

Mayhem at the Box Office

Unless something is done soon, a lot of kids playing race-horse basketball will have heart disease in later life

by **LEO FISCHER**

• SPORTS •

BASKETBALL, as played today, is wrecking the future health of thousands of our youngsters!

What was once a recreational pastime has been "needled" into a frenzy of harmful action through radical rule changes in the past few years.

High school and college athletes are being "burned out" by the fastest, most exhausting and most nerve-wracking sport since ancient gladiators were tossed in to joust with ferocious lions and tigers.

Hard words, my friends?

Perhaps.

But watch the heart-disease curve go up and up—despite reports whitewashing basketball as it is now played. And the victims, unless something is done about it soon, will come in large numbers from the youngsters now cavorting on the nation's hardwood floors.

In the year preceding his death, Dr. James A. Naismith, originator of the sport, gave up almost completely attending games. Asked the reason, he shook his head sadly and replied:

"This isn't basketball the way I used to know it. I devised a game for players. I wanted it to be an interesting, healthful competition. And it was, up to a few years ago. Now the spectators have taken it over and the rules have been changed so that the game is played for their benefit. No one seems to give a thought any more to the boys or their

health. I guess they just want to draw crowds. This isn't my game of basketball."

And he is right. About the only similarity between basketball of today and half a dozen years ago is reminiscent of the feud which once raged between Doc Meanwell at Wisconsin and Ward Lambert at Purdue. Each collected royalties on a certain type of ball and there was always a squabble about which was to be used when they met. Once, before a game, Meanwell wired Lambert

"What kind of a ball are you going to use Friday?"

Lambert wired back:

"A nice, big round one!"

It's still a nice, big round ball that they're using in the game—but the other rules have undergone amazing alterations.

From the time Dr. Naismith hung up those historic peach baskets in 1891 up to a few years ago, players had the entire floor in which to roam or rest. Then it was decided that there was too much resting and not enough roaming—particularly after a couple of Illinois high school teams played a 1 to 0 game and Wisconsin won a Big Ten conference contest by a score of approximately 12 to 9. There was also a game on the Pacific Coast where players on one side held the ball for fifteen minutes while their opponents read newspapers and the crowd jeered.

Instead of considering these as isolated freak incidents, the rules committee began

to view with alarm, and proceeded to speed matters up. It decreed that a line should be drawn through the center of the playing floor. It decreed further that a player obtaining the ball in the half farthest from his own basket had to get the hell out of there within ten seconds.

Jesse Owens can run a hundred yards in ten seconds quite easily, but after all it isn't much space on a stop watch. You have to hustle to get across that line. And thus was taken Step No. 1 in the transition of basketball.

Three years ago it was decided to inject another shot of vinegar into the game. Following agitation from the Pacific Coast, the rules committee voted the sport's most radical change—elimination of the center jump. Those last five words on paper seem harmless, but their effect was to do away with the twenty or thirty second break between the scoring of a basket and the time the ball was again put in play by the two centers jumping for it in mid-court.

As a result, basketball now is sustained motion, except for an occasional injury or exhaustion time out. Play is practically continuous. As soon as the ball whips through the net, it is grabbed by a man from the other side and put into play, while players on the team which has scored sweep like tornadoes for the opposite end of the floor to take up defensive positions.

Certainly, it's a swell game to watch. We love it. So do the thousands of others who jam into gymnasiums, field houses and indoor stadia to watch the boys run themselves ragged scoring points and giving thrills to the cash customers.

Nat Holman, famous coach of New York's City College and one of the greatest players of all time, sounds the keynote of the modern game with this observation:

"Basketball is a spectator's sport. Its recent tremendous growth in popularity is clear evidence of that. We must keep it a sport of action and color to retain the public's fancy."

But what about the players?

Experiments prove that the abolition of the center jump, plus other changes, have added seven to ten more minutes of actual playing time.

The ball is rocketing back and forth for about thirty-eight minutes out of a possible forty in the average college game. Football, with all its hipper-dipper and speed-up, is cold molasses in comparison. Fifteen minutes of slam-bang play is about all in the average college game, careful timing reveals. And that is sixty minutes of play.

