

THE AMBIVALENT LEGACY OF THE 1977 NBA FINALS

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INTRODUCTION

After several up-and-down years, the NBA seemed at last to have turned the corner after the 1977 NBA Finals.¹ The series, which saw the Portland Trail Blazers defeat the Philadelphia 76ers, had achieved unprecedented television ratings. It was the capstone on a year that had witnessed record attendance in both the regular season and playoffs,² the successful merger with the rival ABA and the settlement of the longstanding *Oscar Robertson* labor litigation.³

The series itself had presented a classic contrast between the team-focus of Portland and the individual talent of Philadelphia.⁴ Moreover, the series served as a coming out party of sorts for the league’s two most marketable players: Julius Erving and Bill Walton.⁵ The two seemed to have had the potential to create a proto-“Magic”-Bird rivalry.⁶ One star was African-American, was the league’s most exciting player, and was polished and at ease with the media and the public. The other was white, was the master of fundamentals and team play, but was distant from the press and the public.⁷

Yet, despite these encouraging signs, the 1977 Finals would leave an ambivalent legacy. In the immediate term, the success of the Finals proved fleeting as the series itself and its participants dramatized many of the problems that would haunt the league for the next several years. In the longer term, however, the 1977 Finals and its participants also planted the seeds for the league’s redemption and helped usher in the modern game: how it is played, how it is marketed and how it became widely popular. Using memoirs, contemporary magazine and newspaper accounts, television broadcasts as well as secondary sources, this presentation will argue that the 1977 Finals encapsulated both the problems and the promise of the NBA in the coming years.

I. FALSE DAWN: THE IMMEDIATE LEGACY OF THE 1977 FINALS

The success of the 1977 Finals proved short lived. Instead of heralding a “Golden Age” for the league, the late-1970s and early 1980s represented the doldrums for the NBA marked by: 1) violence; 2) drug abuse; 3) perceptions of selfish play, loafing players and overpaid athletes; and 4) racial concerns.⁸

A. Violence

The 1977 Finals witnessed one of the highest profile brawls in modern sports history. During Game Two, before a live national television audience, a fight broke out, culminating in Philadelphia’s Darryl Dawkins going toe-to-toe against Portland’s Maurice Lucas.⁹ Fans, players and coaches poured on to the floor to join the melee, which had the makings of a riot.¹⁰ The tension was evident to all as CBS announcer Brett Musberger yelled: “Somebody do something!”¹¹ Fortunately, Lucas and Dawkins were separated and arena security eventually cleared the court of fans. But the incident left an indelible impression.¹²

That fall, *Sports Illustrated* celebrated the role of “the enforcer” in its professional basketball preview, which included a cover shot of Lucas.¹³ The 1977-78 season was barely underway when the league’s premier player, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—in response to an elbow—punched Kent Benson, fracturing Benson’s jaw and his own hand.¹⁴ That December, Jabbar’s teammate, Kermit Washington—one of the enforcers profiled by *Sports Illustrated*—almost killed Houston Rocket Rudy Tomjanovich with a punch during an altercation.¹⁵

The 1977 Finals—with its standoff between Lucas and Dawkins—seemed to sow the seeds of the league’s violent image.¹⁶

B. Drug Abuse

At the time of the 1977 Finals, the league’s drug problem was less evident than brawling but it was beginning to draw public attention.¹⁷ Drug use was common on both teams. On May 5, 1976—just a year before the Finals—76er Joe Bryant was involved in the first high-profile arrest of an NBA player involving hard drugs.¹⁸ Bryant had been pulled over by Philadelphia police with cocaine in his car.¹⁹

Dawkins was candid about his own cocaine use during the 1976-77 campaign.²⁰ He recalled that that season “I was . . . toking and snorting . . . and having a high time.”²¹

Yet another 76er, Terry Furlow, was suspected of using hard drugs during the 1976-77 season. Indeed, his friend “Magic” Johnson speculated that drug use may have prompted Philadelphia to trade Furlow after the Finals.²² Tragically, matters came to a head in the early morning hours of May 23, 1980—three years and a day after the start of the 1977 Finals and barely four years after Bryant’s arrest.²³ Furlow’s vehicle collided with a utility pole in Linndale, Ohio killing him instantly.²⁴ A port-mortem indicated that he had ingested cocaine and valium.²⁵ Furlow appears to have been the first drug-related NBA fatality.²⁶ His passing helped trigger a devastating *Los Angeles Times* story in August 1980 which estimated that perhaps ¾ of the NBA used cocaine.²⁷

Yet, Philadelphia was not the only team in the Finals that used drugs. Walton’s housemate, Jack Scott, spent a good deal of time with the Blazers. He wrote in 1978 that “it is accurate and gives a true view of life in the NBA to mention that more players indulge in the kind of coke you snort than the kind you drink.”²⁸

The drug problem was poised to emerge as a major, public concern for the NBA in the years to come and participants in the 1977 Finals played a significant part in this unwelcome development.

