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# Mormon Yankees: Giants on and off the Court

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Fred E. Woods. *Mormon Yankees: Giants on and off the Court*.  
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*Reviewed by John Stohlton*

*Mormon Yankees: Giants on and off the Court* describes an almost twenty-five-year period (1938–61) during which basketball-playing Church missionaries had a profound effect upon the Australian Latter-day Saint community, as well as on Australian basketball. Prolific author Fred Woods skillfully develops his thesis that the use of basketball as a proselyting tool brought both the Church and Australian basketball out of obscurity. In some 292 pages, Woods tells the story of the development of basketball-playing missionaries as a proselyting tool and the profound effect that the elite missionary teams, named the Mormon Yankees, had upon the Church in general and the members and investigators in particular. The author provides a helpful fifty-page overview of the time period and key developments, followed by the perspectives of some seventy former missionaries, Australian Church members, and nonmember Australian basketball players and officials regarding the program and its very positive effects.

All can enjoy this volume, but readers who enjoy Church history and sports are likely to find it almost impossible to even skim through the book without gaining an appreciation for what a group of talented and dedicated basketball-playing missionaries were able to accomplish.

### **Overview**

As I began reading *Mormon Yankees*, I quickly became enthralled with the book and its accompanying 120-minute DVD. The DVD contains clips of games and recorded interviews with some of the principal characters described in the book. I was moved by the testimonies of so many as to the effects of the basketball-playing proselyting program on not only those participants, but more importantly on the image and reputation of the Church and its members. When the elite Mormon Yankee teams were

created, the Church in Australia had a relatively small number of members and was largely an unknown entity. Even in 1991, when I arrived in Melbourne to serve as mission president, Church leaders informed me that a nationwide survey conducted by the Church indicated that the Church's public relations image involved the following in descending order:

1. The Church was an American church.
2. The Church was very rich.
3. The Church was very insular and kept largely to itself.
4. The Church had individuals who had practiced polygamy and, depending on whom you were speaking to, might still be engaged in the practice.

My initial reaction, prior to reading the book, was one of skepticism to the notion that a basketball-playing proselyting effort could be an effective missionary tool. My opinion was largely based on personal experiences with local Church basketball. I was one for whom Church basketball was often described as a brawl that began with a word of prayer. I was skeptical that the type of church ball I had experienced could have a positive effect on virtually anyone, let alone those investigating the Church.

I was also mindful that some Church leaders and members viewed almost any activity not involving traditional door and street contacting as a diversion and distraction, and I couldn't imagine their viewing missionaries playing competitive basketball as a permissible activity. After reading Fred's book, I now hold a far different view. I was particularly impressed with the testimony of Robert G. Pedersen. He wrote, "Well, first and foremost, we knew we were missionaries. We weren't a traveling pre-NBA team on a lark. . . . Our primary purpose as Mormon Yankee basketball players was to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . The reason we played was to let the people know that we were normal, caring, hardworking young men who felt enough about that message that they would give everything up to go on a mission" (212). Richard Christenson, who served in Australia from 1955 to 1957, wrote, "Well, we planned ahead. We had our schedules and our areas that we were going to be tracting and our cottage meetings all on a schedule, and then we'd block out the time necessary for the basketball travel and the game. I can tell you that none of it was wasted. We didn't have any freebies; there weren't movies on the side and extra luncheon engagements. We went right to our responsibility" (94-95).

## **Mormon Yankees and Australian Basketball**

Basketball in Australia was introduced largely through the efforts of the YMCA. By the mid to late 1930s, YMCA basketball leagues in a number of Australian communities flourished, and by the late 1930s missionaries were participating in YMCA leagues. Due to their skill sets and prior basketball experience, LDS missionary teams found almost immediate success in several geographical areas.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, missionaries from the U.S. were pulled out of Australia and were reintroduced following World War II. Australian basketball was also substantially upgraded following the war as a result of the immigration of thousands of Latvians and Lithuanians from internment camps in Europe. Americans had introduced the Baltic refugees to basketball during the war.

A significant development in Australian basketball occurred in 1954 when the Harlem Globetrotters toured the country to great fanfare and attention. Mission president Charles Liljenquist, seeing the attention generated by the Globetrotters, decided to emulate their example and utilize basketball as a means to lift the image and public awareness of the Church. He created the first elite Mormon Yankee team and sent them to Adelaide with the hope and expectation that the team could help accelerate missionary work in the area.

At a public press conference held in Adelaide, President Liljenquist promised, in a flight of hyperbole, to send Adelaide a player “who’s better than the Globetrotters” (10). That player was missionary Loren C. Dunn. The team had instant success under Elder Dunn’s coaching and playing. They became popular with the public because of their skills and were even invited by the Australian Tennis Association to put on exhibitions prior to professional tennis matches. One such exhibition in Adelaide drew over nine thousand people.

It is likely the Mormon Yankee program would have been disbanded at the conclusion of Elder Dunn’s term of missionary service had it not been for the intervention of the prophet, President David O. McKay. President McKay was touring Australia in 1955 when he heard effusive praise for the Mormon Yankees at a press conference held in Adelaide. After the conference, President McKay asked President Liljenquist about the Mormon Yankees. President Liljenquist told President McKay that the program was a good one but would probably have to be discontinued when Elder Dunn and his teammates finished their missions. He explained to President McKay that too few basketball-playing missionaries were being sent to Australia. President McKay responded

by telling President Liljenquest, “You keep the program going. We’ll see that the basketball players come” (19).

