



**HANNIBAL**  
Campy sequel sets table for Hopkins' next course.

**B3**



★★★★  
**TASTE OF OTHERS**  
A divinely human comedy from a neophyte director.

**B3**

**THEATER**



**ANNIE GET YOUR GUN**  
Reba McEntire doing what comes naturally — and more.

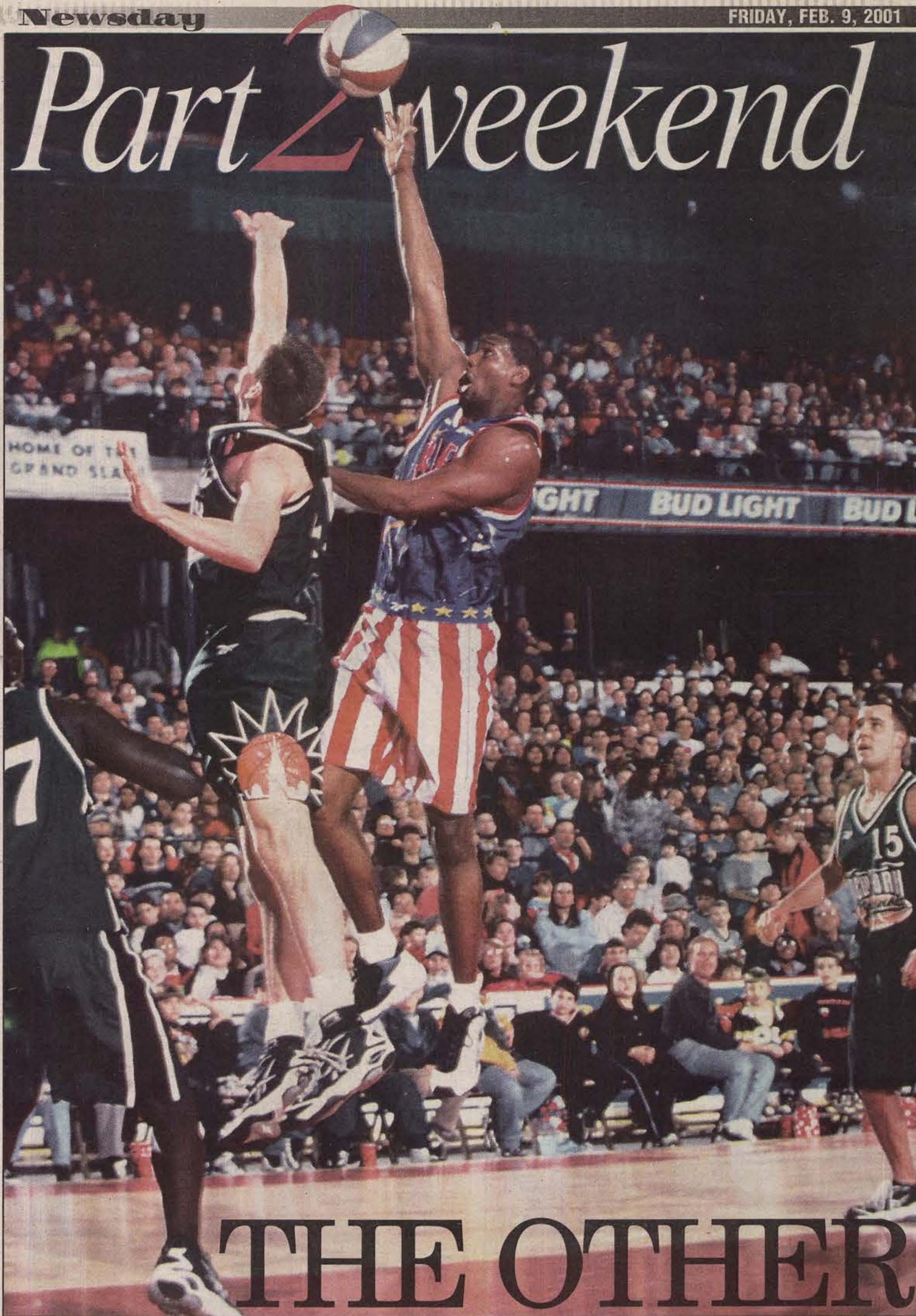
**B2**

**DINING**



**BRASSERIE 345**  
A touch of Paris on Main Street, Huntington.

**B25**



**THE OTHER TEAM**

Harlem Globetrotters Photo

When the **Harlem Globetrotters** come to town, so do the **New York Nationals**.  
What's it like to lose for a living?

**B15**



# Role Players

## The Nationals are the straight men for the clown princes of basketball

By Bill Jensen

**T**HE LAST TIME the Harlem Globetrotters lost a game to their traveling foils was on Jan. 5, 1971, when the New Jersey Reds (as they were then called) edged them, 100-99, in an overtime thriller in Martin, Tenn. Red Klotz hit the winning basket that night, and he'll never forget the thrill of the victory.

"It was like we killed Santa Claus," Klotz says of the fans' stone-cold reaction.

For close to 50 years, Klotz has played the straight man to the clown princes of basketball in this long-running exhibition tour, whose focus is always the Trotters. Retired as a player and coach, the 77-year-old basketball junkie now owns and organizes the Globetrotters' opponents, who have played under various names, from the Reds to the Washington Generals to the current New York Nationals. The two teams will play twice in the area this weekend: tonight at Madison Square Garden and Sunday at Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale.

For his effort to provide "competition" for the main attraction, Klotz has been rewarded with the worst winning percentage of any general manager in the history of sport. But he keeps coming out, year after year, to take more beatings for the love of the game and the smiles of the kids in the stands.

