

# **The Founding of Basketball as an Oxford University Sport**

## **How It All Started**

Pre-World War II, basketball was played at the University, if only briefly. What we know about it is written in Volume 8 of “The History of the University of Oxford,” page 538, which states:

“Attention has been focused on men’s traditional sports, but games less familiar at English public schools were played, including basketball, with a first match against Cambridge in 1921. The first team included a South African, an American, two Etonians, and a Wykehamist.” It goes on to say: “The predominance of American players after 1946 made Oxford one of the strongest teams in Britain”

Post-World War II, basketball, as a University sport, established a firm footing and continues to this day. It started with a note from Dr. Allen, Warden of Rhodes House, to George Rebh [Magdalen College] saying: “Mr. Rebh, I would like to see you at your earliest convenience.” The time was late October 1947. The first group of Rhodes Scholars, to be selected since 1939, had reported to their respective colleges during the latter part of September. Rebh called Dr. Allen’s secretary and arranged a meeting date and time. At the appointed hour, Rebh reported to Dr. Allen’s office. Dr. Allen greeted Rebh with: “Mr. Rebh, I am delighted to see you. Will you please have a seat.” Dr. Allen, thereupon, proceeded to tell Rebh that the University had received an invitation from the Czechoslovakian Olympic Basketball Team to send its (Oxford) basketball team to Czechoslovakia for a series of eight games during the month of January 1948, i.e., during the Michaelmas vacation. The Czech basketball team was seeking the eight game-competition as part of its training program in preparation for the Olympic games to be held in London, during the late Summer of 1948. The Czech letter also stated that all expenses would be paid once the Oxford team crossed the border of Czechoslovakia. Dr. Allen further said that, since the University did not have a basketball team, the Chancellor [the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Halifax] had passed the invitation to him with the thought that, possibly, among the American and Canadian Rhodes Scholars, there might be a sufficient number of scholars with basketball experience to organize a team. Dr. Allen said he had looked through the dossiers of the American and Canadian Rhodes Scholars and found that Rebh had captained the basketball team of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Dr. Allen asked Rebh if he would be interested in canvassing the Rhodes Scholars to determine whether there was sufficient interest in forming a team and in traveling to Czechoslovakia for the eight games. Rebh replied that he would be happy to contact the Rhodes Scholars on this matter.

## **Getting Organized**

During the course of the next week, Rebh contacted the Rhodes Scholars, whom he knew, and asked them, in turn, to contact other American and Canadian Rhodes Scholars to identify those who had played basketball at the college level, varsity or intramural, and who would like to make the trip. There was a fairly good response, but only nine men satisfied both requirements; seven were Rhodes Scholars—John Davis

[St John's College], Charles Jepsen [Brasenose College], Amos Jordan [Brasenose College], Keith Hendrick [Brasenose College], Charles Merdinger [Brasenose College], Rebh, and Bernard Rogers [University College]; the two others were: Bruce Fisher [University College], and Robert Repas [Ruskin College]. Rebh reported to Dr. Allen that he thought a team could be formed with enough experience and talent to represent the University in a creditable manner. Dr Allen asked Rebh if he would be willing to assume responsibility for organizing and coaching the team and attending to the necessary administrative arrangements for the trip, to include establishing contact with the Czech basketball organization. Rebh said he would be happy to do so.

While Rebh coached and captained the team and played as a member, he delegated responsibility for administrative matters to other team members. Davis volunteered to contact the Czech basketball organization and to coordinate with it the administrative arrangements for the trip. Additionally, Davis assumed the responsibility of keeping the scorebooks and attending to certain other administrative matters as they arose. One of the early problems was finding a gymnasium for practice sessions, since there was no college or university gymnasium. This matter was solved by a quid-pro-quo arrangement. Jordan approached the Oxford Police Department, seeking permission to use its gymnasium. The arrangement agreed to was that we could use the gymnasium, if one of us would coach the police team; Jordan volunteered to undertake this task. Subsequently, we obtained permission to practice in the Cowley Barracks Gymnasium, which was a facility on a British military post, located on the outskirts of Oxford. This was a superior gymnasium despite a low ceiling; it was larger and better lighted.

It was a formidable task to prepare for such a trip in such a short period. We practiced in the afternoons and, frequently, on the weekends; sometimes, not all members were present. We were, frankly speaking, out of condition for the rigorous schedule confronting us in Czechoslovakia. We concentrated on fundamentals, defense, running set plays, and conditioning. Prior to this time, we had never seen each other play basketball. Hence, a major goal was to become familiar with each other's style of play to include strong and weak points. By the time we departed for Czechoslovakia, we had developed into what was probably an average American college basketball team for that period.

