

Mormon missionaries and the University of Melbourne Basketball Club

Fred E. Woods

Believe it or not, Mormon missionaries from America once made a significant, but now virtually unknown, contribution to sports at the University of Melbourne. At the dawn of 1957, the university's sports organisation requested a Latter-day Saint missionary to coach the Melbourne University Basketball Club (MUBC), which consisted of several teams. This might surprise us today, yet in light of the events that preceded it, the request made very good sense.

A team of Mormon elders had participated in the YMCA competition in Australia as early as 1938. This visiting group of American Mormon missionaries (pictured page 44) not only won the Melbourne YMCA championship but went undefeated throughout the season.¹ During the 1939 season, the Mormon elders representing the YMCA won championships in both the city of Melbourne and state of Victoria.²

More coverage appeared in a Melbourne newspaper, giving credit to these Mormon visitors for stimulating public interest in basketball and for improving Australian standards of play. The missionaries organised clinics and played with Australia's best in order to popularise the game. At a

banquet held in Victoria to promote basketball, world-famous cyclist Hubert Opperman praised the missionaries' 'outstanding displays of speed and stamina', which he attributed to their religious health code, adding that it 'provided an excellent example for both athlete and general citizen to follow as a basis for health and fitness'.³

This glowing endorsement of the Latter-day Saint lifestyle is evidence that the missionaries were having success on and off the court. Along with their basketball play, missionaries brought Mormonism out of obscurity and displayed Latter-day Saint Church standards. Their exemplary behaviour and hard work continued to bear fruit; the Melbourne YMCA's 1940 annual report recounted that the Mormon missionaries had won another championship.⁴

With the outbreak of World War II, the missionaries were called home to the United States, but they had an even greater influence after the end of this worldwide conflict.⁵ By the mid-1950s, the organisation of a highly skilled, hand-picked Latter-day Saint team, called the Mormon Yankees, ushered in a new era of accelerated interest in Australia in both the LDS Church and basketball.⁶ This team (pictured

page 46) consisted of tremendous talent, especially in their player-coach, Elder Loren C. Dunn, who was a gifted basketballer at Brigham Young University, the privately owned Mormon university in Provo, Utah. The timing to form an elite Mormon missionary team was just right: the Harlem Globe Trotters, having just toured Australia in early 1954, had spurred an interest in basketball, and Dunn put together a team that year which won the South Australian basketball title.⁷ The following year (1955), Mormon missionaries were invited to play for Australian state teams in the Australian basketball championship, with the understanding that there could be no more than three of these skilled American players on any of the Aussie teams. One soon-to-be Australian Olympic basketballer, Merv Moy, noted that during the state competitions the Mormon Yankees 'were so prominent, and so benevolent, in showing us the standard of play that would be required in '56 for the Olympics'.⁸

By this time, the Mormon Yankees' exceptional play was well known throughout Australia, and their skills reached even greater heights when many Melburnians watched the Mormon Yankee team

Latter-day Saints basketball team, 1938. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.



defeat several of their 1956 Olympic opponents during the exhibition games held in Melbourne that year, which included the Australian team.⁹ Thus, it is no wonder that the MUBC had noticed their talents and called the Melbourne Mormon mission office to request one of the

missionaries to coach the university team. The person who made the call was Norman Longmuir, who was at that time secretary of the MUBC and who was involved in the Victorian Amateur Basketball Association, where the Mormon Yankees were playing in A-grade,

being the top level of the Victorian basketball competition. Longmuir then arranged to meet with the LDS mission president, Thomas S. Bingham. This successful meeting also included Longmuir's friend and fellow basketball player, Rhys Lewis. The arrangement was that Longmuir

was to report to Bingham about the progress of the team.¹⁰

The first missionary to have the opportunity to coach the MUBC was Elder Harold Reeb, from February 1957 to February 1958. Reeb later recalled the following from mid-February 1957:

