

Original empirical article

THE FIRST BASKETBALL COMPETITIONS IN THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA

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Abstract. *Basketball as a sport was first played among Sokol and school youths in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1919. The first games took place in mid-1922. The first basketball games were held at the regional Sokol competition in Maribor on June 28 and 29, 1922. In the Second Boy's Grammar School in Belgrade, there was a school competition in the school year of 1923/24. As basketball was initially being played by Sokol youngsters and within the Sokol association, it seemed rather logical to have Sokol members as the first initiators and organizers of the first basketball competitions and championships in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The first attempt to host a state level championship was in Skopje on June 28, 1937, when three Sokol teams appeared at this event. The first championship of the Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was held from September 28 to 29, 1940 in Borovo. There were teams from seven different Sokol regions with 170 men and women divided into 15 teams. This first championship was won by the Men's Zagreb team and Women's Belgrade team. The junior championship in both categories was won by the Zagreb Sokol teams.*

Key words: *Basketball, Sokols, competitions, championship, Yugoslavia.*

INTRODUCTION

It was probably on December 21, 1891, that James Naismith of Springfield College presented his new creation to the world – basketball. As of the next year, 1892, this new

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game started spreading around the globe. Today there is practically no country in which people do not play basketball.

France was the first European country to introduce the game of basketball. It was in 1893 following professor Rideout's arrival in Paris after his specialist course for teachers of physical education at Springfield. (Colbeck et al, 1972, 85-86)

Many other countries introduced basketball as a sport soon after. It first happened in England in 1895, in Germany in 1896, the Czech Republic 1897, Turkey 1904, Russia 1906, Italy 1907, Poland 1908, Sweden 1908, Hungary 1912, Portugal 1913, Bulgaria 1916, and so on.

In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (since December 1, 1918) followed by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (since 1929), basketball was first played in 1919 among schoolchildren and Sokol youths.

Ciril Hočevar, working as a teacher at a boy's elementary school in Studenca in Maribor and in the Sokol association of the same town, introduced basketball to the schoolchildren and Sokol youth in 1919. It was first played by Sokol members near the Sokol facility where two baskets were put in place.

After his transfer to Murska Sobota, in the autumn of 1921, this town also became acquainted with the game of basketball.

At the regional Sokol competition in Maribor held from 28 to 20 of June, there were basketball competitions.

After William Wailand's course on games for children, Belgrade became a town where basketball was played as early as October 1923. The pupils of the Second Boy's Grammar School started playing this new game. In the school year of 1923/24 the pupils of this grammar school played the school championship with eight different teams (classes).

Many other towns in the country started accepting the game of basketball. The first basketball game in Novi Sad was played on May 15, 1924.

In May of 1927, Tuzla hosted the basketball game between the Scout and Sokol teams from that town.

In early 1929, the Zagreb audience saw the first basketball games. The first one was played on January 20, 1929 between the teams of Akademski SK and Građanski.

The aim of this paper is to highlight and bring out of oblivion the following aspects of basketball in this region: the beginnings of basketball in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the first state level championship of the Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in basketball.

The historical method has been used in the process of writing this work. We have researched and consulted libraries, archives and sport museums from former Yugoslavia. We hope to stir up sport historians and readers of all sorts to indulge themselves into further research into basketball development in the former Yugoslavia.

SOKOL COMPETITION IN SKOPLJE

The first attempt to host a basketball championship took place during the Sokol competition in Skoplje in June 1937. There are different sources about this event. Marjan Maržan thinks that it took place in 1935:

"Basketball has been played for a long time in our country. As early as 1935, at the Skoplje Sokol competition, the members of the Zagreb II Sokol

association presented a rather nice and technically sophisticated game. Their opponents were the members of the Belgrade X. As the state champions, they were ahead of the others in attractiveness and subtlety of technical performance and basketball experience". (Maržan, M. 1940, 262-289; according to Paunić, 2007, 162).

Kobali, in his book *Basketball's ABC* (Kobali, 1971, 7), claims that all of this happened in the year of 1936 and in the article titled "The Creation of Basketball in Zagreb" he is even more precise and says "in the autumn of 1936, during the Sokol competition in Skopje, the first presentational basketball championship took place". (Kobali, 1986, 115)

In the Encyclopedia of Physical Education (Nikolić, Pavlović & Blašković, 1975, book I, 493), there is also a note that this competition was held in 1936.

The Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, replying to the letter of the International Basketball Federation dated January 28, 1937, (letter no. 1448/37) informs FIBA on May 17, 1938 that there will be a presentational competition for men and women held within the Sokol competition on June 28, 1937. Here is the letter in its original form:

"Nous Vous répondons à présent à Votre lettre du 28/I 1937 à cause de cela parce que seulement cette année nous avons officiellement introduit Basketball dans toutes nos associations pour les catégories des hommes et des femmes. Nous Vous annonçons encore, que le 28 juin de l'année courante auront lieu à Skoplje les premiers concours de propagande de Basketball. Après ces concours nous Vous enverrons des rapports exacts de Basketball en général et surtout des catégories des femmes. Quant à la question de la correspondance, ayez la bonté de l'adresser à l'Union de Soko du royaume Iougoslave - Belgrade (section pour les jeux de concours). Nous Vous prions d'agréer nos compliments."¹ (Fig. 1)

The letter was signed by the secretary Todorović, president Smiljanić and one of the directors, whose name is illegible.

The magazine *Soko*, of May 15, 1938, no. 5, in the article written by Zdenko Pavić titled "An Appendix to Basketball Rules" (Pavić, 1938, 206) has a picture with the following quote "Presentational games of basketball. Members of the Zagreb II and Belgrade teams". (Fig. 2).

In the book *Basketball Got Its Name Kosarka in Zagreb* (Beganović et al, 2005, 48) there is the same photo with a title "Presentational Game of Basketball in Skopje in 1938. Basketball players from Zagreb Sokol II and Belgrade". Following the year when the magazine was published (1938), the authors concluded that the competition happened in the same year.

Based on that and the primary historical sources, it may be stated i.e. concluded that the championship took place on June 28, 1937. The following facts support our conclusion:

¹ The management of Sokol replied to the letter of the International Basketball Federation dated January 28, 1937 since basketball was officially introduced during that year into all the associations for both males and females. We inform you that our association will organize the first presentational competition in Skopje on June 28 of the current year. Please expect a thorough report on the competition soon afterwards with a special emphasis on women's competition. In respect to the future correspondence, please send all further letters to the Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – Belgrade (department for games).

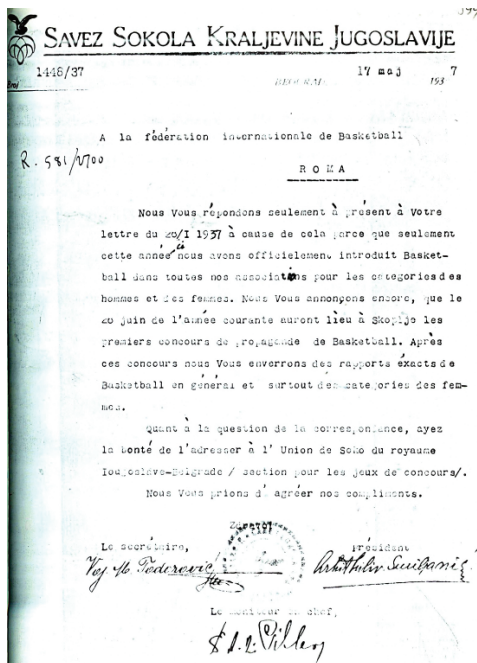


Fig. 1 The letter of the Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the International Basketball Federation dated May 17, 1937
Source : FIBA archives, according to Paunić (1982, 597)

