honor and this privilege of going out [to Salt Lake City] and representing the Lord. They told us why not set a second goal that if we don't happen to win the championship, let's win the sportsmanship." They did it by saying "thank you, sir" to the referee each time they were handed the ball. When they were called for a foul, they signaled that they knew it was on them by raising their hand. They made no negative comments to the referees. If a player on the other team fell down, they helped them up. When the other team made a good shot, the Cincinnati players said, "Nice shot." "For a while it felt a little bit phony, but after we kind of began doing it, we started to feel really sincere about it."⁹⁶

After the Tournament

When the Cincinnati team returned home after winning the championship, the stake held a fireside and invited all the wards. The team members bore their testimonies. The local newspapers covered the event. Wardwell remembered, “Our public relations director from our ward or stake called” the newspaper and suggested they do a story.⁹⁷

Basketball games did not end after all-church. Just as the Edgehill sponsored a Christmas tournament, the Grayson Ward had a post-tournament contest. Coach LeRay Alexander especially remembered 1954, the year that Grayson won all-church. The tournament in Blanding was already set before the ward won, but they needed one more team. When a Provo resident asked if a team from there could attend the Blanding tournament, Alexander agreed. The all-church committee was concerned. According to Alexander, “The all-church athletic executive wrote and said, ‘We don’t want you to play any tournaments down there. We don’t want our all-church champions to be beat so soon after winning the all-church.’” Alexander responded, “That’s not our intention. I’ve already got this set up, so we’re going to go ahead and play it.”⁹⁸

The Provo Fifth Ward came to the tournament in Blanding. Alexander said that they had qualified for the all-church tournament but had been unable to attend. When the Provo team came to Blanding, they added two BYU players. Alexander declared that Grayson won despite the extra players. But he added, “It almost ended in a brawl because [Provo Fifth Ward] got mad at us.” When a BYU football player almost plowed into a Grayson player and got a foul, the Provo team complained. During a timeout, Alexander told the Provo coach he was willing to play basketball, but if there were more complains, he would cancel the game. Alexander concluded, “[Provo] finally decided to play. But they went home the next morning. We’d housed them and given them at least a breakfast and in some cases an evening meal before the game or after. They went home still pretty sore that they got a bad deal. That was kind of interesting. We were happy that we could beat them with two of the five players that played for BYU that year.”⁹⁹

Individual Stories

Playing basketball and attending all-church tournaments was a highlight for the participants. When the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University sent out the request for information, over a hundred people responded. Unfortunately schedules and distance prevented the center's staff from interviewing everyone. Even with the people that the Redd Center interviewed, there are so many stories it is impossible to tell every one. The following stories represent some typical and some unique experiences that show the variety of Mormon basketball. Nearly all the interviewees had positive memories about church basketball, but they were not blind to the problems.

Larry Schlappi—Mr. Church Basketball

Larry Schlappi, "Mr. Church Basketball," played in many all-church tournaments. He grew up in Delta, Utah, and then moved to Fillmore, where he graduated from high school. In 1959 he played on a BYU ward team that went to all-church. After completing college, he worked as a high school coach in Richfield, Utah, and lived in the small community of Glenwood. A group of teachers formed a winning team that went to the all-church tournament five times. One year the team took third place. Schlappi convinced good basketball players who moved to Sevier County to live in Glenwood to strengthen the team. One player lived in a trailer on Schlappi's lawn. He invited another teacher who had separated from his wife to rent an apartment in Glenwood.

The Baldwin Park, California, Ward coach was impressed with Schlappi's play and offered him and another player on the Glenwood team employment if they would move to his ward and play. While Schlappi turned down the offer, he wanted to belong to a ward with a good sports program. When he moved to Orem, he scouted out a ward with high-quality sports and then moved there. As a member of the Orem Twentieth Ward, he went to all-church as a player and a coach. In 1971, the last year of the all-church basketball tournament, his Orem ward won the championship and the sportsmanship trophy.¹⁰⁰

David Jack Cherrington—“Dreams Come True”

David Jack Cherrington was born in 1942 and started playing basketball with the deacons in his Preston, Idaho, First Ward when he was twelve. The ward sponsored an A and B team since so many boys wanted to play. During his senior year of high school, the team lost before all-church. The next year he attended Utah State University but continued to play on his home team. That year the team went to the all-church tournament. Cherrington said that even when his team did not go to all-church, just the possibility kept the young men playing. Going to the all-church tournament was a “significant driving force in my life.”

Getting to the tournament had challenges though. An official, a junior varsity high school coach, called a foul on Cherrington in a regional game. Cherrington felt the call was not fair and did not return the ball. So the official called a technical. When the fans yelled, the referee called the game even though Preston was ahead 50 to 30. The coach and the bishopric complained to the Salt Lake City tournament leaders, and they agreed that there had been a mistake. The referee said he overreacted and the other coach said that Preston should have won. So the Preston team was allowed to advance at the last minute and ended up driving two hours to Montpelier, Idaho, after a hard day’s work on the farm. Preston barely won that tournament.