C. Selfish Play

One of the knocks on the NBA in the late 1970s was the perception of selfish athletes.²⁹ The Blazers’ exquisite teamwork was one reason they were welcomed by so many fans. By contrast, Philadelphia was seen as the prototypical, ball-hogging team.³⁰ The poster boy in this regard was Lloyd Free.³¹ Following a 76er loss earlier in the playoffs, he shrugged: “I got my double figures. I’m doing my job.”³² During the series, Free was not shy about shooting even though he was injured.³³

Bryant was not afraid to shoot either.³⁴ During the Finals, CBS color commentator Rick Barry remarked of the Philadelphia native: “there is a man who is one of the most offensive-minded men you are ever going to see.”³⁵ Furlow was cast out of the same mold. Though Furlow played limited minutes in the Finals, he made the most of it, jacking up shots at a prodigious rate.³⁶

D. Loafing Players

Another criticism of the NBA at the time was that players did not play hard.³⁷ In this respect, Philadelphia's effort often left much to be desired. In his memoir, Dawkins freely admitted to tanking toward the end of the series: "I was still in a funk [from the Lucas fight]. I had no heart to play with these guys, and since I wasn't getting the ball anyway, I stopped rebounding and playing defense."³⁸ 76er practices were notorious for their disarray and lethargy.³⁹

E. Overpaid Players

Another problem the NBA had to navigate in the 1970s was the perception that its players were overpaid.⁴⁰ No team fit the bill better than the 76ers.⁴¹ The \$6 million that Philadelphia paid for Erving's services attached to him the uncomplimentary nickname "the \$6 million man."⁴² Philadelphia had also shelled out big money for George McGinnis to lure him from the ABA. As two journalists opined: "The 76ers were put together with lots of cold hard cash."⁴³ This bred resentment against Philadelphia and seemed to underscore negative views of NBA players as a whole.⁴⁴

F. Racial Division

The 1977 Finals also crystalized the issue of race in the NBA in the 1970s.⁴⁵ This emerged in a number of overlapping ways.

1. Team Demographics

The 76ers were seen as the "black" team and the Blazers the "white" team. Lending some superficial support for this notion was that Portland's best and most visible player was Walton who was white.⁴⁶ Bob Gross and Dave Twardzik were also white, giving the Blazers three white starters during the regular season.⁴⁷ Moreover, the population of the city of Portland was overwhelmingly white. Nonetheless, this label of Portland as a "white team" was misleading as seven of its twelve players were African-American.⁴⁸ Moreover, key Portland players were black: Lucas, Lionel Hollins and Johnny Davis.⁴⁹

By contrast, nine Philadelphia players and four of its starters were African-American.⁵⁰ The 76ers' best and most visible player, Erving, was black. The same was also true of the team's number-two star, McGinnis. And, as a city, Philadelphia had a sizable African-American population.⁵¹ This "black team" label stuck even though Philadelphia had key white players in Doug Collins and Steve Mix.⁵²

2. Style of Play

The racial divide was also seen at the time to include style of play.⁵³ The 76ers were thought to play a "black," playground style,⁵⁴ a holdover from the ABA with its greater emphasis on one-on-one moves, dunking and individual expressiveness.⁵⁵ At the same time, Portland players were thought to play "white." Walton and Gross were masters of fundamentals; passing, cutting and defense.⁵⁶ Twardzik was seemingly the consummate white overachiever.⁵⁷

It is tempting to see this prevailing "black/white" style dichotomy as solely the product of the views of white journalists and fans. However, Dawkins—who was African American—was full-throated in his belief that the 76ers were indeed "a black team" and the Blazers a "white" team.⁵⁸

This "white" versus "black" style often blended into moral terms:⁵⁹ the "good" Blazers versus the "bad" 76ers.⁶⁰ The "good" Blazers were thought to manifest the timeless values of teamwork and shared sacrifice while the 76ers were thought to reflect individualism run amok.⁶¹

3. Openly Racist Sentiment

And, of course, sometimes race was discussed in the most crude, jarring terms. Following the series' conclusion, the headline of one *Philadelphia Daily News* column blared the words "The 76ers were Heroes, Not Just a Bunch of N[*****s] Who Choke." Writing in ostensible defense of Philadelphia, the columnist wrote that:

there were no N[*****s] on the 76ers In middle class white Philadelphia there will be conversations about the team's lack of character and heart. In the working-class white neighborhoods, the talk will be about how the N[*****s] choked. Everyone, in other words, will be saying the same thing.⁶²

In sum, there is a lot to unpack in the racial divide in the 1977 Finals: the relative number of black versus white players, style of play and open use of racial slurs.

G. False Dawn

Alas, despite the record television ratings, star power, clash of styles, and exciting play, the 1977 Finals would prove to be a false dawn for the NBA.⁶³ For one, there would be no Finals rematch featuring the promising Blazer-76er team rivalry and the individual duel between Erving and Walton.⁶⁴

Instead, the 1978 Finals pitted the Washington Bullets and Seattle Super Sonics which was deemed by *Sports Illustrated* to be “about as exciting as the pro bowlers’ tour.”⁶⁵ The Bullets-Sonics rematch in the 1979 Finals was more of the same. These two Finals series so discouraged CBS executives that the famed Game Six of the 1980 Finals between Erving’s 76ers and the Los Angeles Lakers would be aired on tape delay.⁶⁶

II. THE 1977 FINALS AND THE NBA REVIVAL

Though the success of the 1977 Finals would prove fleeting in the immediate term, in the long run, it helped point the way toward the NBA’s rebirth in the mid-1980s.⁶⁷

A. The Game of Basketball in Transition

The 1976-77 season and that year’s NBA Finals epitomized basketball in transition. The season entailed the absorption of four ABA teams and dozens of ABA players into the NBA.⁶⁸ The Finals manifested this transition of style and personnel. Portland—with the premium it placed on teamwork and the center position—represented the traditional, NBA style of basketball.⁶⁹ The 76ers, on the other hand, reflected the more modern game, played with an ABA flair.⁷⁰ With reduced emphasis on the center position and with its greater focus on skilled wing players and individual brilliance, the 76ers were the way of the future.⁷¹ The 76er style of play encouraged greater athletic displays and self-expression on the court.⁷²

