

Race

**The Harlem Renaissance, On and Off the Court**

by Robert Siegel



John Bach

The Harlem Rens were the first team — black or white — to win the World Championship Professional Basketball Tournament, held in 1939. A new book by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, chronicles the team and its place in the Harlem Renaissance.

*All Things Considered*, January 30, 2007 · The Harlem Renaissance wasn't just a literary movement. It was also the name of a famous ballroom in New York City's Harlem neighborhood: the Renaissance Casino and Ballroom.

The venue boasted a huge dance floor that played host to parties and a famous basketball team: the Harlem Rens, the first all-black basketball team to win a world championship.

"That was a special aspect of what the Renaissance Casino and Ballroom was all about. They had basketball, sports and music all at the same time," says Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

The legendary basketball player is the author of a new book, *On the Shoulder of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance*, which takes a look back at the storied history and lasting impact of the Harlem Renaissance Ballroom.

Abdul-Jabbar discusses how ethnic rivalry was used to promote sports, and the differences between the Rens and the other well-known all-black basketball team of the time, the Harlem Globetrotters.

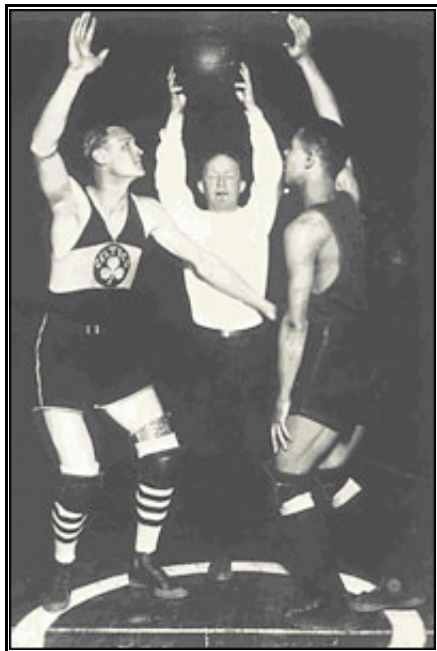
The Globetrotters always clowned around, Abdul-Jabbar says. The club's owner thought white Americans would be more comfortable if his team provided "entertainment" and conformed to negative racial stereotypes that many whites had "because he did not want to go head to head against racial attitudes in this country."

Abdul-Jabbar associates the Globetrotters with Harlem's most famous club, the segregated Cotton Club.

The Rens' approach to the game, on the other hand, was all business.

"They wanted to make everybody respect them as sportsmen," Abdul-Jabbar says.

The team's attitude reflected those of the Harlem Renaissance — the social movement and the black-owned-and-operated club with the same name.



Joe Lapchick

Original Celtics center Joe Lapchick (left) with Rens center "Tarzan" Cooper in what is considered the first jump ball between a white man and a black man in professional basketball.