### **The Czech Trip**

For the trip to Czechoslovakia, the University was represented by the previously mentioned nine players: six Americans and three Canadians. Three wives accompanied the team: Margaret Davis, Mary Merdinger, and Ann Rogers; they provided us with a "built in" cheering section. We proceeded to Czechoslovakia as individuals and in small groups. Davis, Hendrick, Merdinger, and Rogers—plus the three wives-- spent New Years Eve in Trafalgar Square in London. On 1 January 1948, they traveled from London by train to Dover, boarded the Channel boat, and, when they reached Ostend, Belgium, boarded the Orient Express for Prague. Repas joined the group in Belgium, and Fisher was picked up in Liege. Jordan and Rebh traveled together to the Continent, while Jepsen traveled alone. Jordan and Rebh joined the group in Prague, after the first two games had been played. Jepsen was grounded for three days in Denmark and did not join the team until 5 January for game number 3 in Liberec. The group, traveling by train, had a stop in Nuremberg about noon on 2

January; Rogers took the group to the U.S. Army snack bar for milk shakes, sandwiches, and doughnuts. This contingent reached Prague at 11:00 p.m.. were greeted by members of the Czech Basketball Federation, and were taken to the Hotel Graz. They were informed that they were scheduled to play the Czech Olympic team the next night.

At noon, on 3 January, the group was greeted by the mayor of Prague in his office, where photos were taken, and was presented a painting of the city along with autographed pamphlets about Prague and Czechoslovakia. That afternoon, the six members of the team practiced in the large and excellent Sokol Gymnasium. That evening, the first game of the trip was played against the Czech Olympic team; this team was the European champions in 1946 and the runner-up in 1947. The Sokol Gymnasium was packed with about 2,000 enthusiastic fans. Before the game, the team was presented a handsome banner in honor of the occasion. We lost: 58–32. The next night, a game was played, again in the Sokol Gymnasium, against the leading team in Bohemia, the Zizkov Club.. We lost this game, as well, this time, by the score of 66–26. For these two games, only six members of our team were present. Rebh and Jordan, members of the starting five, the first team, had driven to Switzerland for the Christmas holidays. Just prior to starting their drive to Prague, they became victims of the huge snowfall, which blanketed western and northern Switzerland and southern Germany. Deep snowdrifts delayed them, while they waited for the snow to be cleared. Long stretches of road, which were impassible, further delayed them as they tried to find suitable detours. They arrived in Prague after the second game.

In these two games, we were clearly outplayed. In the first game, we played, as stated above, the Czech Olympic team. In the second game, while we did not play the Czech Olympic team, as such, the team, which we did play, included several key Czech Olympic players. As is obvious, the scores of these games were extremely lopsided, which was not surprising, considering the circumstances. We had only six players, which did not include two of our starting five. These six players had traveled from England, arriving in Prague at 11:00 p.m. the night before the first game. These two games were played on successive nights. These three factors contributed to fatigue setting-in during the second half of these games. Even at our best, we could not have won these games. These were the first two competitive games, which we had ever played, and they involved two very talented opponents. The players of these teams were superb ball handlers. They were aggressive on the backboards. They shot well. They defended tenaciously. And, they were well coached. In essence, these were two solid basketball teams. It was abundantly clear that we had our work cut out for ourselves, if we were to play competitively in the international arena.

During our two days in Prague, several members of our group visited the Prague Castle and the St Vitus Cathedral--two historic and prominent landmarks of Prague--as well as the destroyed village of Lidice.

The heavy snow, which had blanketed Southern Germany and western and northern Switzerland, as mentioned above, also fell on Czechoslovakia and the neighboring countries to the north, east, and south. Prague was draped with snow; Wenceslas Square was mesmerizing at night with the light from the street lamps sparkling on the snow. As we traveled by train through the countryside, we reveled in the virtual 'Winter Wonderland'—a white landscape with tall pine trees drooping under

the heavy weight of the snow, snow blanketed valleys with scattered white roofed farmhouses having dark-gray curls of smoke reaching skyward, hilltops crested with forests and occasional clumps of trees all clothed in white, children frolicking in the snow and skating on the small frozen ponds, and horse drawn wagons and carts making their way along narrow roads and, sometimes, seemingly on an uncharted sea of snow. Many of these scenes were worthy of appearing on post cards, especially on those crystal-clear days when the sky was a deep blue.

