

**Young Howard Hobson led Oregon to the first national championship in basketball**



# 1939

**The first-ever NCAA basketball championship trophy ever awarded went to the Ducks in 1939**

Photo by Bob Baker

**By Steve Spatz**  
*Of the Emerald*

**"A**h, 1939." Just the mention of the year lights up Howard Hobson's face. The number rolls smoothly from his tongue as if he was speaking of a good friend.

It was the year that Adolph Hitler launched mankind into a worldwide struggle for freedom. A time when the U.S. was slowly picking itself up out of the Depression, and speculating whether F.D.R. would run for an unprecedented third term.

It was also the year young coach Howard Hobson directed the University of Oregon basketball squad to the very first national collegiate championship. Played in a tiny gymnasium in Evanston, Ill., witnessed by the inventor of the game, Dr. James Naismith, the "Tall Firs" of Oregon defeated Ohio State, 46-33, to capture the championship.

"There were about 5,000 fans packed into this little gym, and no one could care less about the game except the two teams playing," says Howard Hobson, 77, laughing. "It was terrible."

"But after we won, when we came back home to Portland and Eugene, the whole place just went crazy."

Forty-two years have passed and a lot of jump shots have been put up since then. Yet, the memories of the special year are still fresh and vivid for Hobson as he sits in his sun streaked Portland apartment, home for himself and Jennie, his wife of 55 years.

As he goes back in time, you can almost place him in the team picture taken in 1939 — the confident coach surrounded by his tall players. He perches stiffly on the edge of the couch, immersed in thought. His tanned brow wrinkles in concentration as he goes back in time, when his now-silver mane was a deep brown. The moments live once more.

"We were very confident going into the playoffs," says Hobson of his squad, led by 6-8 center "Slim" Wintermute, forwards Laddie Gale and John Dick, plus

backcourt starters Bobby Anet and Wally Johanson, teammates since junior high. All the starters were native Oregonians, and the rest from no further away than Idaho.

"We didn't know anything about Ohio State and they didn't know anything about us. Neither team had scouted the other. All we had to go on was their reputation and season records."

"I remember it was a very poorly lit court, and our shooting wasn't up to par in the first half."

"What helped us is that we controlled the boards," says Hobson, referring to his club's superior height — hence the nickname "Tall Firs." "If we didn't make the first shot then we might get the fourth shot."

There is a curious mix of past, present and future within Hobson and his relationship to the game of basketball. He is a symbol of the game's illustrious past, qualifying perhaps as the John Wooden of his day. Yet, he remains in the mainstream of college basketball to

this day. As to the future, many of Hobson's ideas formulated during World War II are still bantered about when talk of rule changes surfaces.

Even his attire hints at the blend, as the garb suited for a man his age — dress slacks, loafers and a checkered sports shirt — is offset by green-and-gold athletic socks.

**H**oward Hobson's path to becoming one of the greatest coaches of his time, began, predictably enough, with a successful athletic career at the U of O in basketball and baseball. Following his junior year, Hobson began pursuing a coaching career.

He coached first at Kelso (Washington) High School, with a team he terms "not very good." But he built them into league champions within two years. He did the same thing at Benson High in Portland, before assuming the head basketball post at Southern Oregon College at age 29.

By guiding his squad to six wins in eight games over his more talented alma mater, Hobson attracted the attention of Oregon officials who promptly hired him in 1936.

He made the big jump in coaching ranks and became one of the youngest head coaches in the Pacific Coast Conference at 33 — an interesting parallel to the present coach, Jim Haney, who began at age 29. And Hobson, like Haney, had problems in those early years.

"The first year was very difficult," recounts Hobson, "because it's hard for a new coach coming in to get the complete support of the veterans. We had a few disciplinary problems that year, just as Jim Haney had with (Dan) Hartshorne and (Paul) Bain."

"It takes time for a coach to settle in, that's all." A few years later, following the championship year, Hobson was at the top of his profession. His teams at Oregon, and later those he coached at Yale, played to packed houses. The wild, stampeding fast break style he popularized drew raves from all over the nation.



**Members of the 1939 NCAA championship team celebrate their victory.**

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