

Nate Branch:

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'Trotters over Knicks'

By DICK O'CONNOR

If the New York Knickerbockers of the NBA played the Harlem Globetrotters, Nate Branch would put his money on the Trotters.

Nate knows. He played for the Trotters for two and a half years and has been to two pre-season training camps with the San Francisco Warriors.

"If the Trotters took time to get in shape for a game with the Knicks, I think they would win," Nate said. "They can do things with a basketball that the Knicks couldn't. I don't think New York has anyone who can shoot as well as Curley Neal."

Neal is the Trotter who astonishes crowds with hook shots from half court and set shots from almost anywhere.

"Curley is one of the two best shooters I have ever seen," Nate said. Who is the other?

"Milky Johnson," he said. Milky was Nate's teammate on the Ravenswood High school team that won the South Peninsula Athletic League title in 1963 and went on to defeat St. Elizabeth's in the finals of the Peninsula

Basketball Tournament at Stanford.

Nate said:

"Milky could make a shot from anywhere. I saw him make 14 or 15 long jump shots in a row in practice."

After starring at Ravenswood, Branch went to the University of Nebraska and was a starter on the varsity for three years.

He was one of the leading rebounders in the Big Eight and made all-conference as a senior.

He was drafted by the San Diego Rockets of the NBA and the Oakland Oaks of the ABA.

He was the last player cut by the Oaks and never bothered to try out with San Diego.

"I didn't even know they drafted me. About a year later they asked me if I was still interested in playing."

Nate joined the Globetrotters and was with them until last December.

"From the time I started playing basketball, I always wanted to play for the Trotters," he said.

Branch played in every state except Washington and Oregon and also toured Eu-

rope. He played in England, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Greece and France.

"We didn't play in every country. After a few tours, you know where the money is and that's where we play."

Greece provided the biggest crowds. The Trotters played before a crowd of 45,000 fans in an outdoor stadium. They also drew big crowds in Italy.

"The Italians were the most enthusiastic," he said.

Nate also provided the half-time entertainment on the European tour.

He plays the piano, organ, guitar, drums and a little bit of saxophone.

"And I sang too," he added proudly. The Europeans thought he was the greatest thing since Otis Redding.

Travel with the Trotters is tough. It's seven nights a week, sometimes two games on Sunday, for nine months of the year. But the pay is good.

Branch said the best paid Trotter — Meadowlark Lemon — makes about \$80,000 a year.

"Rookies" with the Trotters make about \$1,000 a month. That's comparable to the pay of a first-year man in the NBA

and more than ABA rookies make.

The Trotter tricks that amuse fans around the world have all survived the test of time.

"We do some that don't work out so we add other ones. Sometimes they aren't planned. Meadowlark might be running down the court and, all of a sudden, he'll go into the stands and get an ice cream cone and eat it while he plays.

"The other players know when the special tricks are coming. The water trick, the baseball game and all the other stuff."

Branch never played in a losing game for the Trotters, but that doesn't mean the other team doesn't try to win.

"They let us do some of the tricks but we always give them points in return. The third quarter is when we really play basketball.

"They (the Washington Generals are the current "pat-sies") get a bonus if they beat us. And the bonus comes out of our money," Nate explained.

Branch isn't ready to give up basketball. He'll keep in

shape until this fall and then make one more try at the NBA.

"There are four new teams coming into the league next season. I think I'm good enough to play on one of them," he said.

Branch doesn't agree with black militants who claim the Trotters are demeaning their race by acting like clowns.

"We are doing what we want and it's entertaining. That's the biggest satisfaction. It's a skill and takes hard work. Some people entertain by singing and we do it by playing basketball," he said.

Nate never had any problems with racial prejudice. "Sometimes a fan would call us a name but usually he was drunk. The real fans don't do that.

"In fact, the crowds were more enthusiastic in the South than they were in the North."

During the off-season Branch is working as a public relations man for Kirker-Chapman, an engineering firm. He lives in East Palo Alto with his wife Marilyn, also a Ravenswood High School graduate, and a son, Darion, 1½.



(Times photo by Gene Tupper)

Globe trotting days are over

Nate Branch, former Ravenswood High School basketball star, recalls some of the places he visited while playing for the Harlem Globetrotters.