President Bingham called me in and asked me if I'd coach University of Melbourne basketball ... said they'd had a request from the university for somebody to come and do that. So that was when I started working with those kids, and it was a great experience. It was a lot of fun, and they treated me very well, and I'd take whoever my companion was ... and we'd go out and practice with them, and then we had games, at least one game during the week. So I got a double dose of basketball. I got to play with the Mormon Yankees, and I got to play with, or practice and play with, some kids from the university.¹¹

The University of Melbourne student newspaper, *Farrago*, also took notice of the recruitment of Reeb. In an eye-catching article titled 'U.S. boosts our basketball', the editor noted that:

the recruiting of Elder Harold Reeb, from the Mormon Yankee Team, as coach ... has given shop [the University]¹² a terrific boost for 1957 ... Reeb a Mormon missionary from Utah, is a member of the 'Yankee' team which defeated Australia, Chile and France ... in pre-Games trials.¹³

The article further noted that 'the Club hopes that this appointment will be the forerunner to regular appointments of American coaches'.¹⁴

David Fitzpatrick, one of Reeb's players, remembered practising in the impressive Beaurepaire Centre on the university's Parkville campus, which was completed just in time for the Olympic athletes to use for training. The centre was probably the top training facility in Australia at that time. He recalled that this facility 'included an indoor basketball court and 25 metre swimming pool ... We trained with Elder Reeb on Saturday afternoons and after training to exhaustion I can remember the luxury of falling into the swimming pool'.¹⁵

Excerpts from Reeb's journal shed further light on his work as a Mormon Yankee and his year-long coaching experience, an effort that paid off after much hard work:

12 February 1957: 'Went into the M.H. [Mission Home] & talked to Pres. Bingham for about 2 Hrs ... Well it looks as if I'm to coach the B-Ball team at the U of Melb. Beginning Sat.'

16 February 1957: 'The practice went fair this morning. They aren't very good players, have much to learn, but have the potential. They treat me fine.'

18 February 1957: 'Just got in from our 1st B-Ball game. We lost 37-26 but all concerned feel there are great possibilities in the team. They've sure got a lot of improving to do but it'll take time.'

23 February 1957: 'Coached the U of M & practiced with the [Mormon] Yankees this AM.'

27 February 1957: 'President Bingham said I should spend more time with the B-Ball team; good chance to spread the gospel ... Pres B. complimented me highly for the good work coaching.'

6 March 1957: 'The U of M won their [first] game Mon. nite & all are quite happy.'

Mormon Yankees basketball team, 1956.
Photograph courtesy Rodney Burt.





18 March 1957: 'U of M won a game tonite.'

20 March 1957: 'Norm Longmuir typed up a very good report on the B-Ball club for me & also said everyone was pleased & had learned more in the past few weeks than all their previous years of B-Ball. After today I sure feel ... we got much to learn.'

2 April 1957: 'The U played ball last nite at 10PM and won easily against a bunch of midgets. Everyone played good ball for a change.'

18 April 1957: 'The Uni played the Aust. Army & won 50-22.'

23 April 1957: 'The U of M. beat the New Zealand Army 33-16.'

1 May 1957: 'Played ball tonite—won 58-39 over Bus Houses. I slopped in over 20 [points]. We played better ball. Was chosen ... to play against a U.S. Naval team.'

2 May 1957: 'Well the Uni won their 1st league game 45-19. They really looked good & it seems that all concerned were happy & pleased, even me.'