B. The Culture of Basketball in Transition

1. The Glorification of Individual Play

Not only was the game itself in transition as reflected by the 1977 Finals so too was the culture surrounding the sport. Portland obviously won the series on the court but, in many ways, Philadelphia won from a cultural and historical point of view.⁷³ Erving and the 76ers’ run to Finals capped off a season-long legitimization of ABA players and the ABA game.⁷⁴ Today, the notion that the modern professional game owes much to the ABA is virtually beyond dispute.⁷⁵

Philadelphia's shot of choice—the dunk—soon became the signature aspect of professional basketball.⁷⁶ The trend toward celebrating individual brilliance—particularly through the dunk—has been magnified by ESPN highlights, the internet, social media, and indeed the NBA's own marketing efforts and has contributed mightily to the league's success beginning in the mid-1980s.⁷⁷

In the early 1980s, the league created NBA Entertainment as part of a broader effort to market the professional game.⁷⁸ It did so by emphasizing the game's individual stars rather than team rivalries.⁷⁹ One of NBA Entertainment's more memorable ads showed highlights with the Hall and Oates' song "One on One" playing in the background.⁸⁰ It was an unmistakable league endorsement of individual play, particularly dunking. Indeed, two players from the 1977 Philadelphia squad—Erving and Dawkins—were featured prominently in the ad.⁸¹ Walton and Lucas were nowhere to be found. This ad campaign stood in stark contrast to the CBS intros prior to its NBA broadcasts in the 1970s which showed only faceless, neon silhouettes of players dribbling, passing, and shooting.⁸²

The emphasis the league would place on spectacular individual play in the 1980s derived in no small part from the popularity of Erving. After toiling in semi-obscure in the ABA, the 76er star displayed his talents to the nation in the 1977 Finals and became the league's preeminent star.⁸³ His dunking, in particular, left an enduring impression.⁸⁴ Indeed, Erving's dunks over Gross and over Walton in Game 6 remain among the league's iconic images.⁸⁵

Erving's teammate, Dawkins, also had a groundbreaking influence on the modern game through the stuff. The 76er center was the first player to widely popularize power dunking,⁸⁶ demonstrating this ability during the 1977 Finals.⁸⁷ Just over two years after the Finals Dawkins cemented his reputation by destroying two NBA backboards.⁸⁸ While others before Dawkins had destroyed backboards,⁸⁹ his efforts were captured on video which garnered widespread attention.⁹⁰ Shaquille O'Neal has acknowledged Dawkins as the "father of the power dunk."⁹¹

Dawkins' two backboard demolitions not only promoted power dunking by encouraging emulation, they led to the NBA changing its equipment.⁹² In light of Dawkins' actions, the NBA introduced breakaway rims during the 1981-82 season.⁹³ The effect, not surprisingly, was to encourage still more power dunking and showmanship.⁹⁴

2. Rise of the Superteams

The way the 76ers were assembled also reflected the wave of the future. The franchise quickly became labeled the “best team money can buy.”⁹⁵ As noted, Philadelphia had spent \$6 million to acquire Erving and the year before had lured McGinnis from the ABA for a pretty penny.⁹⁶ As the age of NBA free agency opened up following settlement of the *Robertson* suit, Philadelphia presaged the “superteams” of the 2000s.⁹⁷

3. Young Players

Philadelphia was at the vanguard of yet another cultural aspect of the NBA: the signing of high school players. Dawkins was the first player to go to the NBA without playing in college.⁹⁸ This trend of promising young prospects going straight to the NBA would not take off immediately but, like that of superteams, it would explode a generation later.⁹⁹

4. Commercial Endorsements and Branding

The 1977 Finals and its participants also heralded the rise of commercial endorsements for African-American NBA players as well as self-branding efforts.¹⁰⁰ During the 1977 Finals, Erving was the centerpiece of television commercials for Converse shoes and the Peace Corps.¹⁰¹ Despite the racial divide exposed by the Finals, Erving was at the vanguard of the gradual acceptance of African-American athletes as major corporate pitchmen, a development that would take off with Michael Jordan in the late 1980s.¹⁰² With respect to branding, one profile piece noted that Erving “is aware that [his ‘nice-guy image’] . . . add[s] up under the economic heading of ‘Doctor J’; [and he] is proud [of his] Q ratings . . . Julius is well aware of what went into the creation and maintenance of Doctor J, and he will do almost anything to keep that image from being defiled.”¹⁰³

Other 76ers were also at the forefront of self-branding. Free termed himself “All World” and later legally changed his name to “World” B. Free.¹⁰⁴ Dawkins enthusiastically promoted the moniker “Chocolate Thunder.”¹⁰⁵ He also named his dunks.¹⁰⁶ The efforts of Free and Dawkins to promote their own nicknames preceded self-marketing efforts by players that have since become routine.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the 1977 Finals and its participants are somewhat of a paradox, reflecting and heralding many of the challenges that would face the league in the immediate term but also paving the way for significant longer-term developments that would drive the NBA’s rise in the mid-1980s and beyond.

* The panelist, an author and attorney living in Washington, D.C., would like to thank Professor Adam Criblez for his comments on this paper and Ellie Bufkin and Jeff Beideman for their research assistance.

¹ David Friedman, “Chocolate Thunder and Short Shorts: The NBA in the 1970s,” in *Basketball in America: From the Playgrounds to Jordan’s Game and Beyond*, Bob Batchelor ed. (New York: Haworth Press, 2005), 224.

