

Rubin made basketball work in Pittsburgh

By LEE CHOTTINER

Executive Editor

Pittsburgh Pipers owner Gabe Rubin may have been short (he stood about 5-foot-7), but as Art Heyman recollects, he was a feisty 5-foot-7:

In fact, during the 1968-69 ABA All-Star game banquet, Rubin got into a fistfight with his head coach, Jim Harding.

"I had to break up the fight," Heyman said. "He (Hardy) got fired the next day."

But that was Gabe Rubin — colorful and unpredictable — and always a showman.

It was he who proved that professional basketball could make it in Pittsburgh when his Pipers won the first-ever ABA championship in 1968.

"The pro basketball thing for him was like the crowning achievement in his work life," said his great-nephew, Pittsburgh attorney Harlan Stone. "He was adamant about the ability of the city to support a professional basketball team. He insisted up to the day they moved out of town that Pittsburgh could support a pro basketball team."

Rubin died Nov. 6 in Broward County, Fla. He was 92.

Rubin's championship Pipers boasted the likes of hall-of-famer Connie Hawkins and Heyman — a 6-foot-5 guard out of Duke and one of the team's two Jewish players.

"He was a miniature Barnum & Bailey," Heyman, who today is a New York

businessman, said of his former boss. "He was a good man, but he couldn't con me, because I'm from New York."

Then again, maybe Rubin, who grew up on Pittsburgh's East End, could con him just a little.

Take that 18-game winning streak the team ran in 1969.

"He said don't worry you'll be with me til the end," Heyman recalled. "Then he traded me the next day."

But for the sports tales, Stone said his great-uncle was really a player's owner, someone who the players liked, and vice versa.

"He was close with his players," Stone said. "When I was little I can remember him taking us to the games — my brother and I — and introducing us to the players, as a kid. That was a big thrill."

Rubin wasn't just a sports team owner. He made his name in the Pittsburgh theater business. He owned drive-in theaters — among the first in Western Pennsylvania — and he showed foreign films at the Art Cinema Downtown, which he also owned. He also owned the Nixon Theater for years.

He partnered with Lenny Litman and Jason Shapiro to take over the Penn Theater, where he brought a run of "Hello Dolly" starring Carol Channing.

He used the profits from that run to buy into the ABA in 1967 and become the owner/operator of the Pipers.

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