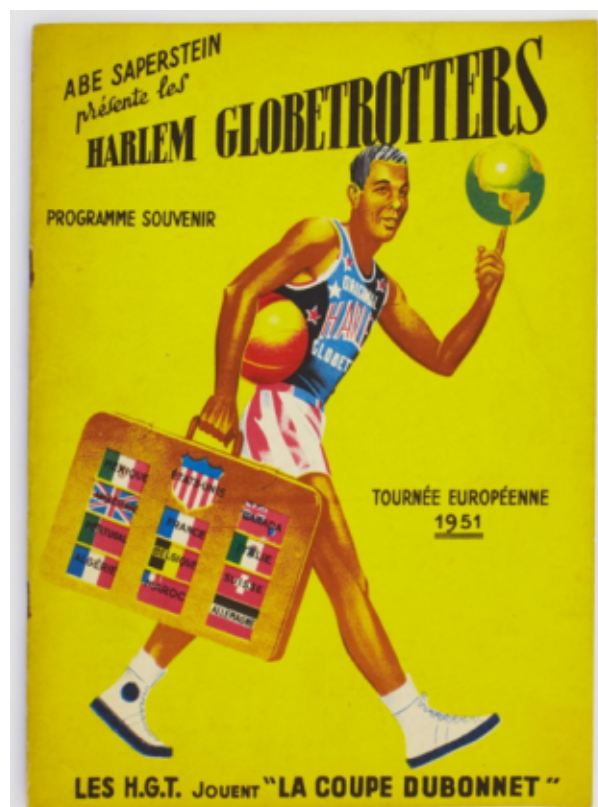


# Harlem Globetrotter tours in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century

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## ABSTRACT

The Harlem Globetrotters, an all-black professional basketball team considered to be the world's best in the mid-twentieth century, made a months-long tour each year between 1950 and 1962 that systematically brought it to Europe. The owner of the franchise, Abe Saperstein, organized these tours to generate profits while exploiting the popularity of its players and their breathtaking technical skill. Their success prompted the Secretary of State to use them as propaganda for the American Way of Life, in the context of a cultural Cold War with the USSR. While diplomats believed that the team's excellence was proof of the emancipation of blacks in spite segregation, some in Europe saw it instead as confirmation of the racist nature of American society.



Poster for the Harlem Globetrotter European basketball tour in 1951. Source:

## Basketball museum.

In 1950, Abe Saperstein (1902-1966), the English owner of the US club the Harlem Globetrotters, set out to conquer the European market. Basketball was the only major sport produced by American society (along with basketball and American football) that successfully crossed the Atlantic. Basketball spread in Europe beginning in the late nineteenth century through a transnational religious organization, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), one of whose physical education teachers, James Naismith (1861-1939), invented the game in Springfield (Massachusetts) in 1891. The transplant took particularly well in the Baltic countries, as well as in the continent's south (France and Italy in particular) thanks to Catholic parish networks.

The Harlem Globetrotters basketball team was considered the world's best. Founded in Chicago in 1927, it had the distinctive feature of consisting exclusively of black players, who were de facto excluded from professional leagues. During the interwar period, African-Americans from the Great Lakes states and the Northeastern United States appropriated the sport, which was essentially urban at the time. The fame of black players on playgrounds surpassed that of whites on the parquet floors of gymnasiums, especially in New York where the summer festival organized by the black neighborhood of Harlem was extremely popular. This is why Abe Saperstein chose this name for his team, to clearly indicate that it was a group consisting of blacks, with "globetrotters" signaling that they would play throughout the United States, the cradle of basketball. During their travels, the "Harlems" continually demonstrated their superiority over the white teams they played. For example in 1948 and 1949, they twice beat the Minneapolis Lakers, champions of the National Basketball Association (NBA).

Saperstein's project was to take advantage of his team's popularity in places where basketball sparked curiosity, but still remained a secondary sport, notably in the Western United States and Europe. The tours he organized from 1950 to 1962 always began on the other side of the Mississippi, and followed the same pattern. The Harlem Globetrotters squared off against a selection of the best white university players, the College All-Stars, in hardly-fought matches. When victory was assured in the final minutes, the Harlems amused the public with all kinds of clowning around that displayed their skill handling the ball. Reece "Goose" Tatum (1921-1967), who had joined the Harlem Globetrotters in 1942 after developing his talents in the "Negro League" for baseball, excelled in this role. When they arrived in Europe, the two teams recruited by Saperstein—the whites were renamed the American All-Stars—played local groups at each of the stops, before playing against each other.