Once at all-church, the team stayed at a hotel and ate at Harman’s Café. The players enjoyed the sponsors, especially one LDS convert with a Southern accent. Preston won two games and then lost the third. But it was worth all the trouble. “Even if we didn’t have officials, even if we didn’t have coaches, even if sometimes our games were delayed or postponed, or we would show up and the building was locked, there would be at the end of the season an organized set of activities with games, officials and score keepers. Then it would be taken seriously. It was a great motivation for us through the season to continue to be active in the program.”

Cherrington returned to the all-church tournament as a graduate student. He was attending Indiana University in Bloomington, and the ward chose to go to Salt Lake City even though it was

at great sacrifice. The players missed classes and the professors did not understand why. After Cherrington completed his graduate degree, he taught at the University of Illinois, and his team qualified to go to all-church. Cherrington remembered driving to Salt Lake City with four team members and buying his wife a fur coat because she felt abandoned for basketball. For Cherrington, softball was fun and fostered a sense of community but basketball was for real. It showed that “dreams come true.”¹⁰¹

R. Wayne Pace—Remembering the Details

Like other players, attending all-church was a highlight for R. Wayne Pace. He grew up in Summit County, Utah, and then went to the University of Utah. In 1950 and 1951 he lived with his uncle in East Millcreek. The ward won the stake competition but lost in regionals. However, the ward presented its team members with letter sweaters. In 1953, Pace moved to the Salt Lake Thirty-third Ward. This team lost in division play, but the tournament needed one more team. The team played an additional game, won, and went to all-church.

Pace recalled in detail each of the games in the tournament. No one expected much from a runnerup team that barely made it. But the team surprised everyone. First they beat Spring Dale from Alberta, Canada. Since Spring Dale had been to the all-church tournament before, “the assumption was that they would walk over us. We won by over twenty points.” In the second game the Thirty-third Ward beat the Colonia Dublan Ward from Mexico that had placed fourth the year before. Then Pace’s team beat the Logan Fifth Ward which had also placed in the tournament the previous year. The newspaper reported, “Biggest Upset in M-Men History.” The Thirty-third Ward lost to Brigham City Fourth Ward in the semifinals. The game was so competitive that a fight broke out. Unfortunately, it was recorded in the first televised game. Pace added, “We would never have gotten any sportsmanship trophies because we were out to win.”

Pace returned to all-church in 1954 with a military team from Pacific Grove Ward. The team had to balance their service assignments and MIA. They lost their first game in the last fifteen

seconds. They only had to hold on to the ball, but another player passed, the ball was intercepted, and the Emigration Ward scored a long basket. The Pacific Grove Ward team then lost to a Spanish Fork team.¹⁰²

Edward H. Rich—A Bishop’s Story

Edward H. Rich represented a leader’s view of church basketball. He was born in Montpelier, Idaho, in 1914. After graduating from the University of Utah Law School, he moved to Van Nuys, California, where he served as bishop from 1963 to 1969. Three of his sons played on the junior team. The senior team won all-church in 1967.

While Rich never played, he was sad when church leaders eliminated all-church because it was an excellent activity for youth. He was excited because basketball was a missionary tool. A nonmember married to a Mormon woman played on the senior team one year. Rich proudly read from the *California Intermountain News*, a Mormon newspaper, “Although the senior team failed to reach the finals, they won a more important prize. . . . Thomas Womeldorf was not a member . . . at the start of the season play. Surrounded by seven fast breaking returned missionaries, including a member of the bishopric, his chances of ending the season as a Gentile were nil. He has since been baptized.”

Basketball also brought people together. Rich attended all the games, and other ward members came as well, creating a community. When Rich telegraphed that the team had won “all the marbles,” his wife bought marbles and put them in the church’s foyer. She also drew pictures of the team members and hung them from the rafter. The team members had reunions and frequently called Rich late at night because he had called them when he was bishop. Rich’s twin brother was a bishop in Salt Lake City, and his ward came to the games and cheered on the California team as well, so it provided an opportunity to create stronger family ties and build bridges between two wards.

Rich remembered game highlights. In 1967, Del West made eighteen of nineteen free throws

in the final game and that led to the victory. The next year West could not get off work for the first games, but the team still won. West was supposed to arrive for the third game, but he was bumped from the plane. He arrived just in time to see the team lose by two points.