² John A. Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist: The Relationship and Broadcast Strategies of the NBA and Television Networks* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2001), 91, 92. During the 1976-77 season, the NBA attracted the highest level of fans per game in league history. Association for Professional Basketball Research, “NBA/ABA Home Attendance Totals,” found at <http://www.apbr.org/attendance.html>. It was a figure, however, that would decline over the next two seasons and that would be exceeded only once until 1984-85, the height of the Bird-“Magic” rivalry. What is notable is that this downward drift in attendance was unique to basketball among professional sports during this period. Paul Attner, “Fan Interest Off Despite Poll Results,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 1979 (basketball “is treading water while its two biggest rivals . . . baseball and football . . . are coasting along at an unprecedented level of popularity”). Like the NBA, MLB set a record for average attendance in 1977. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/misc.shtml>. However, unlike the NBA, MLB average attendance increased, with one exception, every year until the 1981 baseball strike and then resumed its upward climb. *Ibid.* Similarly, average NFL attendance increased every year from 1977 until pro football’s own strike season in 1982. *Official 2018 National Football League Record & Fact Book* (New York: NFL, 2018), 539. Average NHL attendance following the 1976-77 season dipped the next year but then resumed a steady annual climb into the mid-1980s. “NHL Avg. Regular Season Attendance 1970-1985,” The Hockey Database, <http://www.hockeydb.com/nhl-attendance/>. Thus, in the years following the 1977 Finals, professional basketball stood alone among the four major American team sports for its declining average attendance.

³ Play on the court would later be termed by one prominent authority as “the most exciting of the decade, bar none.” Adam J. Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts: Dr. J, Pistol Pete & the Birth of the Modern NBA* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017), 177. The momentum of the regular season continued into the Finals which, given the merger of the two leagues, conclusively established—for the first time in a decade—the best team in professional basketball.

⁴ Sam Goldaper, “76ers and Blazers Match Contrasting Styles in Final,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1977. One writer commented simply that “[s]eldom has an NBA Finals provided a more interesting matchup than” Portland and Philadelphia. Glenn Dickey, *The History of Professional Basketball Since 1896* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day, 1982), 183.

⁵ As an indication of marketability, during the 1976 and 1977 calendar years, *Sports Illustrated* ran eleven covers involving professional basketball—five featured either Erving or Walton. *Sports Illustrated Vault*, “1970s,” <https://www.si.com/vault/archive/1970s>.

⁶ The Finals telecasts emphasized the star power and skills of both players. The media often paired the two in its discussion of the league writ large. David DuPree, “It’s a Stylish Game They Play,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 1978; William Leggett, “Slam-Dunked by the Ratings,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 16, 1978; see also Jack Scott, *Bill Walton: On the Road with the Portland Trail Blazers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978), 236-37.

⁷ Stan Hochman, “Walton Shows He’s Where He Belongs,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 31, 1977. Admittedly, there are some limits to this comparison. Erving and Walton had no college rivalry against one another as had “Magic” and Bird. Moreover, Erving—though a good passer—was not the extraordinary passer that Walton, “Magic,” and Bird were. Nonetheless, Erving had only one fewer assist than Walton in the 1977 Finals.

Even if the budding rivalry between the teams and between Walton and Erving had continued, the league would likely not have blossomed to the extent it later did in the mid-1980s given a number of factors, such as the absence of widespread cable television, the lack of a clear drug policy, and the absence of an energetic and media savvy commissioner. Cf. Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 259-260; Lawrence E. Ziewacz, “Dr. J, Bird, Magic, Jordan, and the Detroit Bad Boys: The NBA in the 1980s,” in *Basketball in America*, 246-47, 250.

⁸ See, e.g., Adam J. Criblez, “White Men Playing a Black Man’s Game: Basketball’s ‘Great White Hopes’ of the 1970s,” 42 *Journal of Sport History* 371, 373, 378 (2015); see also Fortunato, *Assist*, 25. There were a number of stories at the time bemoaning the NBA’s problems. See, e.g., Malcolm Moran, “Status of Pro Basketball Worrying Players’ Group,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1979.

⁹ Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 196. In the words of one authority, the two combatants resembled two “1920s bare knuckle boxers.” Bill Simmons, *The Book of Basketball: The NBA According to the Sports Guy* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 132.

¹⁰ John Feinstein, *The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, And the Fight that Changed Basketball Forever* (Boston: Little Brown, 2002), 21 (quoting Brent Musberger: “This [wa]s bad, very bad. Here we ha[d] the league’s showcase event and we’re looking at a near riot.”); see also Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 196. The head of NBA officiating at the time, John Nucatola, commented that the fight was “one of the most unpleasant I’ve ever witnessed.” Mary Flannery, “Wallop in Wallet?,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 27, 1977.

¹¹ CBS NBA Broadcast, Game 2, May 26, 1977, found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB2gGUuyTUU>. The scene has been described as one of “sheer terror.” “1977 NBA Finals Fight,” *Down Goes Frazier: Forgotten Moments From The Decade That Changed Sports Television*, found at <https://sportsinthe70s.wordpress.com/2017/10/17/1977-nba-finals-fight/>; see also Feinstein, *The Punch*, 21 (calling it “a frightening fight”); *ibid.* at 194 (“The Dawkins-Lucas fight was scary.”). Musberger later reflected:

It was a frightening moment. And the timing of it was important. This was not just another fight in another NBA game. This was two big, strong, men who were really angry taking swings at one another, and no one could stop them. Plus, it was the finals, it was prime-time national TV. It could not have made [NBA Commissioner] Larry O'Brien happy to see this happening in the middle of his showcase.