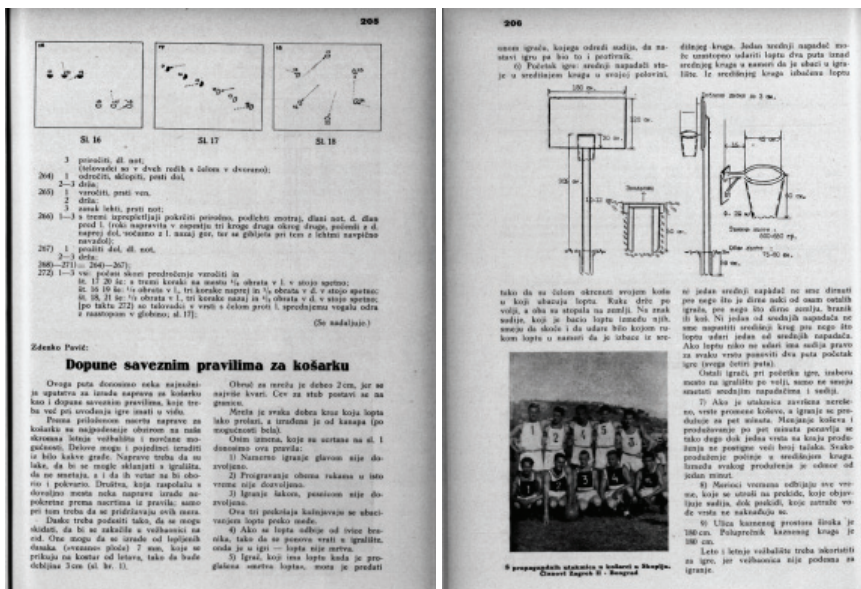


Fig. 2 Zdenko Pavić's article in *Soko*, issue no. 5, dated May 15, 1938
Source: Serbian National Library, Belgrade

(1) the letter of SAKY to the International Basketball Federation in which this date is given as the date for Skopje competition, i.e. June 28, 1937, and (2) it is difficult to expect that the picture from the *Soko* magazine could have been issued in May with the championship being held in 1938.

The weather conditions probably did not allow the game to be played before the end of April or beginning of May, and it is also unlikely for a periodical magazine in those years to be that up-to-date.

The competition itself hosted the following three men's teams: Belgrade X, Zagreb II and Štip. The games were played on the playground on the so-called "Russian beach".

The players from Zagreb II were initially informed that the games would be played in Skopje, where only a children's playground existed, which was later checked by the members of both teams just a day before the competition started. Upon the inspection, the players from the three teams had no other remarks except that the hoops were a bit smaller than normal. Soon after that, the teams from Zagreb and Belgrade played an introductory game.

Kobali, the participant in the match, writes:

"I think it is interesting to note that we, the 'cvajers'², just as we arrived in Skopje, inspected the playground and noticed that it was some kind of a basketball court for children. The hoops (without nets) were smaller in diameter, so instead of 45 cm they were less than 35 cm. They were attached onto the boards at 2.5 meters instead of 3.05. We got to work and lifted the boards at a normal height but we still couldn't make the hoops larger. So as the game were played, it was possible to score only if you shoot from smaller distances and only if you do it very accurately. Otherwise you would miss. On the same day, i.e. a day before the official competition, we played the game against the Belgrade team and agreed that besides the hoop thing there were no other issues". (Kobali, 1986, 115)

Regarding the winner of the competition, there are two versions. According to Paunić "Štip won the match against Zagreb while Zagreb was successful against Belgrade... the game between Štip and Belgrade was not played because the Belgrade team refused to play against them, angry with the fact that they lost to Zagreb". (Paunić, 1982, 426)

Kobali claims that team from Zagreb won the competition: "Only three teams registered (Zagreb II was the winner of the competition, Belgrade X the runner-up and the third place went to the Sokol association from Štip)". (Kobali, 1971, 7)

According to Paunić the latter version is much more likely to have happened, taking into consideration the quality of basketball in Zagreb back in those days. (Paunić, 1980, 426).

In his text entitled "The Beginnings of Basketball in Zagreb" published in 1986, Kobali remembers it differently: "There were only three teams that had entered the competition, i.e. Belgrade X, Zagreb II and Štip. Only two games were played. Zagreb won against Štip in the first game and then beat Belgrade X (I do not remember the result). The runner-up game between Štip and Belgrade X was not played due to some misunderstanding". (Kobali, 1986, 115)

The Zagreb II team line-up included the following players: Tomislav Vrkljan, Zdenko Tončić, Milan Kobali, Johan Ames and Franjo Birtić. The Sokol team of Belgrade X was

²Cvajers, a nickname for the members of the Zagreb II Sokol association.

represented by: Lavadanović, Dinić, and other three players who could not be identified from the picture (Fig. 3).

The women's competition was not held.



