

GAME TWO: MARCH 12, 1944¹

**Duke Medical School vs.
North Carolina College for
Negroes**

The secret game

THEY PILED INTO two cars. It was 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning, and they figured everyone else in Durham, N.C., would be in church. Just the same, they took a winding, back-alley route across town.

Inside the cars were some of the best college basketball players in America: David Hubbell had been a starter at Duke. Jack Burgess had played guard at the University of Montana. Dick Thistlethwaite had been a star center at the University of Richmond. Homer Sieber, the son of a well-known Lutheran pastor in Roanoke, wasn't a great player, but he'd played on the freshman team at Roanoke College, and he loved the game.

They were among the white students from Duke's medical school who walked warily into a gymnasium.

Once they were inside, someone shut and bolted the doors. There were getting ready to break the law. They were about to play a basketball game,

and their opponents would be the varsity team from North Carolina College for Negroes.

In 1944, it was against the law and custom in South for blacks and whites to do most anything together.

But both teams wanted to play because they wanted to see who had the best team in North Carolina.

NCC coach John McLendon had learned the game from its inventor, James Naismith, at the University of Kansas, where McLendon had been the first black to earn a degree from the university's physical education program.

McLendon thought his Eagles might be the best team in America. There was no way to prove it, because black schools were barred from playing in the national post-season tournaments.

Historian Scott Ellsworth says the idea for the game apparently had been hatched during secret prayer meetings between the YMCA chapters at NCC and Duke. Someone had bragged about how good the medical school's intramural team was. An NCC student issued a challenge.

On March 12, 1944, the medical students headed to NCC.

McLendon had arranged for a referee and timer to make the contest official. But there was hesitation on both sides.

"The thoughts running through my mind would be, 'Well, this just isn't done,' " Duke's Hubbell recalled this year on an ABC "Nightline" show about the game.

Aubrey Stanley, an NCC player, recalled being frightened. What if the police found out, or the Ku Klux Klan? "Had it been up to me, no, I would not have done it."

McLendon told his players that if the Duke guys were brave enough to come, NCC should go ahead and play.

They played in an empty gym. A referee tossed the ball up, and at first, both teams played tentatively.

Word spread on the NCC campus that something was going on in the locked gym. Students climbed up on window ledges to watch the action.

In the end, both teams loosened up, and NCC's talent began to show. The Eagles blew the Duke boys out in the second half. The final score was 88-44.

But the day wasn't over. The teams traded players, went "shirts and skins" and played

another game with blacks and whites playing together on both sides.

It was, in McLendon's mind, a perfect mix – an interracial blending of talents and teamwork: "That was the way basketball's supposed to be."

"Just God's children, horsing around with a basketball," one NCC player recalled in a New York Times Magazine story last year.

Afterward, everyone went home and kept what happened quiet, to forestall any trouble. McLendon would surely lose his job if word got out.

But players on both sides took a new understanding away from the experience.

Ellsworth, who wrote about the game for The New York Times Magazine, said on "Nightline" that the men who played in that contest were "American heroes" who took a great chance "for the sake of a game and for the sake of their love of the game."

Dr. Homer Sieber returned home to Roanoke and practiced cardiology and internal medicine until his death in 1994. His widow, Charlotte Sieber, says her husband and his teammates on the medical-school pickup team kept the secret well. "He

just never said much about it," she says. But she knows "he just loved to play basketball. He would go anywhere to play – and probably was real thrilled to be playing with people of the caliber of that team."

McLendon won 246 games at NCC (now North Carolina Central) and then coached at Virginia's Hampton Institute. In the late 1950s, he achieved his dream of winning a national championship for black college basketball by leading Tennessee State to three small-college titles. In the 1960s, he became the first black coach in a major professional league, coaching in the American Basketball League and then the American Basketball Association.