Feinstein, *Punch*, 194 (quoting Musberger).

¹² Feinstein, *Punch*, 194 (quoting Musberger) (“It left you with a very bad taste in your mouth.”). Following the Finals the league owners delegated greater authority to Commissioner O’Brien to mete out fines and suspensions for brawling. *Ibid.*, 195.

¹³ “The Enforcers: Portland’s Maurice Lucas,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 31, 1977; *see also* Feinstein, *The Punch*, 39-40; Simmons, *Basketball*, 132.

¹⁴ Simmons, *Basketball*, 133; Feinstein, *Punch*, 5, 21-22, 41, 82, 210.

¹⁵ Feinstein, *The Punch*, 3-15; Simmons, *Basketball*, 132-33. Both of these high-profile 1977 regular-season brawls involved African-American players assaulting white players, which did little to endear the league to potential white fans. Simmons, *Basketball*, 133-34.

¹⁶ Simmons, *Basketball*, 131-34; Feinstein, *The Punch*, 14, 21, 39-40, 85, 194, 195; *cf.* Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 204. Forty-one total brawls were recorded that season. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Too Black’: Race in the ‘Dark Ages’ of the National Basketball Association,” *1 International Journal of Sport & Society* 223, 228 (2010).

¹⁷ Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Too Black,’” 227.

¹⁸ Roland Lazenby, *Showboat: The Life of Kobe Bryant* (New York: Little, Brown, 2016), 11-17, 58-62. The first arrest of an NBA player for hard drugs was apparently Greg Howard in 1972, though it seems to have been less publicized than Bryant’s. “NBA Crime Library: Complete Database of all NBA Arrests,” *found at* <https://nbacrimelibrary.com/category/5-reason-for-arrest/drugs-cocaine/page/2/>; Lazenby, *Showboat*, 58-62.

¹⁹ Lazenby, *Showboat*, 11-17.

²⁰ Darryl Dawkins and Charley Rosen, *Chocolate Thunder* (Toronto, Canada: Sport Media Publishing, 2003), 72, 88, 100, 101, 102, 103, 106, 199. In 1985, when Dawkins was with the New Jersey Nets, he was socializing with teammate and recovering cocaine addict, Michael Ray Richardson, following a team Christmas party. Dawkins had been drinking with Richardson even though the latter was supposed to be sober. Dawkins left Richardson in the hands of a younger teammate. Richardson evaded his minder, peeled out with a woman and went on a multi-day cocaine bender that effectively ended his NBA career. Charley Rosen, *Sugar: Michael Ray Richardson, Eighties Excess, and the NBA* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2018), 3-10.

²¹ Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, 72.

²² Earvin “Magic” Johnson with William Novak, *My Life* (New York: Random House, 1992), 40; *see also* Pat Williams and Bill Lyon, *We Owed You One! The Uphill Struggle of the Philadelphia 76ers* (Wilmington, Delaware: TriMark Publishing Company, 1983), 80. Furlow’s freebase habit quickly became widely known around the league. George Vecsey, “A Life Ends; Another is Cause for Concern,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1980; Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, 103; Johnson, *Life*, 40-41; Eric Woodyard, “Remembering Terry Furlow and the tragedy of a once-rising talent for the Utah Jazz,” *Deseret News*, October 18, 2018; Bruce Newman, “Blinded by the Light,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 7, 1981.

²³ Eric Woodyard, “Gone too Soon,” *SLAM*, August, 2010; Eric Woodward, “Family, friends remember Flint basketball legend Terry Furlow 33 years after tragic death May 23, 1980,” May 23, 2013, *found at* https://www.mlive.com/sports/flint/2013/05/terry_furlow.html.

²⁴ Woodyard, “Family, friends”; Carrie Seidman, “Furlow of Utah Jazz Dies in Crash in Ohio,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1980.

²⁵ Woodyard, “Family, friends”; *see also* Seidman, “Furlow.”

²⁶ Chris Cobbs, “NBA and Cocaine: Nothing to Snort at,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1980.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; *see also* Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Too Black,’” 227. Spencer Haywood, who battled addiction to freebasing cocaine, put the percentage at 80. Spencer Hayward (with Scott Ostler), *The Rise, The Fall, The Recovery* (New York: Amistad Press, 1992), 190. Dawkins “figured half the players were snorting.” Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, 101. The Cobbs article led to a host of follow-on stories. Vecsey, “A Life Ends”; David Dupree, “NBA Drug Use: High-Risk Recreation,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 1982; Newman, “Blinded by the Light”; Bob Sakamoto, “Cocaine—Scourge of the NBA,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1986. In Bryant and Furlow, the 76ers had players involved in two of the first and highest profile hard drug incidents of the era. 76er coach Gene Shue was later forced to address a major drug problem when he coached Spencer Haywood of the Washington Bullets and the latter relapsed into free basing cocaine. Ultimately, Haywood was kicked off the team. Haywood, *The Rise*, 235-37.

²⁸ Scott, *Walton*, xx; *see also ibid.*, 54 (“I’ve seen a lot of drug usage among players”). Scott did not name names, commenting elsewhere that “if [he] were to name that player who came over to our house who’d taken so many downers, then that would [have] change[d] things” between him and Walton. Mary Flannery, “Walton and Scott: A Unique Bond,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 24, 1977. Portland players clearly used milder illicit drugs such as marijuana. Walton, for example, was a regular reader of *High Times* magazine. Roland Lazenby, *The NBA Finals: The Official Illustrated History* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing, 1990), 166; Curry Kirkpatrick, “All For One Sure Beats One For All,” *Sports Illustrated*, June 12, 1977.