22 June 1957: 'Practiced this AM with the Yankees & coached the Uni in the afternoon. They scrimmaged some of the elders & looked very good, as matter of fact beat them by 3 pts. They sure have a good spirit amongst them.'¹⁶

Don Pemberton, who played under Reeb's full year of coaching, recalled that 'We all called him Elder Reeb. No one was calling him by his first name ... that was a level of respect. He was the coach'. Pemberton recounted a memorable day after practice when Reeb spoke frankly to the team: 'Look, playing basketball is one thing, but how you live your life is another. I'm just saying to you guys, if you're smoking, if you're drinking, if you're wasting your bodies, you're wasting your lives'. Pemberton concluded, 'My sense of Harold Reeb ... he was a guy I looked up to tremendously. He was so clean cut, he was so good at his basketball moves, but he was just an exemplary human being, and ... I thought he was just a magnificent person'.¹⁷

Under Reeb's coaching, the University of Melbourne basketball team had a magnificent year in 1957. In June it tied with Sydney for first place in the Australia Universities Tournament in Perth. Reeb, a supervising elder in the Melbourne

region, was unable to accompany the team to the tournament; President Bingham felt that travelling the lengthy distance (3,400 kilometres) to Perth would be unwise for Reeb.¹⁸ Notwithstanding, at the end of the season the University of Melbourne held a banquet in which Reeb was recognised for his great coaching efforts. He wrote, 'The Uni had a nice dinner tonite; paid me a lot of swell compliments & gave me a rug, book, pennant and a group picture. It was really great of them. I'm sure thankful for the chance to work with them'.¹⁹ At the conclusion of an eventful year of coaching and before a mission transfer to Perth, Reeb wrote his last journal entry about the University of Melbourne team: 'Feb. 25, 1958 ... The Uni ball team practiced last nite & then had a little party afterwards for me. They're really swell guys'.²⁰

Reeb was replaced by Eldon J. Huntsman, another Mormon missionary who had been transferred on his mission from Perth to Melbourne, and who, upon arrival, was assigned to be supervising elder of the other missionaries in his area. According to Huntsman (pictured above), his mission president, Thomas S. Bingham, gave him another assignment: 'President Bingham called me in the office and said, "One of the other duties that you will assume is to

coach the University of Melbourne basketball team [club]" ... I was coaching there from February of '58 until the first part of July in '58'.²¹

Huntsman also mentioned that at this time there were three University of Melbourne basketball teams who were competing at different levels (an A, B, and beginning C freshman team), all of which he coached.²² Thanks to his prior experience of playing basketball at Brigham Young University, Huntsman brought plays he had learnt from his varsity coach, Stan Watts. He later reflected on coaching 'down under':

My experience in coaching the University of Melbourne was that of, 'Boy, you have a challenge to coach these guys, [to] teach them plays.' Because you had to start first by teaching them skills. A lot of the guys couldn't even dribble down the court without looking at the ball. They had to physically watch as they were bouncing the ball down the court. And so there were a lot of very elementary basketball skills that you had to teach along with plays and teamwork and how to rebound and how to do these other things. I remember we had some very athletic guys that could jump out of the gym physically, but they

were terrible ball handlers. You know, you'd throw the ball to them, and they were just all over the place. So ... from a coaching standpoint, you did a lot of coaching. Whereas some teams with a little more experience, you know, with more teaching plays and how to set up defense and so forth, but this was a lot of elementary basketball skills ... A lot of plays that we used were plays that I learned at BYU.²³

Sports historian June E. Senyard has written that, despite their lack of experience, 'The university men emerged as a strong team by the end of the 1950s', though she adds that 'at this time basketball was a novelty'.²⁴ In the same month that Elder Eldon Huntsman left his coaching assignment at the university, *Farrago* noted:

The MUBC has been fortunate in obtaining the co-operation of the Mormon Church. To date we have enjoyed the services of two coaches who are missionaries of this church. The Mormons, apart from their religious activities, have perhaps done more than any other single organization in promoting basketball throughout the world.²⁵

