



THE LEAD

The Cleveland cabdriver's son who sowed the seeds of a hoops revolution

Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff 1h ago

LeBron James has helped shape the NBA, but it's another Cleveland basketballer who sowed the seeds for a hoops revolution that's produced one of the league's largest cadres of international players: the Frenchies.

Most people don't associate France with basketball, but since 1997, when Tariq

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Abdul-Wahad became the first Frenchman to play a regular-season game (with the Sacramento Kings), the country has consistently supplied young men to the NBA. While the Frenchies are influenced by numerous transatlantic cultural reference points, players and coaches, as well as their own homegrown hoops culture, their presence owes much to an American whose love of the game introduced a very different style of play to 1950s French courts.

“I didn’t go to France to play basketball,” Martin Feinberg maintained decades later in a series of interviews, published in part here for the first time. But basketball found him.

The man who left a subtle but indelible mark on French hoops, one that’s contributing to today’s globalizing NBA, grew up along the shores of Lake Erie. Feinberg was born in New York on April 16, 1926, but moved with his family to Depression-era Cleveland, where as a young boy he attended Patrick Henry Grammar School. Basketball was one of the primary sports of his neighborhood, a predominantly Jewish community, and Feinberg learned the game while his parents were at work—his father, Albert, drove a taxicab, and his mother, Sadie, was a milliner.

Feinberg honed his hoops prowess during high school, where he played for the varsity team, then took his talents beyond the Buckeye State. He enrolled in the Navy and attended officers school to train as a pilot at the University of Michigan, where he played the [1945-46 season](#) with the Wolverines.

Back then, basketball occupied a very different place in Ann Arbor.

“Nobody was interested in it,” he said. “They were interested in football and the war, so there wasn’t much emphasis on basketball.”

The Second World War ended before Feinberg completed his program, but basketball remained a constant in his routine. He moved to Los Angeles, where he played semiprofessionally for the 20th Century Fox basketball team, and traveled with them across much of the United States. During the Korean War, Feinberg was recalled to military service and, upon discharge, returned to Cleveland, where he entered into business with a childhood friend. But Feinberg couldn’t stay put in one place very long.

“I was very innocent and didn’t know much about politics or the world,” he recalled. “So, I wanted to get to Europe.”

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After divesting his business holdings, Feinberg went to Paris, where in the fall of 1954 he enrolled in university via the GI Bill. He settled into life in the famed student-centric Latin Quarter, where he met Jacqueline and Madeline “Madgie” Cator, twin sisters who played basketball for the French national team. The women convinced their new American friend to try out for the Paris Université Club’s (PUC) basketball team, an elite squad on which many members of the national team played, including longtime captain Roger Antoine, born in Bamako, Mali, who became Feinberg’s on-the-road roommate.

“I did have a big desire to enjoy life,” Feinberg recalled, thinking the sisters’ request unexpected and enticing. “And, I had played a lot of basketball.” As a recent transplant, he wasn’t familiar with the team or its fabled history. “But I lived in the Latin Quarter, and they asked me to come out, and I said, ‘sure!’”

The 29-year-old American paid a visit to famed PUC coach Émile Frézot. “(He) was thrilled to have a 6-foot-3 American,” Feinberg recalled. Feinberg wasn’t just older than most of the players on the team; he also had more on-court experience. Frézot was delighted and invited Feinberg to play with PUC.

But that first week was a wakeup call.

“We went by car,” Feinberg remembered of his first away game, though he was more astonished by what he saw during the lunch stop: teammates drinking wine before they were going to play.

“I was just amazed,” he exclaimed. “These guys were guzzling wine!” Things were very different back in the States. “Where I came from, we couldn’t smoke or drink alcohol when I played.”

That wasn’t the only difference between American and French hoops at the time. “The stadiums were horrible,” Feinberg recalled. Their home court, Stade Charlety in southern Paris, was built before 1940 and not the most up-to-date

forum, although it wasn't the worst.

“We went to places like Alsace,” Feinberg said. Sunday afternoon away games were played on courts converted from the morning's open markets. “The floor was slippery. My major problem was that when you play basketball, you need good floors.” It was a far cry from conditions back home. “There's no comparison,” Feinberg said. “Wherever we went (in the United States), the basketball coaches were wonderful. They kept up the floors — shellac — and you could play basketball.”