Cage scores have skyrocketed. Not long ago at New Orleans, Loyola and Centenary played a game which the latter won, 78 to 72,

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"He maintains a terrific speed till the end—then he tires a bit"

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after a five-minute overtime. Imagine 150 points in forty-five minutes.

Think that's something? In two widely separated towns on the same night in a recent Illinois state prep tournament, there were scores of 106 to 100 and 102 to 100. And 32-minute high school games, too. Perpetual motion? Whew!

"Call it a marathon or a test of endurance, but don't call it basketball," wrote Vance E. Geiger, coach at Hopkins, Missouri, high school, recently in *Scholastic Coach*, a magazine circulated among prep coaches. "Every change over the past few years has been intended to support the fan who thought the game was too slow. They forgot that the game is supposed to be a form of play and exercise in which thousands of boys participate each year."

Various surveys have been taken in recent years to discover what harmful effects, if any, are being shown by the players. The findings show wide variance.

One of the most comprehensive was made at Rockford, Illinois, two years ago. Players were tested over half a dozen games by a group of physicians for pulse, blood pressure and other reactions. Check-ups were made before, immediately after and twenty minutes after each game.

Pulse reading before a game

ranged from 52 to 84. After its finish they were from 80 to 126. Twenty minutes later they ranged from 72 to 114—all for the same group of boys. The findings of the committee, briefly, were:

"1. The hearts of all the players were functioning well after each game and no excessive fatigue was noted.

"2. In no case was there a tendency to a heart rate in excess of the physiological norm after any of the games.

"3. No untoward symptoms were complained of by any of the players.

"4. The medical, insurance and physical education literature offers no *conclusive* evidence of cardiac or blood vascular damage to the individual that can be attributed to his athletic activity, providing his heart was normal before entering the training period."

Good enough. And we do not question the sincerity of the committee. But the medics thoughtfully added this recommendation:

"That the committee on rules increase the rest period of one minute between quarters to two or three minutes and would especially urge that captains, officials and coaches take full advantage of the time out privilege as now granted in the rules. This, we believe, would be an added safeguard

against the possibility of over-fatigue."

Now you see it, now you don't!

Along about the same time two estimable gentlemen in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Fred V. Hein and Dr. A. J. Randall—were conducting similar experiments. They drew this conclusion, in contrast to the Rockford findings:

"There is an appreciable difference in physiological effect in the old and new games... Many may feel that the difference is not sufficiently great to seriously affect a player. However, when one considers that basketball has always been a strenuous activity, that a boy plays not one game, but many during the season, and may participate over a period of years, things appear in a different light."

Down at De Pauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, Paul J. Fay and Lloyd L. Messerschmidt rigged up an apparatus which compared old and new basketball from a ground-covering standpoint. Their gadget revealed that collegians now run from 3.87 to 3.97 miles in a game, as compared to 2.25 to 2.50 under the previous rules, while the mileage of prep basketballers also has been increased from fifty to sixty per cent.

And finally comes a clincher from Dr. Forrest C. "Phog" Allen, coach of the 1936 Olympic basket-

ball team, director of physical education and basketball coach at the University of Kansas. Phog is regarded as about the final authority on basketball in all its ramifications. Says he:

"There is grave danger to the health of junior high and younger high school boys—especially to their growth—by continued strain of the shuttle, hockey type of basketball.

"As chairman of the National Basketball Research Committee, we are constantly doing research work on the effect of the game. And it has shown the new game is injurious to growing youth!"

Dr. Allen offers a plan to restore the center jump, but in a modified fashion. The principal objection was that it put too much emphasis on height (although bean-pole construction is still considered a valuable asset).

"Why not," asks Dr. Allen, "rotate the center jump among the players on each team? Each club would use a 'jumping order' and after a successful field goal or free throw, the players would rotate the center jump exactly as a baseball team follows its batting order. This would eliminate most of the inequalities of the past."