When you go to a Globetrotters game, you don't give any thought to the opposing team — the team that, in the past 30 years, has never won. If it is true, as the organization insists, that the games are for real, then when you go to watch the Harlem Globetrotters play the Nationals tonight or Sunday, you could see history in the making. You could see one of the biggest upsets in sports history, like the Jets in '69, or the U.S. hockey team in '80. Do you believe in miracles?

Don't hold your breath. But that won't stop the Nationals from trying.

To build his team, Klotz sends scouts all over the world looking for the right type of player. (Klotz' infamous Generals "folded" in 1995 in favor of the new moniker.) The players need to have the right mixture of talent, humor and humility — qualities that you don't always find in the top-notch basketball players of today.

"It's a little different than the usual coach or scout," Klotz says of his vocation. "The players have to show that they are tough enough to play the Globetrotters. That player knows that he can play his game. [But] he has to maintain his pride."

Although most players climb aboard with full knowledge that the team is one giant brick of a losing proposition, Klotz claims he has never had a problem staffing his roster of eight players.

Troy Pennington played guard at Methodist Col-

lege in North Carolina before he was discovered in 1994 and offered a spot on the Generals. He's now the player-coach of the East Coast New York Nationals. (Because of the vigorous travel schedule, the Nationals field East and West Coast squads, as well as an international team.)

"I thought it was an honor to be playing against the Globetrotters," Pennington says before a game in Indiana. "I think my job is better than in the NBA. I get to travel. I've been to Russia, Beirut — places I thought I would never ever get to see. And besides, in the NBA, they only play 82 games." Each Nationals team plays an average of 125 games a year.

The eight members of the Nationals will spend the next 3½ months playing the Globetrotters, watching them chalk up win after win and sign autographs in the parking lot as they walk toward the bus. But even though the two teams stay in separate hotels, the players on both squads form relationships.

"It's like a big family," Pennington says. "Everybody gets along. When you finally go home, you start missing the guys."

While he wouldn't divulge the content of the pregame pep talks he gives his Nationals, Pennington does say that team members train hard every day with practices to keep them sharp.

"I don't tell my guys to miss a shot," he says forcefully. "We lost by eight [points] the other night. Some nights the ball doesn't go our way."

"We've had a lot of close games," Klotz adds with an air of optimism. "It's up to them to beat us. Every once in a while, we can beat them."

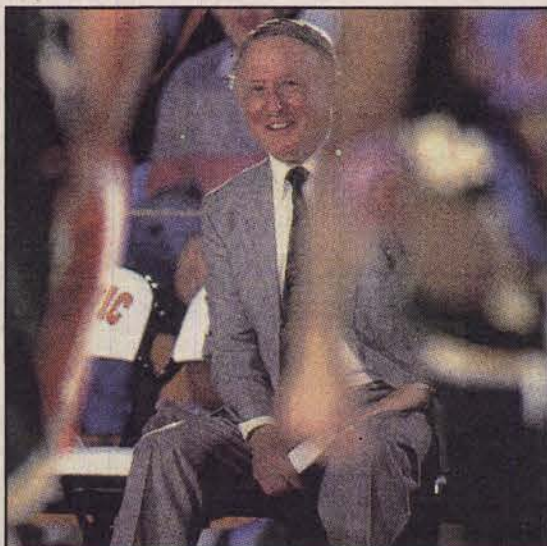
Klotz has never had to give any psychological talks to guys who were used to being winners in high school and college and now play professional losers. "It's no harder than it is for the Clippers in the NBA," he remarks, though even the Clippers have won more than one game in the past three decades.

"Mostly, everybody is a loser except for one champion," Klotz says, defending his team. "The fact that you're losing all the time is 'cause the other team is better than you."

At game time, the Trotters don't start hamming it up with the bucket of confetti, the elastic ball and their other standard gimmicks until they have what they consider a "comfortable" 10- to 15-point lead. Then it's up to the Nationals to play the fool and not get too angry at the referee, who is allowing all of those blatant travesties of basketball justice — like, say, using a stepladder.

There have been times when that lead hasn't held. In their 74-year history, the Globetrotters have actually lost 333 games (the last one being in 1995 against a squad of all-stars organized by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar). Of course, they have won more than 20,000, giving them the best winning percentage in "pro sports." Still, there's no one in the world that has beaten them more than Klotz.

"When I first turned pro, I played in the old American League for the Philadelphia Spahs, an all-Jew-



New York Nationals general manager Red Klotz, 77, owns and organizes the Globetrotters' opponents.



Harlem Globetrotters Photo

The 'Trotters build a healthy lead over the Nationals before they start clowning.

ish team," Klotz remembers. "We played the Harlem Globetrotters in 1942 [back when the Globetrotters played truly competitive games]. My very first game, I had the pleasure of beating the Globetrotters."

What happens if the Nationals somehow shock the world this Sunday?

"Then you'd have a good story," Klotz says with a laugh. "Mannie Jackson [the owner of the Globetrotters] will probably congratulate me. He might be upset with his team." He pauses for a second.

"It will happen again somewhere along the line." ■

Bill Jensen is a freelance writer.

**WHERE & WHEN** Harlem Globetrotters vs. the New York Nationals. Tonight at 7, Madison Square Garden, Manhattan, 212-307-7171; limited tickets remain (\$16-\$26). Sunday, Nassau Coliseum, Hempstead Turnpike, Uniondale; 3 p.m. 631-888-9000. Tickets: \$10-\$75.