The conditions, the lack of money involved — PUC was technically an amateur club, composed mainly of students enrolled in the city's universities — reflected the sport's place within French culture and society. To be sure, there was a long, proud hoops history. The first game played on European soil was in Paris on the rue de Trévisse ([the world's oldest court](#)), French-style play [guided the game's Europeanization in the 1930s](#), and the national men's team, then known as *Les Tricolores* (today *Les Bleus*), won silver at the 1948 London Games, a David vs. Goliath matchup against Team USA. French kids learned how to play during physical education classes at school, but few were captivated enough to play during leisure time.

“They just didn't consider (basketball) as an important sport like football (soccer),” Feinberg said.

That's why Feinberg wanted his teammates to see his homeland and how different basketball was in the United States. So, he organized for PUC to play a series of NCAA and AAU games across the Midwest. Visas in hand, the team set off via ocean liner *The America* in December 1955 to experience “America” and its hoops culture.

The team, weakened by seasickness during a rough Atlantic crossing, disembarked in New York harbor the morning of Dec. 28, 1955. With the exception of Feinberg, it was everyone's first time in the United States and they took in the sights before boarding a flight to Chicago to begin their basketball tutelage.

PUC's record on the road was mixed. They lost their first game against Wheaton College (68-43), won against Lake Forrest College (69-64) and North Central of

Iowa (67-58), and lost to Marquette University (74-43), DePaul University (71-45) and the University of Baltimore (76-68). *Sports Illustrated* noted that the Frenchmen “played a game that looked absurdly old-fashioned,” and “concentrated on ball control, an occasional well-executed fast break, and set plays off the double-pivot offense,” and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* opined, “what the Parisians lacked in cage know-how and finesse they tried to make up with *esprit de corps*.”

Yet, for Feinberg, the on-court results didn't matter. “My goal wasn't to win,” he said. “I loved the United States and wanted them to learn about basketball and Americans.” For similar reasons, after Feinberg began coaching PUC in the early 1960s, he organized a second U.S. tour for the team in 1962, this time with a fellow American, Henry Fields, in tow.



Though he would never admit as much, Feinberg had an indelible impact on basketball's development in France.

For former teammate Michel Rat, Feinberg helped set off a revolution in the French game. “The American players taught us a lot,” Rat noted and emphasized Feinberg's role jump-starting the transatlantic diffusion of basketball culture and skills. “He had a great sense of anticipation,” Rat said. “He taught us techniques, he taught us tactics.”

And these U.S. tours played an important part in revitalizing French on-court know-how. “We went to the United States and obtained technical documents, for example on the shuffle, the system of movement,” Rat said. “We didn't know this in France.”

The alumni of PUC's U.S. adventures graduated to reshape French hoops. Rat played with the national team before leaving his mark as a coach, president and director of the Federal Basketball Center (CFBB) at the National Sports Institute (INSEP) — which counts NBA players Tony Parker, Boris Diaw, Ronny Turiaf and Evan Fournier among its alumni. Fields helped introduce Bill Russell-style defense to French courts as a player and then as a coach, while Roger Antoine, Feinberg's roommate, demonstrated that on-court leadership came in

many forms and capped a long career with multiple French and European basketball [awards](#).

This little-known story, begun by a Cleveland cabdriver's son, sowed the seeds of a hoops revolution that is today helping remold the NBA.

“I’ve seen a lot more change for the better,” Feinberg remarked of the French game today. “I see a lot more technical training, a lot more defense, attack and shooting. So much more concentration on the basics.”

These are the very attributes that French players — and European basketballers, more broadly — are known to bring to NBA teams.

Photo: Martin Feinberg during his years with Paris Université Club (Musée du Basket)

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Editor’s note: Greater details about PUC’s U.S. trips can be found in the author’s forthcoming book, “Barnstorming Frenchmen: The impact of Paris Université Club’s U.S. tours and the role of the individual in sport diplomacy” in *Sport and Diplomacy: Games Within Games* (Manchester University Press) <http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526131058/>

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