What do other coaches think about the modern game? Viewpoints, perhaps, may be shaded

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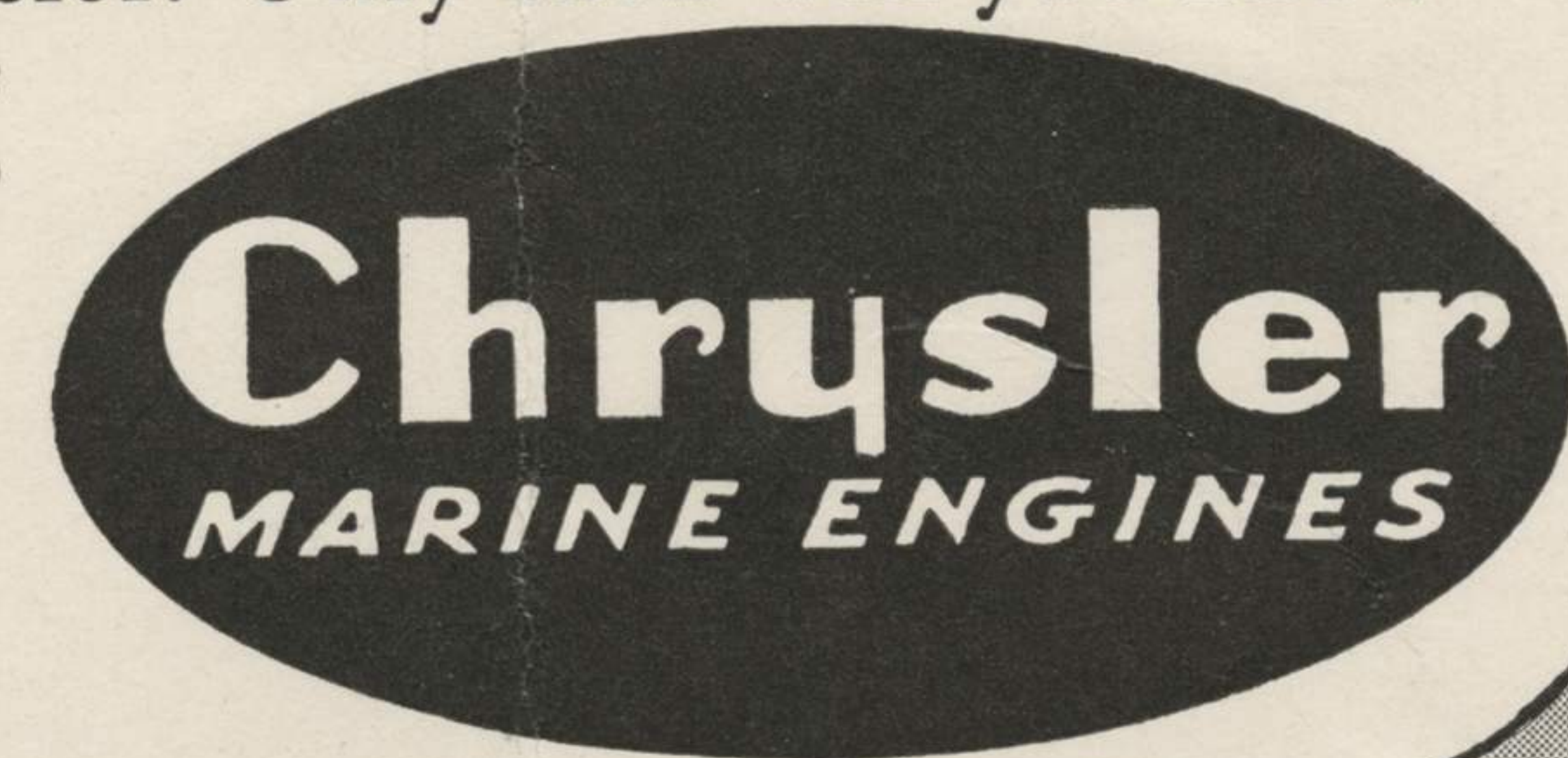
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slightly by the fact that it's bread and butter to them, but we feel that they're giving their sincerely honest opinions.

"No normal boy is going to be hurt playing basketball any more than in any other strenuous sport," declares Harold E. Olsen of Ohio State University. "To my knowledge there is no medical evidence to support the assertion that basketball is too fast and is hurting the boys. The game should not be played by anyone with a heart defect."