Fig. 3 "Presentational tournament in basketball" on *Russian beach* in Skoplje in 1936 (Back row, in Sokol jerseys, members of Belgrade X: 2 Lavadanović, 3 Dinić, others unknown; Front row Zagreb II members: 1 Vrkljan, 2 Tončić, 3 Kobali, 4 Ames and 5 Birtić). Source: Paunić (1982, 603)

THE CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE SOKOL ASSOCIATION OF THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA IN BOROVO

The annual program of the Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia included a planned state level basketball competition for the season of 1940/41. The tournament was due to be played by the end of September 1940. The planned activities took place from September 28-30 at *Batin Stadion*. The head office of SAKY, with the assistance of the Borovo Sokol association, managed the competition. The instructional course for basketball and volleyball was held on Saturday, September 28, the competition took place on Sunday 29, while the refereeing exams were held on Monday, September 30, 1940.

The Sokol Association of Borovo and SAKY provided the competitors and course attendants with room and board, respectively.

The basketball teams from the following seven Sokol regions participated in this competition: Belgrade, Karlovac, Osijek, Petrovgrad³, Sarajevo, Sušak and Zagreb. There were 170 men and women players in 15 different teams (6 men senior teams, 5 men junior teams, 2 women senior teams and 2 women junior teams).

Two days before the championship, on September 27, 1940, *Politika* a newspaper from Belgrade (Fig. 4) published an article regarding the up-coming sport event in Borovo entitled "Basketball and Volleyball in Borovo". The article reads, among other things, as follows:

³The name for Zrenjanin in those days (n.b.)

"The preparations for the Sokol competition in basketball, under the auspices of SAKY, are under way in Borovo. Basketball is a new game introduced by the Sokol associations. It has a multiple effect on both physical and mental abilities of men. It develops many capabilities: speed, stamina, mental focus, etc. This game is known for an expression of intelligence, liveliness and fitness. It is played by both men and women." (Politika, September 26, 1940, 13)



Fig. 4 *Politika*, the newspaper, dated September 27, 1940

Source: *Politika* archives (www.politika.rs/Stranice/Arhiva.sr.html)

On Saturday, September 28, the state level course for basketball and volleyball was held. The course was managed by the competitive games department director, Zdenko Pavić, from the SAKY general directorate, assisted by Rafael Ban and Marjan Maržan. There were 33 Sokol members from different Sokol regions, who attended the course.

The opening ceremony started on Sunday, September 29, at 6.30. In the stands, as guests of honour, the following individuals attended the match: dr Vladimir Belajčić, deputy director of SAKY; Ivan Kovač, director general of SAKY; Milica Šepa, women deputy director of SAKY; Branko Polić, deputy director general of SAKY; Tomo Maksimović, director of Sokol Association in Borovo, and other members of the directorate (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Stadium of *Bata* factory in Borovo, September 1940. The opening ceremony of the first Yugoslav basketball championship. The first in front, Zdenko Pavić (wearing white).

Source: the owner of the photo is unknown

The opening ceremony started with the raising of the national flag and playing of the national anthem.

"The flag's honour guard was made by the Sokol members from Borovo. A speech was given by dr Belajčić on the behalf of the SAKY, who put an emphasis on the codes of competitiveness and cavalry at Sokol games. He also pointed out the importance of the games in the light of patriotic duties." (Maržan, 1940, 4)

The games were played at *Bata Stadium*. According to Pavlović (2000, 47) the games were played on three courts marked up by chalk on the football pitch of *Bata Stadium*.

There were six teams from the following towns: Karlovac, Petrovgrad, Zagreb, Sušak, Osijek and Belgrade. Three games were played in group one: Karlovac – Petrovgrad 10-8; Zagreb - Karlovac 59-12; and Zagreb-Petrovgrad 61-6. In group two, three more games were played: Sušak - Osijek 48-6; Belgrade - Osijek 40-8; and Sušak - Belgrade 31-23.

The final match was played between the teams from Zagreb and Sušak. The result was 45-12 for Zagreb. The following players lined-up for the winning team: Milan Kobali, Zdenko Tončić, Johan Anes, Franjo Birtić, Mileta Tešin, Franjo Pučko, Zlatko Kovačević, Zvonimir Neferović, Viktor Podboj and Tomislav Vrkljan. (Fig. 6)

