

# W for Watchhorn



Woman's sports uniform (bodice) c.1940s for Watchhorns basketball team, Palmerston North., 1942-1950. Donated by the family of Margaret Weir (nee Watchorn). Courtesy of Te Manawa Museums Trust

In this blog, guest contributor Tanja Rother shares local sporting stories about the history of women's basketball in Palmerston North.

In the late 1940s, Palmerston North women led the country in indoor basketball. The Watchorn women's basketball uniform held in Te Manawa's collection, gives us a glimpse into this highlight of our local sporting history.

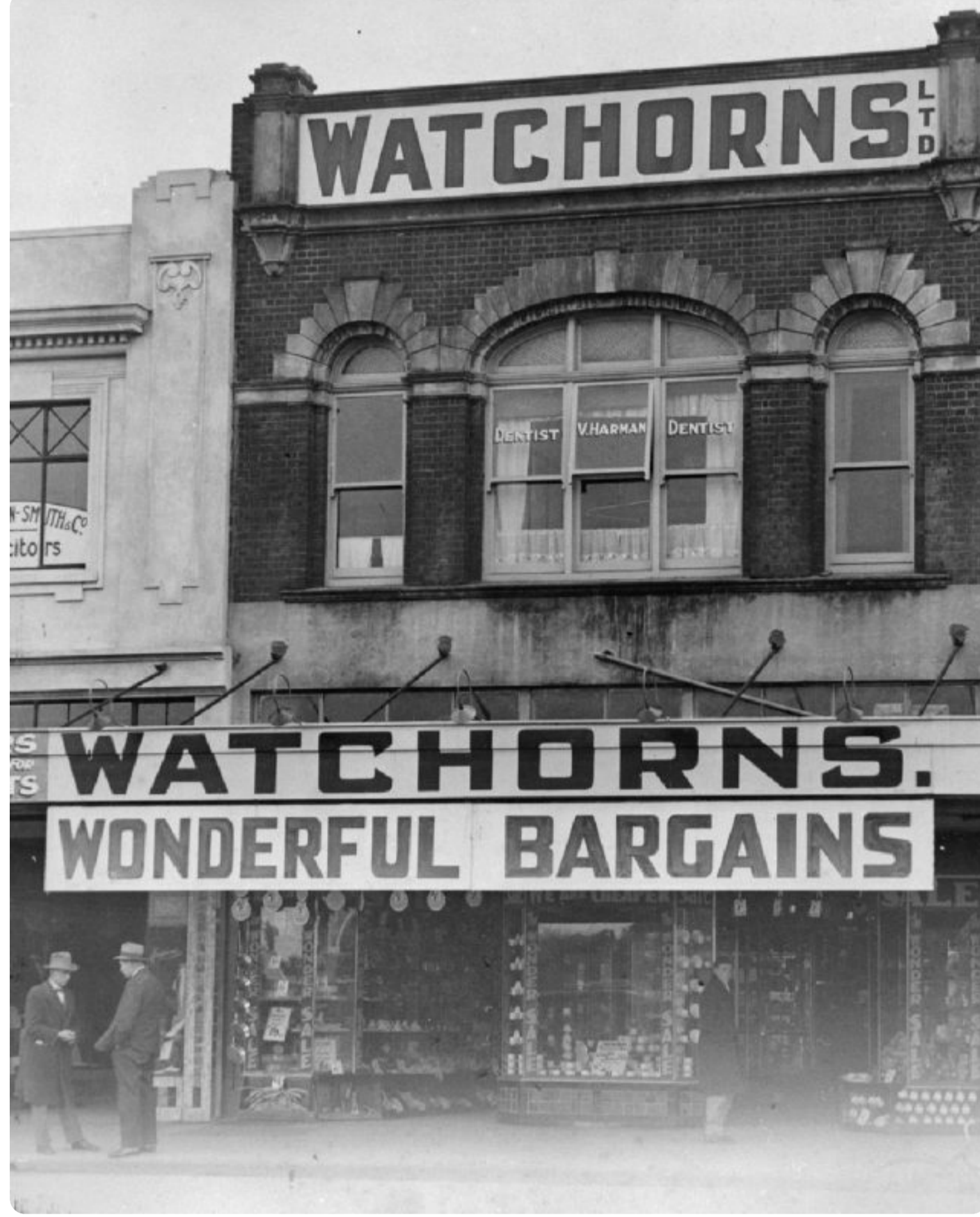
Indoor basketball hit the ground running when it was first introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand by the YMCA in the early 1930s. Both men and women were encouraged to play, and by 1946 the New Zealand Women's Basketball Association (Inc.) was formed, with national championships commencing the year after. Palmerston North's basketballers experienced early success in the newly-organised competition, winning the "A" league in both 1948 and '49.