On 5 January, at 5:00 a.m., we departed Prague by train and rode north to Liberec, near the border with Poland. On arriving in Liberec, we were greeted by several Czech basketball players and were taken by bus to the Red Lion Hotel. At noon, the Vice-Mayor of the city received us in his office; the Communist Mayor was “out of town”. After lunch, some of us went sightseeing via cable car to the top of a nearby tall mountain peak “Jested” from which we had a majestic view of the snow covered adjacent Czech peaks and the not-too-far-distant jagged peaks in Poland as well as the white valleys lying below. After dinner, we were guests of the “Friends of United States Society of Liberec”. Some of the society members were quite persistent in trying to impress us that the Czechs were very interested in the US and wanted to be democratic rather than communist; the Communist takeover of the country was to occur the next month, February 1948. On the morning of 6 January, we practiced for about 1½ hours in another Sokol Gymnasium. That night, with a full complement of nine players, we won by a score of 32–18. We had played a team closer to our caliber. In this game, we jumped-off to an early lead and maintained a comfortable lead to the end. A word about this team and all the teams, which we played; each team had, at least, one member of the Czech Olympic team. The number and the caliber of Olympic players on a team influenced the final score. After the game, we were treated to a light snack before turning in.

We left Liberec by train about 5:30 a.m. on 7 January with destination: Kolin, which lies to the east of Prague. After having lunch at another Sokol Gymnasium and checking in the Savoy Hotel, we all, being thoroughly exhausted, “hit the sack”. Before the game that evening, we were taken to the home of a Sokol official for an early supper of delicious sandwiches and wine. The game that night resulted in another victory; this was a close one, 42-41. The lead switched back-and-forth the entire game with neither team ever leading by more than a few points. Fortunately, we were in the lead at the final buzzer. Following this game, we were guests at a dinner, after which, there was much singing, skits, and Ann Rogers contributing a touch of class, dignity, and sophistication to this otherwise raucous occasion by pounding out some mean boogie-woogie on a piano. The party broke up about 11:00 p.m. with everyone in the best of spirits.

On 8 January, we boarded a train leaving Kolin about 8:30 a.m. and arriving in Bratislava, Slovakia at 6:30 p.m. It was a tiring trip, riding, again, 3<sup>rd</sup> class on benches huddled around an iron stove. This heat was most welcomed in view of the sub-freezing temperature. In general, throughout the trip, we experienced much colder temperatures than exist in England at that time of the year. We were met by some pretty rough and tough-looking characters and were taken to the YMCA. A mix-up in rooms had 9 men sharing 2 rooms, while the 3 ladies shared a room in the Hotel Blaha. After lunch at the YMCA, we all walked downtown and onto a bridge over the Danube, which separates Slovakia from Austria. After viewing the picturesque scenery, we

turned around and walked back to the YMCA and the Blaha Hotel. During the afternoon of 9 January, we practiced drills and set plays.. After dinner at the YMCA, some of us went to the Redoute nightclub along with some of our Czech hosts, where we had a delicious dinner and watched local talent perform.

We practiced again during the morning of Saturday, 10 January, and played a game in early evening. Our 2 game winning streak was broken that evening; we lost to Slovensko: 56 to 19. The following morning, Sunday, at 10:00 a.m., we played Bratislava and suffered another loss--this time by the score of 50-19. Once again, these were lop-sided scores. However, despite playing two first-class teams, each with members of the Czech Olympic team, within a 16-hour period and despite the magnitude of our losses, we played better than we had played in Prague. We were gradually learning to work better together as a team, defensively and offensively. However, we were, clearly, still not playing near the level of our opponents. After lunch at the YMCA, some of us, invited by our Czech hosts, attended a performance of the opera, "The Devil and Kate" by Dvorshak. We enjoyed the opera greatly; the singing, acting, costumes, and stage-settings were first class. That evening, the Bratislava Basketball Federation hosted us for dinner and drinks at a fancy restaurant in a small suburb of Bratislava. It was a lively party. Many of the players of the Bratislava team were accompanied by their wives or girl friends. In the interest of improving country-to-country relationships, some of us were not bashful in dancing with the lovely local ladies. Washing down black bread [slathered with lard and paprika] with green wine and/or slivovitz [a kind of plum brandy drunk mainly in Slavic countries] made for a difficult walk back to the YMCA over icy roads, especially for those of us who had indulged too heavily in the local mature fruit juices and who had missed the last ride to town.