Frank Keaney of Rhode Island State, whose teams average better than sixty points a game, has similar ideas. "This so-called 'race-horse' type of basketball is not detrimental to the health of the player," he says. "By actual tests, players at the end of the season are in better shape than boys who do not participate. If a player gets himself into good shape, his heart will not be injured."

"After thirty years of coaching I have come to the conclusion that basketball as played today is excellent. The crowd loves the new game. Give them what they want and they'll come back to see you again. Put the boy into shape and he'll enjoy the fast tempo."

Coach Keaney also declares that among other things, a coach should see that his boys get plenty of rest, good food and lots of sleep. "We found that a boy who dances the night before a game is not at his best the last ten minutes of a game," he observes.

Sam Barry at the University of Southern California is another who insists there is no harm in the present style.

"With the elimination of the center jump there was a tendency to race-horse the game," says the Trojan coach. "But after a year's experience, teams have adjusted their pace. The new type of game is more pleasing to the spectator and has increased scoring. It has many other favorable advantages."

Wesley Fesler, Harvard's basketball coach, doesn't think the game is detrimental if proper conditioning work has been done. "Our kids don't feel that they are being overworked—and we don't have very many," he opines.

This also is the viewpoint held by Ward Lambert of Purdue—one of the best known coaches in the business. "In twenty-five years of coaching I know of no ill-effects from basketball," he adds. "We use a fast break and invariably our players have gained weight by the end of the season. They are given thorough physical examinations before the season and also 'cold shots.'"

But hold—here comes the rebuttal, the dissenting voices among the coaches who uphold Phog Allen's views!

One is from Clair Bee of Long Island University, whose quintets have made basketball history in the past few years. Two seasons ago his Blackbirds set an all-time college record of 44 straight wins.

"I can't say whether basketball as played today is detrimental to

health," he asserts, "but I do know it is extremely strenuous—mentally and physically. There should be a break in the game after a basket is scored so players, coaches and spectators can relax."

And another—from Dr. H. C. Carlson of the U. of Pittsburgh.

"Elimination of the center jump makes for a game which is exhausting to spectator and player alike," he says. "The average fan likes a few seconds to reflect and possibly comment to his companion on a successful shot. Under the new rules we certainly have action, but possibly we have too much action—for both spectators and players."

This continuous, unrelieved tension perhaps was responsible for many startling incidents last winter, such as the one at Fulton, Missouri, where teams from Tarkio and Westminster Colleges were battling in a heated game. As the bitterly-fought first half came to a close, the timer raised his gun. The shot rang out. And down from the rafters floated a dead guinea hen. That crowd, at least, relaxed.

It will be noted that coaches and others who favor the modern game assert it is not harmful to a boy in good physical condition.

And there's the rub. What is good physical condition? Even doctors are puzzled at times. C. Paul White, President of the Kewanee, Illinois, Board of Health, wrote a letter recently to the *Illinois Medical Journal*, asking physicians of the state to arise in protest against the dangers of basketball. In it, he declared:

"The game has been speeded up to such an extent that in my opinion it is actually dangerous... Recently, a boy in a nearby town collapsed at the close of a game and died an hour later... No matter how well checked these boys are, there are bound to be some whose hearts cannot and will not stand the strain."

And then there's the scholarly dissertation written by Dr. J. A. Walce of Columbus, Ohio, and published in the *Journal Lancet* of Minneapolis.

"Inadequate recognition is given the condition known as potential heart disease in cases involving participation in athletics," he states. "The question of what constitutes... a degree dangerous in athletic competition is not settled."

In other words, heart trouble is something that doesn't make itself known the next afternoon. A check-up over a period of weeks on pulse, blood pressure, etc., may show no immediate ill effects—but one doesn't need a volume of medical books to realize that a little strain here and a little strain there sooner or later becomes a big doctor bill.

Coaches and surveys to the contrary notwithstanding, these are the facts. Heart ailments still constitute a vast medical mystery—and race-horse basketball is sowing a crop of ailing tickers that many of today's young players will reap regretfully in later life.

But the turnstiles click merrily on! #



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