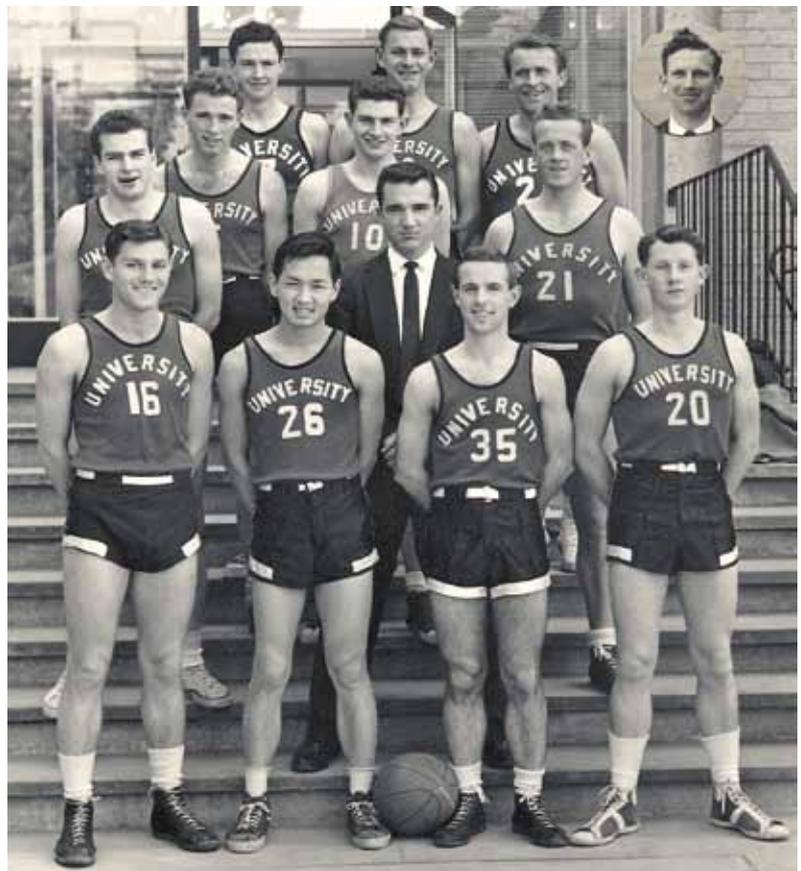
Although this statement may be a bit exaggerated, on a local level these two Mormon missionaries definitely had a beneficial effect on the Melbourne campus. Not only did they influence the quality of basic basketball skills, they also appear to have left their mark on the game of life. That is why this unknown chapter in the history of basketball at the University of Melbourne deserves mention.²⁶

Fred E. Woods is a professor of religious education at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He has lectured internationally in many venues and has been a visiting teaching and research professor at several universities, including the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. His recent publication, *Mormon Yankees: Giants on and off the court*, provides a broader view of the story of the Latter-day Saint basketball coaches at the University of Melbourne, as does the companion documentary, *Mormon Yankees on and off the court*, co-produced by Professor Woods and narrated by Andrew Gaze.

1 *Citizens of to-day and to-morrow*, 67th annual report Young Men's Christian Association of Melbourne, 1938, p. 19. Box 29, series no. 2/2, annual reports (Victoria) 1932-57, ref. no. 1975.0092, Young Men's Christian Association Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. In the LDS periodical the *Austral Star* (published out of Sydney), an article titled 'Victorian District' gives more evidence of Mormon basketball players, possibly including members of the championship team. ('Victorian District', *Austral Star*, 20 June 1938, p. 8.)

Coach Elder Harold 'Hal' Reeb and the University of Melbourne basketball team, 1957. Back row: Ron Holt, Rhys Lewis, George Serch. Middle row: Andy Kalkavs (captain), David Fitzpatrick, Norm Longmuir, Trevor Reid. Centre: Elder Harold Reeb. Front row: Gerry Tickell, Ting Ing Kiet, Ken Johnson, Don Pemberton. Inset: Jeffrey Hughes. Courtesy Harold Reeb for photograph and Norman Longmuir for identification of team members.

