

The Gallant Toilers

(from Vince Leah's [*Pages from the Past*](#) pp. 57-59)

The annals of Canadian basketball are brightened by the names, Toilers and Edmonton Grads. Both have passed out of the picture now but in the era when basketball on the national level was struggling for acceptance, the Toilers and Grads, by their brilliance and attitude, made a major contribution in the building of basketball. The Grads packed it up when they ran out of competition after winning many Canadian and international titles. The Toilers, decimated in that terrible air crash of March, 1932,* (sic) rebuilt for one more unsuccessful try at the Canadian title and then disbanded.

Toilers were the first Canadian men's champions. The sport was quite popular here despite the ascendancy of hockey and as far back as 1914 city schools had a league and there were competitive leagues at the YMCA. But not until the Toilers arrived did the game here acquire a championship look.

Comprised of YMCA members ... you had to have a "Y" membership to play in the leagues which used YMCA facilities. Toilers were strictly amateur despite efforts of the Amateur Athletic Union to keep them out of the Canadian final in Montreal because they weren't amateur card holders. It was almost laughable. Toilers were forever going into their own pockets to buy uniforms and so on. If there ever was an amateur champion it was this blue-clad brigade.

Local senior teams tried hard to match Toilers with little success. Not until the last week of the season in 1926 did Toilers finally lose a game, Canoe Club scoring a hard-fought 44-43 victory. In a way it may have helped Toilers by bringing them down to earth, if they were ever off it. Toilers met Regina YMCA in the Western semi-final and raced to 45-31 and 49-20 victories. British Columbia had been disqualified by the Canadian association for non-payment of dues but eventually the matter was rectified and New Westminster Adanacs, a name famous in basketball and lacrosse, eventually were allowed to complete. The Adanacs were good, but not good enough, and went down to defeat here, 31-19 and 24-20. One of their better players was Jackie D'Easum and he would return to Winnipeg in a later season with the famous New Westminster Royals of soccer renown.

There was some doubt about the final being played due to financial difficulties, but the CABA appealed to Montreal AAA, pointing out that other cities had rallied to help their representatives. The Montrealers need not have worried. Over 3,5000 turned up for the first game in the Forum. Toilers, sparked by George Wilson, vanquished the Montrealers, 27-22, in the first contest and the Eastern team never looked like winning in the second, going down 30-20. Wilson scored 18 points in the second game, a remarkable total in a basketball period when scores were low, not because of lack of skill but the rules were different and there was a centre jump after every score. Wilson, incidentally, also scored 12 in the first game. If you are selecting a sports hall of fame of outstanding Manitoba individual athletes, you must include George. He had plenty of support from Lynn Sinclair, "Skinny" Clifford, Gordon Cummings, Waddy Fergulson. Henry Schendel, Bill Thorogood and Al Silverthorne. Schendel coached with some success at the University of Manitoba in the 1930's.

Toilers retained the title the following season and won it again in 1932. Returning from an international series with Tulsa Oilers. United States amateur champions, their chartered aircraft plunged into a Kansas wheatfield. Among the dead were two of the team's brightest young stars, Joe Dodds and Mike Shea. The club reorganized later and with the assistance of Joe Perpich and Bud Marquardt, who had come to Winnipeg to play football, and Curt Dennehey, another US. college player, made a brave bid for another national title. They failed, however, against Victoria, B.C., and the club later disbanded for good to be replaced by such well-known basketball names as St. Andrew's, Paulins, and University of Manitoba. But when basketball needed a boost in the dear, dim past, Toilers provided it.

** the crash occurred March 31, 1933*