Mid-morning of 12 January, we boarded a train for Lomnice, a small town located in the northeastern part of Czechoslovakia on the edge of the Sudeten Mountains. When we arrived that evening, we were met by a group of enthusiastic young people, who escorted some of us to a hotel and the rest to private homes. One of the latter was Mary Merdinger, who was invited to stay in the home of an English speaking young lady. She had officially greeted us at the railroad station and was also an avid basketball player. Besides the warmth of the family's hospitality, Mary remembers vividly the rotating Christmas tree decorated with real candles. Upon departing, Mary gave the young lady a pair of silk stockings, a rarity for the post war period. The young lady cried and said that she would save them for her wedding day. She and Mary exchanged correspondence for a year, until it became impossible for the Czech people to send letters outside the country because of the deteriorating political situation. For the rest of us, the townspeople contributed all of our meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. On the morning of 13 January, we practiced shooting and running drills. After lunch, we toured the J. Jina Cookie factory, which we found to be extremely enjoyable, mainly because we were given delicious samples of a variety of cookies, which served to add sparkle to our sometimes-bland diet. In the evening, playing before a full house and on a slick floor, we won 48-44. This was another team of comparable ability to ours. While the score appears close, we were clearly in charge throughout the game. This was possible because of our gradual improvement in playing as a team—both defensively and offensively. The people of Lomnice could not have been nicer. As a further expression of their generous hospitality, they presented the team with an attractive pennant and each player with a coffee-grinder.

On 14 January, as on other occasions, we were up early, this time to catch a 6:30 a. m. bus, which took us to the express train for Prague. We arrived in Prague mid-morning and made arrangements with Cidok, a travel agency, for the return trip to England. Then, at 2:30 p.m., we boarded a train for Pilsen, arriving at 5:00 p.m. We were assigned very good accommodations at the Grand Hotel. After a light supper, we went to another Sokol Gymnasium for the last game of our trip. We registered another win with a score of 40-38. This was a cliff-hanger, not being decided until the final minute. We considered that our ability to win this hard-fought game was not because we were playing a weak team but, rather, was the result of a steady improvement in our playing together as a team. This was our best game and, again, we played before a full house.

Those, who were returning to England by train, boarded the Oriental Express mid-morning on 15 January and passed through Czech customs without incident. When the train stopped about 5:30 p.m. in Nuremberg for 1 hour, the group, as before, headed to the Army snack bar for refreshments. The night ride was pretty tiring with the Orient Express arriving on 16 January in Ostend about 12:30 p.m. A couple of hours later, the group boarded the Channel boat, docked at Dover at 5:30 p.m. [British time], cleared customs, and boarded the train to London, arriving in time to catch the 9:00 p.m. bus to Oxford. The group arrived at the Oxford bus terminal about 11:30 p.m. and was on the verge of collapsing. This had been a very, very tiring train, boat, and bus ride home.

The other members of the group, not returning to Oxford by train and bus, were Jordan, Chuck and Mary Merdinger, and Rebh. They returned via Rebh's car. Before saying a final good-bye to Prague, they went on a buying spree to rid themselves of the Czech currency, which would be of little or no value in England. They purchased all manner of things to include considerable rhinestone jewelry, which did not cost very much but certainly did look expensive. As they approached the Czech border, they pulled to the side of the road and hid the jewelry and other items under the cushions of the car. Considering the number and total value of the purchases, they were uncertain as to whether they would be required to have export permits or whether they might be exceeding tourist value allowances. When they stopped at the border checkpoint, the guard, upon seeing their Czech pennants, must have known that they were members of a visiting basketball team. He made no attempt to search the car, but rather waved them merrily through. From there, it was a non-stop drive to Ostend, except for a mid night snack at the U.S. Army snack bar in Nuremberg. Merdinger and Rebh alternated driving. Boarding the car ferry at Ostend, they crossed the English Channel docking at Dover. In going through British customs, the agents spent considerable time checking the rhinestones to determine that diamonds were not being smuggled into the country. Jepsen, who was traveling alone, happened to be going through custom just ahead of them, looking like a single humped camel. He had purchased a large pair of binoculars in Prague, which he had strapped across his back and had concealed under a long coat. Despite the hump on his back, he was not challenged by the custom's agent. Once through customs, this group proceeded non-stop to Oxford arriving late at night. Like the other group, they too nearly collapsed. The Merdingers took Jordan into their house for the night—a house that was cold with beds equally as cold. For everyone in this group, even though their beds were cold, their beds never felt so good.

For this series of games, the final tally was four wins and four losses—a rather diplomatic way of handling this international competition. We were very pleased with our performance considering: (1) We had played the best teams in Czechoslovakia, to include the Czech Olympic team; (2) When at full strength, we had only nine players; (3) Prior to the tour, we had not played as a team in a competitive situation; (4) All of the games were played before a highly partisan Czech crowd; (5) We played eight games in twelve days, which proved exhausting, especially considering our less-than-great physical condition, when we started the trip. The state of our physical condition was aggravated by the need, on several occasions, to get up very early to ride third class coach to our next destination. (6) Then, too, there were the time-consuming welcoming ceremonies, tours of the cities, and dinner parties after most games. There was little time for rest; and (7) Finally, we were not always playing on a “level playing field”. Several referees, like the spectators, were highly nationalistic, resulting, frequently, in preferential calls for the home team.