²⁹ See, e.g., “Let’s Put Life Into the NBA,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1979 (“‘Selfishness’ is seen to be rampant. Players are disdaining defense, complaining that their salaries aren’t astronomical enough, demanding to be traded to some team where they will fit in, or where everyone will fit around them.”); see also Bruce Newman, “The NBA Goes Back to School,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 9, 1981.

³⁰ In this regard, 76er coach Gene Shue happily conceded the point: “We were a totally undisciplined team.” David Higdon, “Blazermania,” found at <http://www.nba.com/encyclopedia/blazermania.html>. Perhaps not unrelated to the team’s selfish behavior was that, at a personal level, 76er team chemistry was poor. Sam Goldaper, “76ers’ Unhappy Season Ends Unhappily,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1977 (Philadelphia was “a team of players with exaggerated egos in a season of exaggerated hopes, magic moments, inflamed temperaments, discontent and divisive public utterances.”); see also Pat Williams, *Ahead of the Game: The Pat Williams Story* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 200. For instance, Mix and Bryant got into a heated altercation after Game Three. Dick Weiss, “Is Angry Mix Rocking Sixers’ Boat,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 31, 1977; Frank Coffey and Tom Biracree, *The Pride of Portland* (New York: Everest House, 1979), 92. According to Dawkins, the 76er locker room was divided between Erving adherents and McGinnis partisans with Dawkins and Free as the only neutrals. Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, 70.

³¹ Newman, “Back to School.” Erving recalled: “Lloyd Free . . . [could] put up shots at a remarkable rate. Lloyd [was] a shooter. He [would] put it up from the locker room.” Julius Erving (with Karl Taro), *Dr. J: The Autobiography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 307.

³² Nathan George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 191. A year after leaving Philadelphia, Free remarked that “[p]eople talk about winning, but it’s not really about winning. Times have changed. Today it’s a show. People want to see that razzle-dazzle—guys taking crazy shots and hitting them. You have to have some jazz in the game, ‘cause if you don’t, people won’t come out.” John Papanek, “Born Free and Living Up to His Name: Lloyd Free, Philly’s Gift to San Diego, Is the Most Spectacular Show in Town,” *Sports Illustrated*, January 22, 1979. Remarks such as these ensured that Free became a *bête noir* for NBA purists. To many Free epitomized the 76ers more than any other. In the words of one Beantown sportswriter, “Here, [in Boston] where the pick-and-roll is considered an art form and rocket launchers are made to feel ashamed, Free is damned as . . . the symbolic conductor of this strut-and-glitter . . . show that passes for a professional club. Bob Ryan, who preaches five-man basketball with the zeal of a Baptist revivalist and the logic of Jesuit professor, detests Free and everything he represents.” John Powers, *The Short Season: A Boston Celtics Diary, 1977-1978* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 77.

³³ Among those in the regular 76er rotation, Free averaged more shots per minute in the Finals than anyone except Erving. “1977 NBA Finals: Trail Blazers vs. 76ers,” found at <https://www.basketball-reference.com/playoffs/1977-nba-finals-trail-blazers-vs-76ers.html>.

³⁴ Simmons, *Basketball*, 129 n.76 (“Joe Bryant . . . was an unapologetic gunner”).

³⁵ CBS NBA Broadcast, Game 3, found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxyTRO3KO40>. Similarly, play-by-play announcer Brent Musberger commented: “there are times when Joe thinks he is the Doctor at the offensive end.” *Ibid.* In Game Two, Bryant put up six shots in as many minutes, prompting Musberger to remark with a chuckle, “he is not shy that is for sure.” CBS NBA Broadcast, Game 2.

³⁶ Furlow averaged more shots per minute than any player in the series. “1977 NBA Finals: Trail Blazers vs. 76ers,” found at <https://www.basketball-reference.com/playoffs/1977-nba-finals-trail-blazers-vs-76ers.html>. Philadelphia selfishness was reflected in ways other than shooting. The actions of some 76ers toward McGinnis are instructive in this respect. The forward was going through a crisis in confidence as he seemed unable to hit an outside shot. Williams and Lyon, *We Owed You*, 60; Blaine Johnson, *What’s Happenin’?: A Revealing Journey Through the World of Professional Basketball* (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1978), 243; Dick Weiss, “Even Erving Needs Time to Recycle,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 31, 1977. McGinnis also battled a groin injury during the series. Unless McGinnis got back on track it seemed almost certain Philadelphia would lose to Portland. Yet many teammates openly ridiculed McGinnis. When he would put up shots in practice during the Finals, McGinnis’ efforts were met with catcalls of “Brick!” from his fellow 76ers. Johnson, *What’s Happenin’?*, 243; Coffey and Biracree, *Pride*, 92; Kirkpatrick, “All For One.” In no way could this have benefitted McGinnis or 76er title hopes.

³⁷ Attner, “Fan Interest”; “Life Into the N.B.A.”