The junior competition hosted five teams: Petrovgrad, Sarajevo, Zagreb, Belgrade and Karlovac. Three games were played in group one: Petrovgrad – Sarajevo 36-2; Zagreb – Sarajevo 41-1; and Zagreb – Petrovgrad 14-9. In group two only one game was played: Belgrade – Karlovac 16-6 (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6 The winning team of Zagreb II. Back row: Milan Kobali (3), Zdenko Tončić (4), John Ames (5), Franjo Birtić (6), Mileta Tešin (7). Front row: Franjo Pučko (8), Zlatko Kovačević (9), Zvonimir Neferović (11), Viktor Podboj (12), Tomislav Vrkljan (10). Source: Beganović et al. (2005, 51)



Fig. 7 September 1940, the junior team of Zagreb II at Bata stadium – the juniors of Sarajevo (wearing white) Source: The owner of the photo is Z. Neferović, according to Paunić (1982, 615)

In the final match Zagreb beat Belgrade 16-6. During the first half, "it was very difficult for Zagreb juniors to defeat their opponents before the second half". (Maržan, 1940, 4) Here are some quotes about the games from the entire competition (Fig. 8):

"There were some quite intense and interesting games going on. A semi-final game between Belgrade and Sušak was very exciting and technically subtle. The winning team met the Zagreb II squad in the finals, which won the competition in the end by defeating Sušak with their beautiful and refined performance... the Zagreb Sokols presented themselves as a mighty team in all competitive games played by Sokol members." (Maržan, 1940, 4)



Fig. 8 Marijan Maržan's report from the championship in Borovo in the Soko gazette no. 40, 1940
Source: Serbian National Library, Belgrade

One of the players from the match between Belgrade and Zagreb, Miodrag Stefanović, a player on the Belgrade team, remembers some details about the game:

"... Vasa is open so I'm passing the ball to him, the result is 8:7 for Zagreb team, Kraucer fouls him but the referee... Vasa now has 4 personal fouls and is fouled out, he's crying... we are all depressed. Only Maja is happy with the result, more than happy I would say. They congratulate us, the members of Zagreb team, saying that we are as good as them... That's how the Borovo tournament ended. It was one of the most beautiful competitions, which I will always remember. That was life. That was something worth living for. Maybe the best moments of my life. The moments of friendship, one of those you never forget... and one of those that will never return. The event in Borovo inspired us to practice even more and to revenge on Zagreb team or to forget about basketball for good..." (according to Paunić, 1982, 303)

According to Švegar (1987), the Karlovac Sokol regional team was represented by the following players: Dušan Vešović, Milan Mrvoš, Milan Gabrić, Branko Romčević, Branko Sablić, Ljubiša Sablić, Ante Tešija, Žarko Hajdin and Josip Odhazel. Jovan Tomić and Zdenko Tončić, born in Karlovac, played for the Zagreb basketball team although they were the initiators of Karlovac basketball activities.

The women's tournament had competitions with four teams from Belgrade and Zagreb (two senior and two junior teams respectively). Two matches were played. The senior team game was won by the Belgrade team.

The following players were on the Zagreb team: Desa Dodig, Branka Neferović, Mira Neferović, Zora Kozjak, Božica Mervar and Vanda Grisogono. (Fig 9)

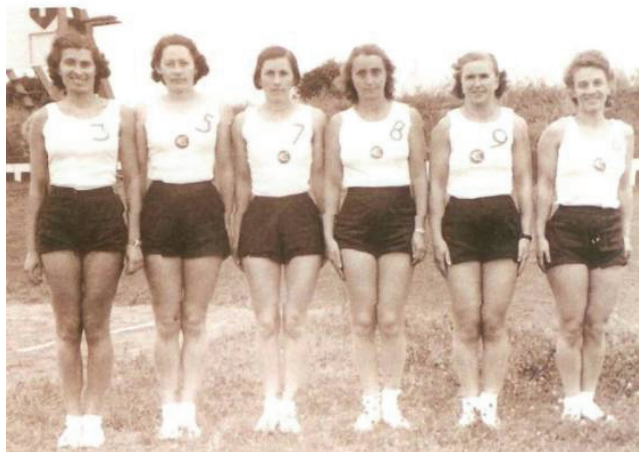


Fig. 9 Women's basketball team of Zagreb II: From left to right: Desa Dodig, Branka Neferović, Mira Neferović, Zora Kozjak, Božica Mervar and Vanda Grisogono. Source: Beganović et al. (2005, 51)

Ružica Radovanović⁴, a player on the Belgrade team, recollects the moments from this game as the only scorer during the entire match:

"... in the second half I got the ball and made the shot... as I always loved to play forward on the left side... it suited me better... and I scored... the first and the last one in the game... we celebrated that... I don't know how we did it... suddenly... I don't know how... I became a sort of a hero... I realized... that I contributed to my town's only victory, which made me so overwhelmed that I managed to graduate the same year... I spent every day on the court that year shooting the ball... when I became a freshman at the Faculty⁵... that's probably why my head teacher took me as a teaching assistant... I knew much about basketball... the rules of the game also... I even passed the refereeing exam in Borovo... those were the two big things for me from Borovo... I guess this was probably something that meant a great deal for me and kept me going... basketball made it all possible for me...". (according to Paunić, 1982, 303)

The game between the junior teams of Belgrade and Zagreb ended with a final score 20-0 for the Zagreb team.

According to Maržan's report, the games were refereed by the following referees: Zdenko Pavić, Božo Stefanini, Josip Rapajić, Josip Bingula and Selimir Radovanović". (Maržan, 1940, 4)

Pavlović (2000, 47) says that Stevica Čolović⁶ and Borivoje Jovanović⁷ also took part in the refereeing.

The doctor on duty was dr Jovan Novaković.

The Yugoslav National Championship in Basketball 1940 was won by the following teams: men's senior team from Zagreb, women's senior team from Belgrade, men's junior team from Zagreb and women's junior team from Zagreb.

According to Maržan's report, the competition was held in " perfect order with the competitors singing the national anthem at the closing ceremony." (Maržan, 1940, 4)

The closing ceremony took place in the gym of the hosting Sokol association at 5.00 p.m. The travelling cup was awarded by Tomo Maksimović, the director of Borovo Sokol Association.

The team of Zagreb Sokol was presented with the cup by deputy director of the SAKY, dr Vladimir Belajčić, who congratulated the Zagreb Sokol members for their success and result in his speech.

On behalf of the winning team, dr Stanko Tončić, the director of Zagreb Sokol Association said the following in his speech:

"This victory, won in a fair game, makes me proud, not just for the mere fact of winning the game, but for the fact that our Sokol Association has

⁴Ružica Radovanović, later an official in the *Red Star*, Belgrade basketball club and Yugoslav Olympic Committee, gained her first insights into basketball by being instructed by professor Maržan on the playground of *Matica* (former facility of the Faculty of Physical Education). Together with Sofija Mladenović (1923), Mira and Ljiljana Petrović, Nena Šešlija, Aleksandra Dakić, Branka Cipruš, they went on to form the first team of *Red Star*.

⁵Physical Education School

⁶He was later one of the leading basketball referees in Yugoslavia.

⁷He was later the national coach of Yugoslavia, as well as a professor at the Faculty of Physical Education.

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PRVA KOŠARKAŠKA TAKMIČENJA U KRALJEVINI JUGOSLAVIJI

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Košarka se na prostorima Kraljevine Jugoslavije počela igrati 1919. godine, među sokolskom i školskom omladinom. Prve utakmice počinju da se odigravaju polovinom 1922. godine. Na Župskom sokolskom sletu, 28. i 29. juna 1922. godine, u Mariboru, održana su takmičenja u košarci, a u Drugoj muškoj beogradskoj gimnaziji je, školske 1923/24. godine, održano prvenstvo škole. Kako se košarka prvo počela igrati među sokolskom omladinom, u sokolskim društvima, logično je da su Sokoli bili inicijatori i organizatori prvih košarkaških takmičenja i prvenstava u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji. Prvi pokušaj da se održi prvenstvo desio se na Sokolskom sletu, 28. juna 1937. godine u Skopju, kada su se takmičile tri sokolske ekipe. Prvo prvenstvo Saveza sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije je održano 28. i 29. septembra 1940. godine u Borovu. Na takmičenju su učestvovalе košarkaške ekipe iz sedam sokolskih župa. Takmičilo se 170 Sokola i Sokolica, raspoređenih u 15 ekipa. Prvenstvo Jugoslavije su osvojili: u kategoriji članova ekipa sokolske župe Zagreb; u kategoriji članica, članice sokolske župe Beograd; u kategoriji naraštajaca, naraštajci iz Zagreba; i u kategoriji naraštajki, naraštajke iz Zagreba.

Ključne reči: košarka, Sokoli, takmičenje, prvenstvo, Jugoslavija.