The success of our local team may have been related to the strong basketball culture cultivated by local businesses at the time. The 'W' on this uniform stands for 'Watchorn', a household name in the Palmerston North business and sports worlds in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Frank Morris Geoffrey 'Geoff' Watchorn was one-time amateur welterweight boxing champion of Australasia, and son of John Samuel Watchorn, who owned a hardware business on the Square. The Watchorns became involved with the YMCA, and YWCA in 1935 when they donated goods from the family warehouse for a street fundraiser. We might speculate that was when Geoff became aware of the YMCA's role in promoting basketball and decided to get involved. When Geoff took over the family business in the late 1950s, Watchorn's continued to have their own staff indoor basketball teams.



Woman's sports uniform c.1940s for Watchhorns basketball team, Palmerston North., 1942-1950. Donated by the family of Margaret Weir (nee Watchorn). Courtesy of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Watchorn's women's team was one of a great number of teams associated to businesses and organisations in Palmerston North. At the height of the game, P.D.C., Woolworths, Rosco's, the Hopwood Hardware Company, milk-powder producer Glaxo, the hospital and even the City Council had their own indoor basketball teams, among others. In 1945, for example, the number of people competing in these business teams equated to 1% of Palmerston North's population! With players spread across more than 50 teams (16 men's and 42 women's), it was necessary to divide them into three grades: A; A Reserve; and B. Playing basketball was as much a sportive as a social occupation. Each inter-house competitive season ended in a dinner and dance, at times attended by as many as 400 players.



Watchhorns Ltd, 162 The Square, Palmerston North City Library, 1936-1939

Indoor basketball was popular in smaller centres in the Manawātū too. By 1936 Rongotea had the Te Kawau ladies' basketball association and Pahiatua the Bush Basketball Association.

'Girls, Girls, Girls Galore' wrote the *Manawatu Standard* (in the language of the time) in September 1958. The New Zealand Indoor Basketball Championships had just opened in Palmerston North and women made up the majority of representatives. Although Wellington, Rotorua and Whangārei took away the winning titles then, indoor basketball is still played in the Manawātū more than 75 years later. The Watchorn's uniform might not make for suitable attire on the basketball courts today, but the sport it represents remains.

## Further Reading

- Bell Gay, *President Zena, New Zealand Women's Indoor Basketball Association, 'Basketball, Women's indoor', April 2009.*
- Gisborne Herald, 22 September 1947
- Gisborne Herald, 6 October 1948
- Manawatu Evening Standard, 9 September 1958
- Manawatu Standard, 22 September 1936
- Manawatu Standard, 8 April 1935
- Manawatu Standard, 9 November 1944
- Manawatu Standard, 26 September 1945
- Manawatu Standard, 13 November 1945
- Manawatu Times, 15 August 1936
- Mather, Brian and Margaret Weir, 'Geoff Watchorn Palmerston North sportsman', *The Manawatu Journal of History*, issue 3, 2007



Previous

### kōrero mai

get in touch

Phone: +64 (06) 355-5000  
0800-4-A-MUSEUM

Te Manawa Museum  
326 Main Street  
Private Bag 11055  
Palmerston North, 4442  
Aotearoa New Zealand

Email Enquiries

### haere mai

visit us

**HOURS:**  
Tues – Sun: 10am – 5.00pm  
(Opens 1pm Anzac Day, Closed Good Friday, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. Open Mondays during School Holidays)

Free general entry.  
Donations appreciated  
Charges may apply to some exhibitions/programmes.

### pārongo

quick links

- > Covid 19
- > Venue Hire
- > Birthday parties
- > Vacancies
- > Exhibition Proposals
- > Past Exhibitions
- > Publications
- > Our societies
- > Earle Trust

### karere rorohiko

join our mailing list!

Sign Up

### whanaungatanga

stay connected

- Instagram
- Facebook