Despite the negatives, this was a very successful and encouraging basketball trip. A major accomplishment was the experience, which we gained. This experience gained, through competition in the international arena against several first-class teams, sharpened our individual abilities, but most importantly, greatly improved the teamwork phase of our game. On both the offense and on the defense, we communicated better, we helped each other better, and we ran our set plays better. We were a much better basketball team when we arrived home in Oxford than when we departed.

All things considered, the trip was a very enjoyable, satisfying experience. Upon arriving in a host city, we were greeted by a reception committee often by enthusiastic university students, many of whom spoke English and were eager to practice their language skills on us or to demonstrate to us their fluency. After the passing of pleasantries, we were often escorted to the mayor’s office, where the mayor officially welcomed us with a short speech and a handshake. We signed the guest book and were handed pamphlets and brochures of the city and Czechoslovakia. Frequently, we were taken on a tour of the city. On occasion, we stayed in family homes where we were warmly received. We found the Czechs to be patriotic, freedom-loving, and nationalistic people. In competing with us in basketball, it was not simply a matter of one team against another team, but rather Czechoslovakia against England, America, and Canada. At the same time, they were friendly, warm and sincere toward us. When we walked into a dining room, we often found an English or American flag displayed on a wall. Prior to each game, “God Save the King” was played along with the Czech national anthem. The viewing stands were filled for each game. And, after several games, we were treated to an excellent dinner along with local entertainment and, sometimes, a dance band.

When we reflect on the many wonderful people whom we met, one stands out in particular. It was our English-speaking guide, who escorted us from the time we left Prague until we had completed our tour through Czechoslovakia. He was a university student and a member of the Czech Olympic basketball team. As a basketball player, he was unique in that he played barefooted. He was 23 years old, with blond hair and blue eyes, six feet tall, and powerfully built. His name was Ctirad Benacek, but, after a few hours with us, his name was anglicized to “Ben” and “Ben” it has remained through the years. He was specializing in agriculture and hoped to serve in his government

after graduation. Though his father was a Czech regular army officer and his brother had flown with the RAF, Ben was an ardent pacifist, a poet, a lover of nature, and a true gentleman. He was first class in every respect. He was an excellent representative of his country. Several years after our trip to Czechoslovakia, Ben, during a basketball trip to Italy, defected. He, eventually, was able to migrate to New Zealand. The Merdingers visited him twice in his home in New Zealand. He died a few years ago. He was truly an exceptional person, whom we all adored, admired, respected and whom we shall always remember with great fondness.

Then, there was “Black Market Charlie”—cut from a considerably different piece of cloth than Ben. He was a member of the Czech escort party and accompanied us on a portion of the trip, particularly on the train to Bratislava. As might be deduced from the name which we pinned on him, he bought and sold cameras, jewelry, cigarettes,—just about anything one wanted—and exchanged money at black market rates. Though involved in an “unauthorized” business, Charlie was, nevertheless, an affable, friendly, generous, likeable fellow. A few of us remember him for taking us, after our first game in Bratislava, to a swank restaurant for a fabulous dinner.

We all agreed that, in general, this was an experience to be treasured for the rest of our lives.

### **Back at Oxford**

After we returned to Oxford and word spread about our trip, considerable interest was generated in University basketball among student athletes. One favorable outcome was that an Englishman, John Palmer [Wadham College] joined the team. He became the tallest man on the team at 6 feet 10 inches (the English equivalent of 2.08 meters). He was prominent in another way; he wore size 21 shoes. Now, we could legitimately claim an English identity. Several other students also joined the team, including J. Dee [Brasenose College], C.B. Hubbard [Brasenose College], and P.J.M. Bryan [St Peters Hall College], and Rhodes Scholar Ed Shannon [Merton College], adding greatly to the pool of talent, and, thereby, increasing competition for a position on the starting five.

During Hilary term, the team played several games with military and civilian teams; there is a very limited record of the specific teams and scores. Included in these games is one played on 1 March 1948, against a U.S. Navy team, stationed in London. The game was played at the Oxford Police Gymnasium; we won: 32-21. On 6 March, we drove to Birmingham to play in the Midlands area tournament of the All English Basketball Championship. The tournament was played in the Birmingham University Gymnasium. In the semi-finals, we played Loughborough and won 45-10. In the finals, we defeated the Birmingham Saints by a score of 34-28, thus, winning this tournament of the All English Basketball Championship. These were important victories for our so recently organized team. We won all of these games quite easily. Our experience in Czechoslovakia, the new recruits on the team, and our rigorous workouts, during this term, paid off. Additionally, during this term, arrangements were made to play a series of games in Monaco, Lyon, Paris, Ghent, and Brussels during the spring vacation.