- 2 *Weaving the fabric for the future, 68th annual report Young Men's Christian Association of Melbourne*, 1938, p. 18. Box 29, series no. 2/2, annual reports (Victoria) 1932–57, ref. no. 1975.0092, Young Men's Christian Association Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 3 Cited in D. Forrest Greene, 'Victoria champions', *Improvement Era*, June 1940, pp. 369–70. The name of this newspaper is not known but it may be the Melbourne *Argus*, which contains several mentions of the American Mormons playing basketball in Melbourne at this time. (See for example these articles in the *Argus*: 27 May 1938, p. 20; 14 July 1938; 13 May 1939, p. 15; 24 June 1939, p. 19.)
- 4 'Basketball', in *Christian democracy for today, sixty-ninth annual report and financial statement of the Young Men's Christian Association of Melbourne for the year ending 31st December, 1940*, 1940, pp. 17–18. Box 29, series no. 2/2, annual reports (Victoria) 1932–57, ref. no. 1975.0092, Young Men's Christian Association Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. The *Austral Star* noted: 'Basketball is main sport among members here, all teams have had much success. The Elders playing as Y.M.C.A. No 2 defeated the Church of England No. 1 64 to 32, to take the Victorian State Championship for the second year in succession'. ('Victorian District', *Austral Star*, September 1940, p. 10.)
- 5 Because of World War II, the American missionaries were evacuated from Australia in October 1940. (Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross saints: The Mormons in Australia*, Laie, Hawaii: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1991, p. 186.)
- 6 Ted E. Haynes, the only Canadian to play on this elite Mormon Yankees team, remembered: 'In Adelaide we played in their premier league for the season of 1954, and we were successful in winning the state, senior men's basketball championship there, and received a lot of publicity and good will ... The [LDS Church] members benefitted, and also it opened



- doors for us, and we were able to meet quite a number of people through that particular method.' (Ted E. Haynes, interview by Martin L. Andersen, 8 April 2011.)
- 7 Loren C. Dunn, interview by Matt Heiss, typescript, 1991, pp. 24–5. Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
- 8 Mervyn Moy, interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin L. Andersen, 25 June 2010. The

- program, *Australian basketball championships Sydney, 1955*, indicates that it was Elder Smith, not Elder Day, who was on the New South Wales 1955 team. Flick and Moy also played together on the first Australian Olympic basketball team in 1956.
- 9 'Basketball scores—Melbourne', *Austral Star*, December 1956, p. 10.
- 10 Norman Longmuir, email to Fred E. Woods, 8 March 2013.