In May 1950, the European journey began in Portugal and continued in six other countries (France, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, FRG, and Great Britain); the 73 matches played in a little over two months drew tens of thousands of spectators. In addition to sports matches, players held practices and clinics, thereby contributing to the acclimatization of American methods for technical and tactical training. The tour was so successful that it drew the attention of the State Department, which decided to make the Harlem Globetrotters one of its key actors in the cultural Cold War underway at the time. Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1893-1971) insisted that the tours receive logistical support from the country's diplomatic network, but no government financing, for the objective was to show that a private company was better at promoting sports excellence than a state-run sport system, as was the case in the USSR. In 1952, Acheson pushed to enlarge the tours by adding South America, Asia, and Australia to the program. That same year, US consulates completed the planetary promotion of *The Harlem Globetrotters* movie produced in 1951 by Columbia Pictures. However, the State Department occasionally deemed it necessary to directly intervene in the tour. On August 22, 1951, it organized a match in West Berlin between the Harlem Globetrotters and a team from Boston, in an effort to compete with the Third World Festival of Youth and Students that had brought thousands of communist youths together in East Berlin at the time. The game was played in front of 75,000 people, the largest attendance ever recorded for a basketball match. It was marked by

the arrival on the field—at halftime via a US army helicopter—of Jesse Owens (1913-1980), who won four gold medals at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. For the US High Commissioner for Germany, John McCloy (1895-1989), the show was “great publicity for American democracy,” since it proved that the black minority could advance within the social hierarchy despite segregation.

Nevertheless, the existence of such a club could conversely be interpreted as evidence that racism was institutionalized in the United States, as NBA franchises started to recruit black players very gradually starting with the 1950 season. The USSR made no mistake about it, and in 1959, after a series of nine matches played in Moscow as part of détente, Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971) collectively decorated the team with the medal of the order of Lenin. Similarly, in 1955 the French national coach Robert Busnel (1914-1991) spoke with enthusiasm about the game as it was played by the Harlem Globetrotters, “the great American school,” especially with regard to the point guard: “When Tatum stretches out his arms (the arms of a monkey that after a thousand generations of mimicry, after millennia lived in the forest, have resulted in members that are longer and more flexible than creepers), [...] are there Incas playing in their kingdom, or African witches performing magical rites, with a leather ball representing the sun?” The reference to Africa and the rest of the American continent, and not solely to the United States, can be surprising on the part of a passionate admirer of US practice methods, as well as a resolute supporter for introducing a dose of professionalism in French championships. In reality, the promotion of black players—African Americans in the literal sense of the term—was the basis for the counter-Americanization needed to legitimize the game within the French national space. It was on this condition that the transplant of basketball took root in France, and that French society could appropriate a practice that did not, for all that, become a sign of Atlanticism.

In the early 1960s, Harlem Globetrotter tours met with less success, and were interrupted entirely in 1962. The disaffection of both the European and American public can first and foremost be explained by the fact that the team was no longer able to recruit the best black players, who were now directly hired by North American franchises when their studies came to an end. The career of Wilt Chamberlain (1936-1999), the last star to wear a Harlem Globetrotter jersey, is telling in this regard. He was the hero of the tour in Moscow in 1959, but the following year opted to join the Philadelphia Warriors, who offered a much more lucrative contract. The NBA established itself in the US market as the championship of reference, while in Europe the level of play in competitions, which were more structured, continued to improve. Beginning in 1967, the European public could even begin appreciating the qualities of US players, as clubs could now recruit up to two players per team. There were sixteen of them in France in 1968, and nearly 120 twenty years later. In 1990, in the wake of the opening of an NBA affiliate in Europe, the Harlem Globetrotters revived their exhibitions in the Old World, this time solely for entertainment. They have since lost the status they had during the 1950s as masters of the game.

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