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Sunday March 31, 1996: JIM CROW LOSSES;The Secret Game

By Scott Ellsworth

Aubrey Stanley double-checked the laces on his sneakers and sneaked a look across the gym floor. The other team's center was a good three or four inches shorter than Big Dog, the center on Stanley's team, the Eagles. A good sign. Stanley and his teammates, dressed in their maroon jerseys, satin shorts, knee pads, striped wool socks and war-issue canvas high-tops, lined up for the tip-off.

It was 1944, a banner year for basketball at the North Carolina College for Negroes, in Durham. The Eagles had lost only one game all season and were making a name for John B. McLendon, their 28-year-old coach. His standouts -- Stanley, Henry (Big Dog) Thomas, Floyd (Cootie) Brown, James (Boogie-Woogie) Hardy -- ran a blistering, high-speed attack. "We could have beaten anyone," says McClendon, now a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame. But there was no way to prove it. Neither the National Invitational Tournament nor the N.C.A.A. tournament allowed black colleges to participate.

Across town at Duke University, the Blue Devils had won the Southern Conference championship. But they weren't necessarily the best team on campus. The Army and the Navy had established wartime training programs at Duke, and the intramural teams were stuffed with former college athletes.

The medical school team was perhaps the best. Dick Thistlethwaite, a former star at the University of Richmond, played center. David Hubbell, a forward, had started for the Duke varsity. Homer Sieber had played at Roanoke College, and Dick Symmonds at Central Methodist in Missouri. Jack Burgess, the team's newest member, had played guard at the University of Montana. As much as he liked Duke, Burgess despised the Jim Crow laws. Once, he was chased off a Durham city bus -- at knife point -- when he told the driver what he thought of the seating arrangements.

At a place like Duke, Burgess's opinions were unusual, though not unheard of. In early 1944, the Y.M.C.A. chapters at Duke and North Carolina College had begun to meet, at considerable risk from the police, who vigorously maintained the color line. "It was dangerous," recalls one former Duke student. "We had to lie on the floor of the car going to those meetings."

At one meeting, a North Carolina College student overheard an idle boast about the Duke medical school basketball team. A challenge was issued: let's see who has the best team in town. It was an absurd notion. Convening a secret Y meeting was bad enough, but holding an illegal, racially mixed basketball game was courting disaster. That same year, a black G.I. had been killed by a white bus driver for not moving quickly enough to the rear of a Durham bus.

Coach McLendon, however, endorsed the idea: denied a postseason championship game, he would create his own. The game, he decided, would be held in the North Carolina College gym, a legitimate contest with a referee and a game clock.

At Duke, the proposal fell on stunned ears. Jack Burgess wanted to play, but some of the others were hesitant. In the end, pride won out. "We thought we could whup 'em," David Hubbell says. "So we decided to find out."

Sunday, March 12, dawned blustery. McLendon had scheduled the game when most of Durham, including its police force, would be in church. He hadn't told the school administration about the game; when a reporter for The Carolina Times, Durham's black weekly, found out, he agreed not to write anything. No spectators would be allowed.

Just before 11 A.M., the Duke team piled into a couple of borrowed cars. "To keep from being followed, we took this winding route through town," Hubbell recalls. They pulled their jackets over their heads as they walked into the small brick gym.

Inside, stomachs had been churning all morning. "I had never played basketball against a white person before, and I was a little shaky," Stanley says. "You did not know what might happen if there was a hard foul, or if a fight broke out. I kept looking over at Big Dog and Boogie to see what to do. They were both from up North."

The game began with a sputter. Both teams botched routine plays, and shots caromed off the rims. One of the Duke players made a gorgeous pass -- right into the hands of a North Carolina College player. "On that particular morning, you didn't exactly need to play skins and shirts," Hubbell says with a laugh.

As the nervousness subsided, the Duke team found its game: give-and-gos and three-man weaves, two-handed set shots off screens. Burgess fed Thistlethwaite the ball inside and Hubbell shot from the wings. But the Eagles warmed up, too. Big Dog knocked down four-footers, while George Parks, a towering Kentuckian, swept the boards. Boogie and Cootie ran cutaways and reverse pivots, whipping down-court passes after crisp steals.

Stanley was only 16, the Eagles' youngest player, and had grown up under Jim Crow. "About midway through the first half," Stanley says, "I suddenly realized: 'Hey, we can beat these guys. They aren't supermen. They're just men like us.' " By the second half, the Eagles were scoring on nearly every possession. Running one fast break after the next, they were skirting a wide-open style of play that wouldn't flourish for another two decades.

The Duke players had never seen anything like it. By the end of the game, the scoreboard told the story: Eagles 88, Visitors 44.

Then came the day's second unlikely event. After a short break, the two teams mixed their squads and played another game, an even more egregious violation of Jim Crow. This time, it was skins and shirts. "Just God's children, horsing around with a basketball," says George Parks.

Word had spread, meanwhile, that something was afoot in the gym. McLendon had bolted the doors, but a few students climbed up to the window ledges. Pressing their faces to the glass, they saw this second game -- a segregationist's nightmare and a scene that college basketball in the South would not know for years to come. Afterward, the two teams adjourned to the men's residence hall for a bull session. A few hours later, the Duke students drove home.

The Durham police never found out what happened. Nor did the city's two daily newspapers, and the black reporter kept his word. No scorecard exists, and as far as official basketball recordkeeping is concerned, the game never took place.

"Oh, I wonder if I told you that we played basketball against a Negro college team," Jack Burgess wrote to his family in Montana a few days later. "Well, we did and we sure had fun and I especially had a good time, for most of the fellows playing with me were Southerners. . . . And when the evening was over, most of them had changed their views quite a lot."

Photo: AUBREY STANLEY, DAVID HUBBELL, GEORGE MCLENDON, JACK BURGESS ANDEDWARD BOYD. (ANN STATES/SABA, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)