## On to Monaco, France, and Belgium

When term ended, we made our ways separately to Monaco. On 14 April 1948, Davis, Jepsen, Jordan, Rebh, and Rogers assembled in Nice, France and later traveled to Monte Carlo, Monaco, where Fisher, Hendrick, Merdinger, Palmer and Shannon had already arrived. Eight members of this ten-man team had made the Czech trip; Palmer, and Shannon were the new members. Our cheering section was enlarged from 3 ,Margaret Davis, Mary Merdinger, and Ann Rogers to 4 with the addition of Jeanne Rebh. For this trip, the host organization paid all expenses, once we arrived in its city. We were responsible for our own transportation between cities. Most members traveled by train; two members, Merdinger and Rebh along with their wives, traveled by private automobiles. In all cities, we were welcomed and treated in a friendly, warm manner. Hotel accommodations were generally adequate, though not always especially clean; the meals varied from good to excellent. In Monte Carlo, on the morning of 15 April, we practiced in the Louis II Stadium, where we played our first game on an outdoor court. We lost, the score was 53–25. This was the first time we had ever played outdoors, and it was not to be the last. The team, which we played, consisted primarily of croupiers from the Monte Carlo casino, who were coached and led by an American. He had traveled to Europe with the Chicago Lithuanian basketball team and remained to start many basketball teams throughout Europe. Every place we played on this trip, our opponents knew him well, many of them had been coached by him. At this time, he was waiting for his wife who had been detained in Russia. Apparently, she had to write something to satisfy the Russian authorities before being released. This game was a case of our opponents being well coached, very aggressive on defense, good ball handlers, and able to move the ball around quickly. We played well but still had several wrinkles in our teamwork, which needed ironing-out. Shortly after reaching Monte Carlo, Rogers came down with an infected knee, thus, missing this game as well as the one in Nice on 17 April. After the Monte Carlo game, we indulged ourselves with a few hours of relaxation in the Monte Carlo Casino, mostly people watching and looking over the shoulders of the affluent gamblers. The stakes were too high for our student budgets. All of the patrons were tastefully dressed with many of the ladies gorgeously dressed.

On 16 April, we returned to Nice, to play the Nice University Club on another outdoor basketball court. In the win-loss column, we were now even; we won 27-19. We played a team with talent on a par with ours. The difference was that we were more aggressive and made a greater percentage of our shots—both from the field and at the foul line. We found the “La Grande Taverne” to be an exceptionally fine place to eat.

On 18 April, we moved on to Lyon, France. Some of us traveled in the Merdinger and Rebh cars and the rest of the group by train, the latter arriving at 11:30 a.m. with the Merdingers and Rebhs and company arriving soon afterwards. We found our reservations at the hotel de Vieux Lyons to be unavailable. We were taken to another hotel, which, in the judgment of some members of the group, was “plain lousy”. It is said that the French Basketball Association paid 25 cents [U.S currency] per person per night to house us. The Merdingers slept in a room with no windows, but it did have a ventilator shaft, which vented the commodes on the various floors. This may have accounted for Chuck being so groggy until noon. . How lucky can two people be! This could not have happened to two more deserving, wonderful people! That evening, before “hitting the sack”, we partially assuaged our drooping spirits by

sipping wine with a couple of members of the host team. During the morning of 19 April, we transferred to the hotel in which we were originally booked. We found it to be little better than our accommodations of the night before. During the day, we did some sightseeing of the city. On the morning of 20 April, we had shooting practice. In the evening, we played a professional team having 3 “A” Internationals players and 2 “B” Internationals players. We lost 45 to 25. The label “International” signifies that the player is a member of the “national team”. This was a game in which we were outplayed despite our best efforts. These players dominated the backboards. They committed few turnovers. And, they functioned like a smooth-running machine. After we returned to our hotel and had cold showers, we were invited to share Merdinger’s birthday cake. Despite much pressure, Merdinger refused to divulge his age.