³⁸ Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, 80. For more on Dawkins’ own take on his work habits see DuPree, “Stylish” (quoting Dawkins: “honest hard work . . . [is] [t]he kind [of thing] I like to avoid.”). Curry Kirkpatrick described the 76er effort in Game Four: “the 76ers (minus Dr. J), loafed, sulked, laughed and quit.” Kirkpatrick, “All for One.” Kirkpatrick described the scene in the 76er locker room after Game Five: “Bryant again accused some of his teammates of giving up . . . Free said he didn’t want to play Sunday [in Game Six].” *Ibid.*

³⁹ Dick Weiss, “Blazers Win in 6 Games,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 6, 1977 (quoting Erving) (“We’ve never believed in orderly practices or doing things by the book.”). One journalist commented after observing a 76er practice:

when the 76ers took the court . . . [t]hey were looser than [when] I had seen them practice . . . in November. [Caldwell] Jones wore a visor on backward. Free had a baseball cap on sideways. Dawkins wore a floppy beach hat and the string on his sweat pants was drawn up around his . . . neck. No one shot a layup without putting something crazy on it . . . I found myself thinking, this team doesn’t deserve to win anything. They don’t work hard.

Johnson, *What's Happenin'?*, 243. Other observers concurred. Goldaper, "Unhappy Season" ("Most of their practice sessions had the appearance of a schoolyard get-together where players had to win to keep possession of the basketball court."); Williams and Lyon, *We Owed You One*, 36-37 ("George McGinnis . . . was a corner cutter. In every practice drill, in every lap run, George always did the minimum, just enough to get by. . . . [T]he younger players . . . tend[ed] to follow whatever example the star set. Players are great imitators.").

During the Finals, the *Philadelphia Daily News* ran a photo of 76er coach Gene Shue addressing the team in practice with his players in various states of inattention, one spinning a ball on his finger, one adjusting his socks and others seeming only partly interested. The caption read: "Shue . . . has the undivided (?) attention of the players." Dick Weiss, "Real Dr. J Stands up in Playoff," *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 25, 1977.

⁴⁰ Criblez, "Great White Hopes," 373.

⁴¹ Scott, *Walton*, xxi.

⁴² Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 178. Walton was also criticized for his salary though it was partly linked to his political views. *Ibid.*, 192. Average NBA salaries had increased by more than 500% during the 1970s. Friedman, "Chocolate Thunder," 197.

⁴³ Coffey and Biracree, *Pride*, 70. The manager of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team, Sparky Anderson, commented about Philadelphia's outlay of resources for players: "I hate the 76ers. I hate them for what they stand for. If that's what it takes to win, then something stinks." Jim Barniak, "Dixon Seeks Rebirth of Philly Basketball," *The Philadelphia Bulletin*, May 29, 1977.

⁴⁴ Williams and Lyon, *We Owe You One*, 61-62.

⁴⁵ This was not the first time the NBA Finals would be seen as a racial proxy. The 1957 and 1958 Finals between Boston and St. Louis, the 1974 Finals between Boston and Milwaukee, and the three 1980s Finals between Boston and Los Angeles all had racial undercurrents. Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 110-111; John Matthew Smith, "'Gifts that God Didn't Give': White Hopes, Basketball, and the Legend of Larry Bird," 13 *Massachusetts Historical Review* 1, 5 (2011); Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, "Introduction" in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 7-8.

⁴⁶ Though Walton recoiled at being labeled the "Great White Hope," it was a label that stuck. Dickey, *History*, 178; Criblez, "Great White Hopes," 377. By the time of the 1977 Finals, the NBA's existing white stars—John Havlicek, Dave Cowens, Bill Bradley, Pete Maravich, and Rick Barry—had already made their NBA Finals appearances and were either nearing retirement or, within a season or two, finding their careers in rapid decline. Smith, "'Gifts,'" 6.

⁴⁷ Twardzik was injured in the second round of the playoffs and was replaced in the starting lineup by Johnny Davis who was African American. Though Twardzik was close to full recovery by the start of the Finals, the Blazers continued to start Davis. Nonetheless, Twardzik logged a good number of minutes in the series. Reserves Larry Steele and Wally Walker gave Portland a total of five white players.

⁴⁸ During the 1975-76 season, Portland's squad suffered from racial discord as its two leading scorers Sidney Wicks (black) and Geoff Petrie (white) loathed each other. Dickey, *History*, 179.

⁴⁹ Lucas was the team's leading scorer and second-leading rebounder, Hollins led the team in assists and steals and Davis was a starter in the Finals. Lloyd Neal, Herm Gilliam, and Corky Calhoun each logged important minutes off the bench for Portland in the Finals. Robin Jones, who was African American, was also a reserve.

⁵⁰ The starters were Erving, McGinnis, Jones, and Bibby. The five other African-American players were Dawkins, Harvey Catchings, Bryant, Free, and Furlow. From a racial composition standpoint, the Blazers were less than 60 percent black, reflecting the NBA reality of the late 1960s. John Papanek, "There's an Ill Wind Blowing for the NBA," *Sports Illustrated*, February 26, 1979. The 76ers were 75 percent black reflecting where the NBA would be at the end of the 1970s. *Ibid.* At the end of the 1970s and well into the 1980s, the NBA was widely thought to be "too black" for white fans. George Vecsey, "White Heroes and Professional Basketball," *New York Times*, June 9, 1980. One NBA official was quoted in 1985: "It's race, pure and simple. No major sport comes up against it the way we do. It's just difficult to get a lot of people to watch huge, intelligent, millionaire black people on television." Mark Jacobson, "Doctor: One and Only," *Esquire*, February 1985; see also Ray Didinger, "Lost in City of Winners," *Philadelphia Daily News*, December 5, 1980; Bill Fleischman, "Sixers Poll-axed by Fans," *Philadelphia Daily News*, December 3, 1980.

