



# Tri County Canary

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## “Arnie Johnson – Gonvick’s Gift to the NBA”

by Barry S. Martin  
 Seven decades ago Gonvick native Arnie Johnson hitchhiked his way to a slot on an eventual NBA championship team, the Rochester (NY) Royals.

Born May 17, 1920, the son of Albert and Ida Johnson, Arnie starred in basketball, football, baseball and track at Gonvick High School. He worked in wheat fields and on highway construction projects to pay his way through Bemidji State Teachers College (student body 400) where he earned three-time basketball and two-time football All-Northern Teacher's College Conference First Team honors. He also tossed the shot put and discus and ran on the "Beavers" 220-yard relay team.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in physical education, Arnie taught high school P.E. classes for six months. The day after the Japanese bombed Pearl

Harbor he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He served 30 months at Buckley Air Force Base (Aurora, CO) as a physical training (calisthenics) instructor and starred on the base's basketball team, nicknamed the "Gunners."

On leave, Arnie, a 1941 Converse honorable mention All-American and 1942 National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball (NAIB) tournament second team selection, played before 12,000 spectators in Chicago Stadium (later the NBA Chicago Bulls home court) in the College All-Star Game between the best recently graduated college players and the National Basketball League (NBL) champion Oshkosh All-Stars. At this time Arnie met Seton Hall College All American and Great Lakes Naval Training Station (Chicago, IL) star Bob Davies who led the collegians to a 61-55 victory.

After World War II ended, Chuck Taylor, whose signature graces the classic basketball sneakers, spotted 6' 7", 240-pound Arnie playing for the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Continental Airways team. Taylor urged Les Harrison, the owner and coach of the Rochester Royals, to take a look at Arnie.

"Wait till you see this guy, Les," said Taylor. "He is big and rugged. You won't find many guys around who are willing to argue with him on the court. Why it's a good thing this kid is even-tempered. If he was mean, he could kill a guy."

Harrison sent Arnie money for a tryout in Chicago. Worried that he might not make the team and would need cash for the trip back to Gonvick, Arnie hitchhiked 660 miles, in mid-winter, to the Windy City in a cattle truck.

Arnie passed muster and Harrison signed him. The pride of Gonvick enjoyed a seven-season NBL-NBA career – all with the Royals who with the Minneapolis Lakers were the dominant teams in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In fact, the Royals and Lakers are two of only four NBL-NBA teams to win the playoff championship or finish or tie for first in their division or conference for five consecutive seasons.

Just as he was coming into his own in the 1946-47 season, Arnie, who a Rochester sports columnist said "used to stamp out forest fires in the Minnesota wilds with his powerful right foot," pulled up lame in the third quarter of a late February game against the All-Stars in Oshkosh. "Hercules" tried to play in the fourth period, but "his lameness was marked" and he was taken out of the game. X-rays revealed a fractured foot bone and Arnie missed the remainder of the

season. The Lakers tried to buy Arnie's contract, but Royals' owner Les Harrison wanted too much money. In late January 1948, 300 Gonvick area residents attended a Royals-Lakers game in Minneapolis. Unfortunately, Arnie played poorly. "So that's the big bloke you asked us a fancy price for," a Lakers' fan taunted Harrison. "Why we wouldn't take him as a gift."

Nonetheless, Arnie became a fixture in the Royals starting lineup with Hall of Fame guards Bob Davies and Bob Wanzer and center Arnie Risen along later with talented former University of Louisville forward Jack Coleman. Johnson rebounded strongly and made put backs of missed shots, fired 15-foot one-hand push shots, passed unselfishly, ran the court with surprising speed for a big man, and defended aggressively.

Arnie's teammates nicknamed him "Bulldozer" for the way he drove to the basket and "Broad Beams" for setting formidable screens for teammates. "It's just like shooting in practice (unopposed) with Arnie in front of you," said two-hand set shot marksman Bob Davies.

"One of the nice things about playing with the Royals," pointed out future Hall of Fame coach Red Holzman, "is you have Johnson on your side. Know what I'd do if I ever had to play him? I'd give him a big smile and a healthy handshake and say: 'Arn, old boy, you're sure having a great year. How are all the folks at home? Let's you and I get together after the game and cut up a nice thick steak.'"

