

Courteey of John "Doc" Herring The Rochester Polish Filarets were the best amateur women's basketball club in the country, from their inception in the 1920s until they folded in 1957. Stella Walsh and Olga Hanchar (third and fourth from the left, respectively) were the club's leading scorers. Hanchar, currently a parishioner at St. Salome's Church in Rochester, played with the Filarets from 1937 to 1942.

Women's basketball squad was nearly unbeatable

By Mike Latona Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Olga Hanchar came to a definite conclusion after watching the U.S. women's basketball team's recent bronze-medal performance at the Olympic Games.

Senior Lifestyles

Had the 1992 Olympic unit squared off in pre-Olympic trials against Hanchar and her Rochester Polish Filaret teammates of 50 years ago, chances are that the Filarets would have proven themselves the better squad to represent our country in Barcelona, Spain.

"I think that we'd give (the Olympic team) a good battle," said Hanchar, 74. John "Doc" Herring was even more certain of the potential outcome.

"The Filarets would blow that team out, that's for sure," remarked Herring, a historian of Rochester sports who coached local men's basketball squads during the Filarets' heyday.

Rarely in any level of athletics has a team been as consistently dominant as were the Filarets. From their inception in the 1920s until they folded in 1957, there was no better amateur women's basketball club in the country. The Filarets compiled a staggering record of 554 wins and just 12 losses.

During one stretch, the Filarets captured 211 consecutive games — mostly by margins similar to those posted by the 1992 U.S. Olympic men's "Dream Team." This astounding streak led to features in Life magazine and Ripley's Believe It or Not.

According to Herring, the team began modestly as a six-member group from St. Stanislaus Church, 1124 Hudson Ave. In 1933 Father Peter Jankowski, a parish priest, asked Roy Van Graflan, a major-league baseball umpire who resided in Rochester during the winter, if he could help out with coaching chores.

Van Graflan agreed, and his addition to the team became the turning point in the Filarets' success story.

Van Graflan embarked on a massive recruiting and promotional effort, luring top-notch female players from the

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Buffalo and Cleveland areas as well as Rochester.

Soon the Filarets were playing in front of sellout crowds at the St. Stanislaus hall as well as the Polish Falcon Club hall a few blocks away on Weyl Street. Whether opposing teams were local or from such distant venues as Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, nobody could touch the Filarets.

According to Hanchar, these evenings would consist of doubleheaders featuring a Filarets game and a men's contest, followed by dancing afterward.

"We had people waiting in line all the way down Hudson Avenue to Norton Street," recalled Hanchar, who played for the Filarets from 1937-42.

Although only 5 feet, 7 inches tall, Hanchar played at the forward position and was one of the club's leading scorers. Another standout was Stella Walsh, whom Van Graflan recruited from Cleveland. Walsh had been a gold medalist in the 100-meter dash at the 1932 Olympics.

The team traveled extensively on the weekends, visiting such cities as Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Van Graflan often drove Hanchar (who lived near Buffalo) and other team members to games.

"More recognition should be given to Roy and all the things he's done for Rochester," Hanchar commented. "He had to pay for all of our expenses."

Although they were never paid a penny, Hanchar said the Filarets never minded.

'We played for the glory of basketball," said Hanchar, who now resides in Irondequoit and is a parishioner at St. Salome's Church, 4282 Culver Road. "I'm still glad that I played then. The only way I wish I'd played now is that I could have gotten a college scholarship.'

Apparently, memories of the Filarets' exploits remain clear in the minds of many Rochesterians.

"It's surprising how many people still come up to me, because it's been so long," Hanchar remarked.







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