- 11 Harold Reeb, interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin L. Andersen, 31 October 2009.
- 12 The University of Melbourne was frequently called 'the shop' around this time. (David Fitzpatrick, email to Fred E. Woods, 23 April 2013.) The author expresses appreciation to Fitzpatrick, who carefully reviewed this article and made several suggestions for improvement.
- 13 Reeb noted that he was not a member of the Mormon Yankee team that had played in the 1956 exhibition games. He would have probably been on the team but, because he had been assigned to serve for a time as a missionary in Tasmania, he was not in Victoria at that time. (Harold Reeb, telephone interview with Fred E. Woods, 5 March 2013.)
- 14 'U.S. boosts our basketball', *Farrago*, 16 April 1957, p. 8. University of Melbourne Library.
- 15 David Fitzpatrick, email to Fred E. Woods, 23 April 2013.
- 16 Journal of Harold Reeb, in possession of Harold Reeb, Utah.
- 17 Don Pemberton, interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin L. Andersen, 14 December 2009. David Fitzpatrick expressed similar feelings about Reeb, recalling: 'Now that I am nearly 76 I have forgotten more than I can remember about many detailed aspects of my life including basketball but have never forgotten about Elder Reeb and still remember him with great affection today'. (David Fitzpatrick, email to Fred E. Woods, 22 April 2013.) Apparently Reeb also influenced another MUBC player, whose interest extended beyond the realm of basketball: Trevor Reed, who met with another set of elders to learn more about the Church. (Journal of Harold Reeb, 9 May 1957.) Norm Longmuir, who made the initial phone call to Reeb's mission president, requesting a coach, paid this tribute to Reeb: 'Throughout life you meet a few people who command your respect and leave a lasting impression with you shaping or influencing your ongoing ambitions, behaviour and life decisions. For me, and I suspect many of the members of the MUBC 1957 Basketball team, Elder Harold Reeb was such a person. As one of the people responsible for bringing Mormon missionaries to the club as basketball coaches, I was concerned that they might try to preach to the players. That never happened. What did happen was that this young man, by his personal and professional demeanour over the period of his coaching, caused most of the team to re-evaluate their own behaviour and to view the Mormon faith in a new way. Some explored the Church of Latter Day Saints, others, committed to their own faith, developed an affinity for the Church that did not exist for them previously. In researching the history of the MUBC in the 1950's I have spoken with many of the players all now in their seventies or eighties, and, whilst some are vague in their memory of other players or events, everyone is crystal clear in their memory of Elder Harold Reeb'. (Norm Longmuir, email to Fred E. Woods, 22 April 2013.) Another player, Ron Holt, commented, 'In 1957, being 17, I was probably the youngest team member. Because basketball at that time was not a mainstream sport in Australia, most players had more or less picked up their understanding of the game without any deliberate coaching. It was therefore exciting to be coached by a person like Hal who was an experienced, knowledgeable player-coach and a very effective, patient, good-humoured communicator (influenced not least I would guess from his faith journey too). That year brought with it, I remember, noticeable improvements in team-building and player skills'. (Ron Holt, email to Norm Longmuir, 23 April 2013.)
- 18 Reeb noted: 'Got a telegram from Andy [Kalkavs] yesterday, they're joint winners with Sydney'. (Journal of Harold Reeb, 9 June 2011.) Andy Kalkavs was a member of the University of Melbourne basketball team. (Harold Reeb, conversation with Fred E. Woods, 25 April 2011.) Western Australia also tied with the Sydney and Melbourne teams. ('Another three-way inter-varsity tie', *Farrago*, 25 June 1957, p. 8.)
- 19 Journal of Harold Reeb, 19 September 1957.
- 20 Journal of Harold Reeb, 25 February 1958.
- 21 Eldon J. Huntsman, interview by Martin L. Andersen, 11 May 2011. Although Huntsman said 'team', it would be more correct to say club or teams, since both Huntsman and Reeb were coaching the Melbourne University Basketball Club, which consisted of several teams. (David Fitzpatrick, email to Fred E. Woods, 23 April 2013.)
- 22 Huntsman further explained that these three teams 'all played in different leagues, in different levels of competition. The A-team ... played against other universities'. (Eldon J. Huntsman, interview by Martin L. Andersen, 11 May 2011.) David Fitzpatrick clarified this statement by noting, 'The MUBC A team played in the Victorian Championships A Grade. The MUBC B Team probably played in the Victorian Championship A Reserve Grade. The MUBC C Team probably played in another competition or league called Business Houses'. (David Fitzpatrick, email to Fred E. Woods, 23 April 2013.)
- 23 Eldon J. Huntsman, interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin L. Andersen, 11 May 2011. Although Huntsman introduced new plays, one player who was coached under Reeb remembered that 'Elder Reeb did teach us one set play which we called Plastic'. (David Fitzpatrick, email to Fred E. Woods, 23 April 2013.)
- 24 June E. Senyard, *The ties that bind: A history of sport at the University of Melbourne*, New South Wales: Walla Walla Press, 2004, p. 320.
- 25 'Basketball comes up', *Farrago*, 15 July 1958, p. 10.
- 26 For more information on the development of basketball via Mormon missionaries in Australia, see Fred E. Woods, *Mormon Yankees: Giants on and off the court*, Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2012. This book is coupled with a DVD documentary co-produced by Fred E. Woods and Martin L. Andersen.