President McKay was true to his word, and from that time on some of the Church’s most talented collegiate players were sent to Australia. College stars such as DeLyle Condie from the University of Utah, Don Hull from Utah State University, and Mark Frodsham and Bob Skousen of BYU were assigned, and their basketball prowess quickly established the reputation of the Mormon Yankees team.

In 1956, mission president Thomas S. Bingham was approached by Ken Watson, the soon-to-be coach of the 1956 Australian Olympic team. Watson asked President Bingham if he would form an elite team that could help coach and train his team for the upcoming Olympics that were to be played in Melbourne. Watson told President Bingham that his team needed someone to practice and play against in preparation for the games. He said that “it would be a great proselyting tool for the Church, a benefit for the Church, and that he saw that it would be a great benefit to them [the Australian Team] when they were getting ready for the Olympic games” (21).

An elite team was formed under the leadership of Elders Condie and Hull, and competition and coaching soon ensued. The skill level of the Yankee team was such that much of their time was spent in teaching basic skills to the Aussie players. That 1956 Yankee team defeated the Olympic teams from Australia, Taiwan, Chile, and France and lost by nine points to the Russians, who went on to win the silver medal in Olympic play.

Similar Mormon Yankee teams were formed in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and West Australia.

With the introduction of nationwide television in 1957, many of the Mormon Yankee games were televised nationally. The Mormon Yankees became extremely popular, especially Elder Condie. The press gushed over Condie’s skills, and one sports writer suggested that Condie “defeated Australia virtually on his own.”

In 1959, two enterprising elders took the Mormon Yankee format to an entirely different level. They convinced the mission president to send the team out on the road to play exhibition matches in country towns where missionaries were present or where missionaries would be sent. The enterprising elders persuaded Volkswagen of Australia to sponsor the events and to provide a new van to transport the team and to arrange for all publicity. The willingness of Volkswagen to participate is an obvious testament to the popularity of the Yankee teams.

As a result, high-level basketball was introduced into many communities, and the traveling elders held clinics for the youth in the exhibition

communities. In many of those communities, firesides were conducted and proselyting efforts intensified. Missionaries who would be left behind to serve in the communities were introduced at the games. As a former mission president, I appreciated the fact that Brother Woods devoted substantial portions of his book to the day-to-day missionary service that accompanied the basketball playing. Of particular benefit were the day-to-day journal entries made by Elder Harold Turley, one of the team members.

In 1960, the Mormon Yankees once again defeated the 1960 Australian Olympic Team. Elder Bob Skousen, who had an outstanding freshman year at BYU before leaving on his mission, led the Yankees at that point. Veteran Australian basketball officials later said that Elder Skousen was the most outstanding shooter they had ever seen.

Despite the popularity of the basketball-playing effort and the tremendous goodwill generated, the General Authorities announced in 1961 that the Church would no longer use sports as a vehicle to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Australian basketball officials were devastated by the news and tried to persuade Australian Church officials to reverse the decision. The decision was not reversed, but still Australian basketball continued to thrive and develop to the point where today the Australian national team is recognized as one of the world's basketball powers.

### **Benefits of the Mormon Yankees**

Although the Church was introduced to Australia in 1840, it labored in relative obscurity until the emergence of the Mormon Yankees. The great missionary awakening in Australia, however, occurred under the direction of mission president Bruce R. McConkie, beginning in 1961, and just after the basketball playing was discontinued. I believe that it would be fair to argue that the unparalleled success enjoyed by President McConkie was at least in part due to the publicity and service given by the Mormon Yankees. The Mormon Yankee Program did so much to instill pride and confidence in the relatively few members of the Church.

The interviews of members conducted by Woods make it clear that the program had a real effect. Consider this quote from Church member Lorna Cullis:

For me, the legacy of the Mormon Yankees is tremendously important because not only did it change the face of basketball in Melbourne, but it changed the course of my personal life because of Mark [Elder Frodsham] having such an effect on my husband, who was not a member of the Church and had no intention of becoming a member of the

Church. And because of Mark's goodness and all of the things that he was to us, he had such an effect on Bert that it has changed not only the face of basketball; it has changed my whole life. . . . We just loved it when they were here. It was an exciting time, a wonderful time, and a hugely growing time for the people in the Church. The Church in Australia became a different situation entirely, because it suddenly stopped being this little few people, and it started to grow. (106)

As President Bingham would later write, "We know that basketball in and of itself does not convert people to the gospel, nor has it brought outstanding and immediate results, but in a country where Mormonism is not generally accepted[,] we feel it can do an immeasurable amount of good in breaking down prejudice and hatred toward the Church" (28).

Church members were not the only ones who praised the program. Woods's book contains a number of interviews and quotes from non-members who played against the Mormon Yankees. Those quotes are profuse in their admiration for the Yankees players and their sportsmanship and character. An Australian sportswriter wrote of the Yankees: "They were gentlemen on and off the court, and . . . I can't remember any instance of a case of pushing, shoving, or name calling and rolling [by] any of the Mormon players, and of course that made an impression. That affected other teams as well" (56).

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