On 21 April, we caught an early train to Paris, where we stayed at the Hotel de Rome. That evening, before our game, we attended a reception in our honor; also present, was a member of the French cabinet. After the reception, we played the Paris University Club, losing 37-18. The Paris University Club was essentially France’s Olympic team. This was a team comparable in ability to the Czech Olympic team. We considered that we had played, in a creditable manner against this strong team, especially when considering that this was our second game in two days, that we had traveled by car or train between Lyon and Paris on this same day, and that we had attended a reception in our honor just before the game. We also considered that the referees had a patriotic streak in them, which caused them to show partiality to the home team. This favoritism was not surprising in view of the intense nationalism of the French people. Late in the game, Merdinger’s nose was broken during a scuffle under our basket. After the game, Merdinger sought out the mentor of the French team, Dr Macheboeff, who was also Professor of Medicine at the University of Paris. The Professor took Merdinger to the University hospital, where it soon became apparent to Merdinger that the Professor was a very important person. Merdinger was first seen by the Night Surgeon, then the Head Surgeon, and, finally, by the Nose and Neck Surgeon. In the end, the nose was put back together, a piece of medical tape was used to secure it on his face, and he was told that he was free to leave. When Merdinger tried to pay for the service, he was told: “No charge, this is French socialized medicine”. During the remainder of the trip, Merdinger tried unsuccessfully to find a facemask to protect his “French nose”. As a result, Merdinger played cautiously, when deemed appropriate in the remaining games, and was able, in this way, to arrive home with nose intact. On 22 April, some of us toured Paris; places visited included the Pantheon, Notre Dame, Sacre-Coeur, Place de Concorde, the U.S. Embassy, the Champs-Elysees, and the Eiffel Tour. In the evening, we thought we would sample the exotic, erotic, scandalous nightlife for which Paris is famous. For starters, we went to the Follies Bergiere. This extravaganza--with its spectacular stage-settings, the flamboyant and, at the same time, scanty costumes, the curvaceous young ladies, the precision high kicking chorus line, the chanteuses, and the comics--was awesome. And, one could, in the same breath, say interesting, entertaining, and, even, fascinating. After the Follies’ performance, a few hearty souls wandered along the Champs Elysees and, ultimately, found their way to the Moulin Rouge, in the Montmartre district. While Toulouse-Lautrec was nowhere in sight, his canvases were alive in the cabaret and on stage with the can-can girls very energetic with their famous splits. We now understood the full meaning of the expression: “How can you keep them down on the farm once they have seen Patee.”, especially, after seeing the Follies and Moulin Rouge performances. Demonstrating extremely great will power, sound

character, and forbearance, each and every one of us successfully withstood the siren call—we had several more basketball games to play.

In most games, which we played on this trip,—to ease the tension of the highly competitive and highly emotionally charged atmosphere-- we would have Palmer, our tall center (tall by the standards of those years!) hunch forward under the basket. Rebh, being only five feet seven inches tall, would sneak behind him and climb on his shoulders. Palmer would stand erect. Rebh would receive a pass of the ball and drop it in the basket. The crowd would roar with delight on seeing this unusual maneuver. We did this only for the laughs and only once a game. Most referees would simply consider it an unauthorized act, disallow the basket, and give the ball to the opposing team. But, the Parisian referees were not amused. They declared this to be an illegal act and penalized Rebh with a technical foul. C'est la vie.

On 23 April, we took the train to Brussels, Belgium where we stayed in the Hotel de Brugges. That evening, we lost to the Brussels Racing Club by a score of 35–20. This was another highly talented, well-coached, aggressive team, which clearly outplayed us. We played a strong game, but it was not good enough to keep the score close. After the game, there was a joint celebration in the hotel—much white wine, a speech by the Deputy Mayor of Brussels, and lots of laughs and fun.

On Saturday, 24 April, we traveled by the afternoon train to Ghent, where we found our accommodations at the “Coeur de Richard”. These were the best accommodations of the entire trip. In the evening, we played the last game of the trip. We defeated the Ghent Hellas team 39–35. It was an exciting game with the score ‘nip-and-tuck’ during the entire 40 minutes. It was a well-played game by both teams. We were fortunate to have the greater momentum in the closing minutes. As on our Czech trip, we ended this trip on a triumphant note. After the game, we went to a small café to celebrate this victory and end this memorable tour--with ice cream and dancing.

The final tally for this trip was 2 wins and 3 losses—a respectable showing, considering that 2 of the 3 losses were against non-university teams, having experienced and highly talented players, who, additionally, had played together for several years.

On 25 April, the group, minus Merdinger and Rebh and the passengers in their cars, traveled by train to Ostend, where they had lunch and boarded the ferry to England—disembarking at Dover. It was a cold, miserable day, making the crossing quite unpleasant. Some of the group had difficulty getting from Dover to Oxford, arriving as late as 2:00 a.m. on Monday, 26 April. These hardships made them extremely glad to be home.