"It might not have any effect on him," chuckled Red, "but a guy would be a sucker not to try to dig a hole when he saw a hurricane coming."

Bill Calhoun, who started at forward alongside Arnie during the 1947-48 season, remembers a three-aside scrimmage. As Bill ran by him, Arnie stuck out his arm. "It about bent me in two," remembered Bill. "Arnie's arm didn't move an inch. He was really strong."

Bob Wanzer told a story about an NBA rookie inadvertently crashing into Arnie and running back down court next to him apologizing and begging that he be spared punishment.

The Rochester Times-Union reported that some teams tried to use a "hatchet man" to get Arnie out of the game, but soon stopped this tactic because the bad guy "usually finished second best."

Beginning the 1949-50 NBA season, another Scandinavian and Minnesotan, the Hamline College star and future Hall of Famer 6' 7", 230-pound Arild Verner "Vern" Mikkelsen, joined the Lakers.

It soon seemed that Arnie in games against the Lakers was fighting a one-man war against other denizens of the Gopher State such as Don "Swede" Carlson, Anthony "Tony" Jaros and Myer "Whitey" Skoog (Minnesota), Howard "Howie" Schultz (Hamline), as well as Mikkelsen.

"It was great to watch Vern Mikkelsen go at it with Arnie Johnson," said Hall of Fame referee Charlie Eck-

man. "They would get together on the floor in Rochester and they would lean against one another. They would hold one another up. I would run by and say, 'How do you feel, fellows?' And they would say fine Charley, don't bother us, we are all right. Go referee somewhere else...blow the whistle somewhere else.' Those guys never bothered anybody. They didn't fight anybody."

During a pre-game warm up in the Minneapolis Auditorium, Arnie sidled up to Mikkelsen at midcourt. "Mik," said Arnie, "I want to warn you that tonight you better not be too rough on me. My brothers are here."

Vern looked into the stands in the direction Arnie was pointing and saw three huge Paul Bunyan look-alikes wearing almost identical Pendleton shirts.

"Hey," said Vern turning with a grin at Arnie, happy that it was a joke, "I'll take all four of you on."

The Gonvick Giant definitely had a sense of humor. While in Washington, D.C. for a game with the Red Auerbach-coached Capitals, Bill Calhoun and a teammate were walking around the Smithsonian Museum. A hotel key mysteriously slid across the floor in front of them. Nobody appeared to claim the key. When they returned to the hotel, they found out the key was for Arnie's room. Unknown to them, Arnie had come to the museum alone. "Arnie was a comedian in his own quiet way," remembers Bill.

At half-time of the 1950-51 NBA season last game, "Arnie Johnson Nite," Rochester fans presented "Old Ironsides" a new car. Unlike many players on their special night, Arnie played a good game, scoring seven points and grabbing 16 rebounds in a 91-79 victory over the Indianapolis Olympians. "It's the happiest night of my life," said Arnie.

In the 1950-51 playoffs, the Royals foiled the Lakers attempt for the first NBA three-peat championship. Laker Hall of Fame center George Mikan attributed a Royals victory in Minneapolis that negated the Laker's home court advantage in the western division championship playoff series to Arnie's control of the backboards and keying of fast breaks. In the sixth game of the playoff Finals against the New York Knicks, Arnie scored 27 points.

At the end of the Royals NBA championship season, teenage fan and poetess Jody Cronau Low immortalized the pride of Gonvick in this verse:

Our Big Louie, the Sherman Tank,

With his gears no-shift, his engine no-crank,

Driving in for his famous layup,

Had much to do with the post-season payup.

Arnie and his nine teammates divided a \$14,750 playoff bonus, which amounts to \$134,000 in today's money.

With Arnie averaging ten points (657 points in 68 games) in the 1951-52 season, the Royals became the first NBA team with all five starters averaging in double figures.

Mid-way through the 1952-53 season, Royals captain Bob

Arnie Johnson, "one of the unsung heroes" of the 1951 Royals NBA champions, died in Rochester, NY, on April 8, 2000 at the age of 80. His 99-year old sister, Rose Odegaard, and niece JoAnn Birkeland, still reside in the Gonvick area.

Davies was accumulating too many "technical-personal" misconduct fouls for complaining to referees. Les Harrison hit upon a clever solution to protect his superstar. He named Arnie the team captain.

