

Famous New Yorker Clarence Jenkins

“Fats” Jenkins was a two-sport star during America’s first golden age of sports. Racial prejudice limited his fame, but, in the early days of professional basketball, fans of all races recognized Jenkins as one of the best in the game.

Clarence Reginald Jenkins was born in Manhattan on January 16, 1898. While attending Commerce High School, he starred for the school team and the St. Christopher youth club team. By the time Jenkins joined the team St. Christopher was already recognized as “Colored Basketball World’s Champions.” When Jenkins graduated from the lightweight to the heavyweight team, St. Christopher won regional and racial championships from 1917 to 1919. Relatively short at 5’7” but solidly built, Jenkins was known as “Little Fat,” “Fat” or “Fats.” His speed on the court belied the nickname.

Like many athletic institutions of the time, St. Christopher considered amateur athletes superior to professionals. Players who took money were thought more likely to take bribes from gamblers. Because Jenkins had been paid to play for other teams, St. Christopher expelled him. He became a full-time professional, playing for the Loendi Big 5 in Pittsburgh and the Commonwealth Big 5 in New York.

In 1923 Jenkins joined a new team based at the Renaissance Casino ballroom in Harlem. The “Rens” didn’t belong to a league. They spent most of their time on the road playing the best independent and league teams in the country. While racially mixed teams were rare, all-black teams like the Rens and all-white teams often played each other. In the absence of a dominant professional league, teams like the Rens and the Harlem Globetrotters were considered equal to the best white teams. Racial equality rarely extended beyond the basketball court; however, the Rens often slept in their tour bus when hotels refused to serve them.

Jenkins eventually became the Rens’ captain and coach. During the 1930s, when his Rens were widely regarded as the best team in the country, reporters dubbed Jenkins the “Babe Ruth of colored basketball.” Despite the Great Depression, Jenkins earned up to \$10,000 a season – equivalent to a six-figure salary today. The Rens’ best season was 1932-33, when they won 88 games in a row. They claimed world championships several times before entering the first World Professional Basketball Tournament in 1939. Independent teams such as the Rens competed with representatives of the National Basketball League. After beating the Globetrotters in the semifinal, Jenkins coached the Rens to victory over the NBL’s Oshkosh All-Stars. Jenkins announced his retirement later that year but played part-time for a Chicago team in 1940.

Throughout his basketball years, Jenkins also played professional baseball. In the Negro Leagues, Jenkins was a two-time All-Star during a 21-year career as an outfielder, manager and base-stealing specialist. In a more segregated sport than basketball, he never got a chance to play all-white Major League teams in a national tournament.

After retiring, Jenkins became a successful businessman while remaining active in sports as a boxing referee. In 1963 the Basketball Hall of Fame inducted the New York Rens as a team. Long after his death on December 6, 1968, “Fats” Jenkins’s fans continue to demand his induction as an individual player. They consider it his due as an American sports pioneer.



Clarence “Fats” Jenkins left, New York Black Yankees team mate, Bill Yancey right. Photo courtesy of National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown



Harlem was originally settled by the Dutch and named after city of Haarlem in the Netherlands. It has become a world renowned center of African-American culture.

For more about baseball’s Negro Leagues go to www.nlbm.com or for info about the New York Renaissance go to the Basketball Hall of Fame’s website at <http://www.hoopshall.com/hall-of-famers/tag/new-york-rennaissance>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.