Merdinger and Rebh and party traveled to Ostend, boarded the car ferry for Dover, and drove straight through to Oxford. The Merdinger car contained Mary and Chuck, “Big John” Palmer, Shannon, and Hendrick. The Rebh car contained Jeanne and George plus others, whose names have been forgotten.

As with our trip to Czechoslovakia, we came away with many fond memories: memories of the many friendly, warm, and interesting people, whom we met or were associated with; memories of our nights ‘out-on-the-town’ in Monte Carlo, and,

especially Paris; memories of our poor and excellent sleeping accommodations; memories of the excellent cuisine in Nice and, especially Paris; memories of our basketball games—whether we won or lost-- and, particularly, our progressive improvement in all phases of the game. These are memories, which will last for a lifetime.

### **The End of the Season**

During the Trinity term, we played several games against military and civilian teams. Among these games was one, which took place on 4 May. We drove to the RAF Station at Halton and played a Marine team from London; we won quite handily 37-19. A most memorable game was played on 12 June, when we drove to Manchester for our final game of the season, playing Tynmouth in the semi-finals of the All English Basketball Championship and winning 42-17. What happened to the Finals of this All English Basketball Championship, we do not know. We have no notes, papers, recollections, or diary entry to answer this question. For the time being, at least this mystery will remain unsolved. As the scores of these games indicate--and they are typical of the games, which we played this term, we dominated our opponents. We attribute a great deal of our success to the experience gained and lessons learned as a result of playing several talented teams, during our two trips on the Continent, plus the addition of several talented players to the team..

### **In Conclusion**

We were highly satisfied with our progress during these nine months: October 1947--June 1948. We started with a small group of individuals, previously unknown to each other. We soon bonded together and, through the experience gained during the two rigorous trips on the Continent plus hard work, we matured into a smoothly functioning, highly competitive, winning team. Thus, at the end of this first and formative year of Oxford University basketball, we had established the Oxford University team as a formidable opponent in the basketball arena--a team to be reckoned with in future years. And, the team had gained a certain amount of recognition for the University on the Continent.

### **The Basketball—Lacrosse Connection**

Finally, there is the matter of the Oxford-Cambridge basketball rivalry. The first game was played on 11 June 1949 at the RAF Camp located at Halton. Oxford won the game: 47–11. However, the seeds of this rivalry were sown during 1947-1948. During the fall of 1947, the captain of the Cambridge lacrosse team, Dickie Zimmern, contacted Merdinger of our basketball team, who was an All-American lacrosse player, having played at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the United States Naval Academy. Zimmern was interested in reviving the Oxford-Cambridge series, which had been suspended during World War II. Subsequently, agreement was reached, with the first match played during the spring of 1948; Cambridge won 5-2. Later in 1948, Merdinger, who was the captain of the Oxford lacrosse team, went to Cambridge to see Zimmern, suggesting that it was now payback time. Oxford had fielded a lacrosse team, which enabled the Contabs to win their Blues. Zimmern, thereupon, located a

Canadian, who knew something about basketball, and formed a team, which played Oxford, during June 1949, as noted above. This was the first post WWII basketball game played between the two Universities.

The organizing and development of both the basketball and lacrosse teams were closely linked. Each team recruited from the other. Practice sessions had to be scheduled to accommodate the fact that seven members: Davis, Fisher, Hendrick, Jepsen, Jordan, Merdinger, and Rebh, played on both teams. When the seasons overlapped, one team practiced on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the other team practiced on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Thus, endeth the story of that formative period, October 1947-June 1948, giving birth to the Oxford University basketball team, which, since that time, has grown and matured into a University “Full Blue” sport and has continued as a dominating force in basketball games played in England. And, through the years, Oxford University has had the good fortune of having Rhodes Scholars with stellar basketball talent, the most prominent of whom have been the “All American” basketball players, Bill Bradley and Tom McMillen.

Unfortunately, through the course of time, the team’s records have been lost. The scores cited above are from individual papers, memories and one diary. The passing of several members of the team has resulted in the loss of any information they may have accumulated or remembered. During the period, 1992-1998, attempts were made to recover the missing records. The Vincent’s Club was contacted; it did not have any of these records. A letter was written to the Warden of Rhodes House, enquiring whether his files contained the Czech invitation—again a negative answer. These unsuccessful efforts terminated the search for the missing documents. The writing of this story was completed during December 2006.

This bit of Oxford basketball history is a collaborative effort of:

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Brasenose College  
1947

Charles Merdinger  
Brasenose College  
1947

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Brasenose College  
1947

George Rebh  
Magdalen College  
1947

Bernard Rogers  
University College  
1947