Over seven professional seasons Arnie had been assessed one technical foul. Turning to run down court, he had inadvertently kicked the ball into the stands. The referee later apologized for this miscarriage of justice. Harrison reasoned that taciturn Arnie might get a fair hearing from the officials because he never griped to them and ought to have earned their respect.

"It must be awful miserable being a referee," said Arnie. "How do I feel about being captain? Well, it's okay with me if the boys want me. We'll have to wait and see what happens."

Under the "Johnson regime," the Royals, avoiding misconduct calls, won six of eight games.

When "Iron Man" Arnie retired at the end of that season, he held the NBA consecutive games played record of 326. As the Royals workhorse, his career regular season NBA scoring average was 8.7 points per game and rebounds 6.2 per game. Les Harrison called him "the most unselfish player" that he had ever seen.

In a visit to Gonvick in May 1953, the Bemidji Fish Fry Crew presented Arnie a Paul and Babe statuette. He continued to reside in Rochester and initially worked in public relations for the Genesee Brewing Co. and later as director of industrial relations for Bausch & Lomb optical company. He and his wife Nancy enjoyed skiing and golf and won the Country Club of Rochester Invitational Tournament three times. They did not have any children.

Arnie made his last national basketball appearance on January 15, 1964, in the NBA Old Timers Game in Boston Garden. He and Royals teammates Bob Davies, Bob Wanzer, Arnie Risen, and Jack Coleman combined with Lakers George Mikan, Jim Pollard, Vern Mikkelsen, and Slater Martin to represent the West. Arnie was held scoreless and Mikkelsen contributed six points in a loss to the East Old Timers led by former Boston Celtics Bill Sharman and Bob Cousy.

In November 1986, the Northern Intercollegiate Conference Athletic Hall of Fame inducted Arnie Johnson as one of 19 charter inductees from athletes who competed between 1932 and 1976.

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Barry Martin is the author of "Bob Davies: A Basketball Legend" and autographed copies can be obtained through information on [www.bmartinauthor.com](http://www.bmartinauthor.com).

Martin is a native of Webster, New York. He is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the College of William and Mary, holds a master's degree in American History from the University of Washington, Seattle, and graduated from the University of California Berkeley School of Law. He is a retired Administrative Law Judge. The author and his wife, Carolyn, reside in Sacramento, California.



Gonvick's Arnie "Big Louie" Johnson drove to the basket like a Sherman tank for the National Basketball Association Rochester Royals (now Sacramento Kings).



"March 18, 1951 was 'Arnie Johnson Nite' in Rochester's Edgerton Park Sports Arena; Nancy Johnson stands fourth from the left."

## Townships in East Polk Conservaton District are eligible for funds

The East Polk Soil and Water Conservation District has a limited amount of cost-share funds available to assist well owners with sealing abandoned (unused) wells. Cost-share funding is available in amounts up to 50% of the total well sealing cost. All property owners within the East Polk Soil and Water Conservation District are eligible.

**Eligibility Requirements:**  
 -The well must be located within the East Polk Conservation District (Badger, Brandsvold, Chester, Columbia, Eden, Garden, Garfield, Godfrey, Grove Park/Tilden, Gully, Hill River, Johnson, King, Knute, Lessor, Queen, Rosebud, Sletten, and Woodside Town-

ships).  
 -The well must have been used in the past for water supply. Monitoring wells, pollution recovery wells, observation wells, test wells, dewatering wells, and soil borings are not eligible for this program.  
 -Wells that have been previously sealed by a licensed contractor are not eligible for funds.  
 1. Do not seal your well before you are notified of approval/disapproval of your application. Sealed wells are ineligible for receiving cost-share grant funds. You cannot apply to the program. Sell the well without approval, and expect to receive cost-share funds.  
 2. The East Polk Soil and Water Conservation District

Board of Supervisors will vote to approve or disapprove funding.  
 3. You must include a copy of the completed "Well and Boring Sealing Record" (prepared by your contractor) and a receipt from your licensed well contractor.  
 4. At the board meeting, the Board of Supervisors will authorize payment.  
 5. Payment will be processed and you will receive your check in the mail.  
 Please contact the East Polk Soil and Water Conservation District with any questions you have at 218-563-2777 or stop in the Bjella Building at 240 Cleveland Avenue, McIntosh, MN 56556.