Rich also recalled some “low” lights. In 1969 a team member reported a Van Nuys player smoking after a stake championship. Rich worried about what to do. The players’ parents were inactive, and Rich wanted to keep their son at church. But he also knew that smoking was against church standards. The bishopric decided that the team would not go to region play because it had used an ineligible player. A nonmember father who had a stepson on the team complained that the whole team should not be punished. He complained very vocally. But Rich felt the team needed to be eliminated.¹⁰³

Edwin B. Griggs—The Real Reason for Church Sports

Coach and bishopric member Edwin B. Griggs’s 1969 team made up of University of Arizona students had four new converts who started playing after their baptisms. The team won its season and the first rounds. They beat a team with players who attended Arizona State University at the buzzer at the zone tournament. Then to get to all-church Griggs’s players had to take their final exams early and borrow cars to drive to Salt Lake City. Unfortunately the vehicle that the starting five players were in broke down in Nevada in the middle of the night. One player hitchhiked to the nearest town to get a part. The repairs took longer than expected, so by the time the carload arrived in Salt Lake City, they had forfeited their first game. They then lost the second game. But Griggs felt the team “won” in other ways. All four converts remained active in the Church and served in church positions—three as bishops and one as a stake president. As Griggs explained, “It wasn’t the destination that was most memorable, but rather it was the journey that we will all remember forever.”¹⁰⁴

Summary

The all-church basketball tournament was a highlight for many Mormon males. It was the

largest and best attended tournament among the church's youth activities. Planning and operating the tournament took the YMMIA athletic committee a lot of time. But the stories that the players told made the effort worthwhile. The most important stories were the ones that reinforced church teachings and brought young men and women to religion. In the 1950s, Walter Stevenson, an MIA General Board member, gave a talk titled "Why an All-Church Tournament" at BYU. He said, "We have an activity program in the MIA for one purpose, and that is to develop Latter-day Saints among the participants."¹⁰⁵ The basketball program fulfilled that goal for many.

With the basketball success, the LDS Church went on to offer other all-church tournaments. The next chapter discusses the second largest tournament, softball.

1. Gary W. Bowie and James A. P. Day, "Sports and Religion: The Influence of the Mormon Faith on Sport in Alberta," Paper for the Second World Symposium on the History of Sport and Physical Education, Banff, Alberta, Canada, May 31-June 3, 1971, copy in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
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50. Ibid.
51. Bary Gammell Oral History, interviewed by Michael Cannon, 2003, Midvale, Utah.
52. Richard Hirtzel Oral History, interviewed by Matthew Swenson, 2003, Pleasant Grove, Utah, 7; Ray Messegee Oral History, interviewed by Jenny Harris, 2004 telephone interview, 4.
53. Helen Gee Oral History, interviewed by Jenny Harris, 2003, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2-3.
54. Richard Adams Oral History, interviewed by Michael Cannon, 2003, Lehi, Utah, 5; YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972, Box 2, LDS Church Archives.
55. Richard Ball Oral History, interviewed by Jenny Harris, 2003, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1.
56. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972, Box 2, Church History Library; *Polk's Salt Lake City Directory* (Salt Lake City: R. L. Polk, 1962).
57. Adams Oral History, 5; Kimball, 67-68, 82; "Mutual Work—The Deseret Gymnasium," *Improvement Era* 13(February 1910):380; *Church News*, November 17, 1962, 6.
58. Adams, 2.
59. Green, 2.
60. Goddard, 2-3.
61. Hirtzel, 8.
62. Ray Hale Oral History, interviewed by Gary Huntington, 2003, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1.
63. Bagley, 5-6; Green, 2. Green remembered there were six thousand at the final at the U when he competed in the 1960s.
64. Snow, 112, 116.
65. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972, Church History Library; Allen Brown, 8.
66. Neldon Evans Oral History, interviewed by Heather Pabst Ward, 2003, 4.

67. Messegee, 2.
68. Adams, 3.
69. Glenwood Basketball File, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
70. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972, Church History Library; Salt Lake City Polk Directory, 1962; Gammell, 2; Gary Fish, 6. The teams stayed at these motels: Bonneville at 1325 Foothill Drive, Dean's Motor Lodge at 1821 South Main, New Mission Motor Lodge at 855 North 200 West, Seagull at 325 North 200 West, Se Rancho at 630-48 West North Temple, Travelodge at 144 West North Temple, and Western Motor at 317 West North Temple
71. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972, Church History Library; Salt Lake City Polk Directory, 1967; Dale Christensen Oral History, interviewed by Michael Q. Cannon, 2003, Orem, Utah, 5. The teams stayed at these motels: Temple Square Hotel, Bonneville, North Temple Travelodge, City Center at 134 West North Temple, Western Motor, Little America at Main Street and 500 South, and Scenic at 1345 Foothill Drive.
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84. Benson, 2-3, 6; Patty Wilkinson Oral History, interviewed by Jenny Harris, 2004, telephone interview, 4-5.
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93. Donaldson, 6.
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95. Eagar, 5; Brown, 4.
96. Wardwell, 8.
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98. Alexander, 5.
99. Ibid.
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102. R Wayne Pace Oral History, interviewed by Heather Pabst Ward, 2003, Orem, Utah.
103. Edward H. Rich Oral History, interviewed by Michael Cannon, 2003, Provo, Utah.

104. Edwin B. Griggs, email to author, December 4, 2003.

105. A. Walter Stevenson, "Why an All-Church Tournament," *BYU Speeches of the Year, 1953-54* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1954), 287.