⁵¹ Cf. Boyd and Shropshire, "Introduction," 8-9.

⁵² Collins was the team's second leading scorer in the Finals and Mix was a former All-Star for Philadelphia and an important player off the bench. Reserve guard Mike Dunleavy was also white.

⁵³ Jeff Greenfield, "The Black and White Truth About Basketball: A skin-deep theory of style," *Esquire*, October 1975; DuPree, "Stylish."

⁵⁴ Criblez, "Great White Hopes," 374 ("The quintessential 'black' team of the 1970s [was] the 1976-77 Philadelphia 76ers.").

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* (the "ABA . . . became known as a 'black' league The NBA was, by comparison, perceived as a 'white' league"); George, *Elevating*, 181 ("the ABA [was] a league dominated by the Black athletic aesthetic."); Ziewacz, "NBA in the 1980s," 247 ("dunking was a legacy of the American Basketball Association's 1976 All-Star game [contest] . . . which Julius Erving won [W]ith the

merging of the leagues, such high flyers as Dr. J and David Thompson could provide the same electrifying moments as they had in their old league”); *see also* Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, “Introduction: Basketball Jones: A New World Order?” in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 6-7; *cf.* Davis W. Houck, “Attacking the Rim: The Cultural Politics of Dunking,” in *Basketball Jones*, 156.

⁵⁶ Criblez, “Great White Hopes,” 374 (the “Portland Trail Blazers . . . captured the essence of ‘white’ basketball.”).

⁵⁷ David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 2d ed. (New York: Hyperion, 2009), 198-203.

⁵⁸ Of the differing styles of play, Dawkins wrote:

It’s not politically correct to make this kind of definition these days, but [the Sixers] played black basketball and Portland played white basketball.

The white players at the core of Portland’s success were Dave Twardzik, Bobby Gross, Larry Steele and Bill Walton. . . . The black guys on Portland also played white basketball . . . All of the Trail Blazers, white and black, played a controlled style of ball. Whereas [the Sixers] used picks just to set up isolation situations, their picks were designed to give their shooters enough time and space to get their feet set before shooting . . .

The Sixers, on the other hand, were much more flamboyant. [The Sixers] had more individual moves, more off-balance shots, more fancy passes, more dunks, more entertaining one-on-one stuff. [The Sixers] just wanted to run and gun. Everybody wanted to shoot and everybody wanted to be the man . . . [The Sixers] had too many stars and not enough role players willing to do the dirty work—like setting picks, making the pass that leads to the assist pass, getting back on defense and boxing out.

Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, 75-77; *see also Red Hot and Rollin’: A Retrospection of the Portland Trail Blazers’ 1976-77 Championship Season* Matt Love ed. (Pacific City, OR: Nestucca Spit Press, 2007), 86-87.

⁵⁹ *See, e.g.,* Scott, *Walton*, 241, 271-272, 275-276; Halberstam, *Breaks*, 18; *cf.* Scott, *Walton*, 130, 239, 285.

⁶⁰ Zander Hollander, *The Modern Encyclopedia of Basketball* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979), 351 (“Basketball fans perceived [the Finals] as a morality play—the Blazers’ team style against the free-lance Sixers.”); Julius “The Doctor” Erving *Documentary* (2013), found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvO4ZqZC5aA> (quoting Bob Ryan) (“The 1977 Finals were almost a morality play in the eyes of a lot of people. This was the basketball . . . old world taking a stand against these invaders and protecting the women and children from these crazy people.”); Halberstam, *Breaks*, 18 (“When Portland won [the Series], the phone rang off the hook in the Portland coach’s offices with congratulations from other coaches, professional and college. There were hundreds of telegrams and letters thanking the coach and the players for helping their programs and making it easier to coach basketball the right way. Some people thought there were racial overtones in this, as if white basketball had beaten out black basketball”); *see also* Dickey, *History*, 186; Scott, *Walton*, 241, 271-72, 275-76.

⁶¹ Racial concerns as to style of play did not break down solely according to team loyalties, however. David Halberstam wrote in his classic *The Breaks of the Game*:

[Portland Coach Jack] Ramsay, in . . . pregame sessions, had emphasized [to his team] that while Erving was a great player, there were limits to his game, he was not an exceptional passer and he did not play strong defense. Because Erving, both as an athlete and as a man, intelligent, proud, respected, was so important to black players, he was to them an almost mythic figure, the epitome of the *black* game, there were some blacks on the Portland team who somewhat resented Ramsay’s briefings. It was as though he were denigrating one of their gods.

Halberstam, *Breaks*, 304.

⁶² Larry McMullen, “The 76ers were Heroes, Not Just a Bunch of Niggers Who Choke,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 6, 1977; *see also* Scott, *Walton*, 275. Some have argued that the racial divide helped television ratings for the Finals. Simmons, *Basketball*, 129.

⁶³ Attner, “Fan Interest” (“Two seasons ago, when the American Basketball Association merged with the NBA, interest skyrocketed. For the first time, attendance surged over the 10 million figure and TV ratings recorded a peak. Fans flocked to see if Julius Erving and friends were for real. The league, however, has not been able to build on that momentum. As soon as the Erving mystique evaporated, some of the association’s glaring problems returned from temporary hibernation.”); Friedman, “Chocolate Thunder,” 225 (after the 1976-1977 season “[p]ro basketball seemed to be living up to its billing as the ‘Sport of the Seventies.’ The era of good feelings after the merger was short-lived, however.”).

⁶⁴ John Papanek, “The Big E Wants an MVP,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 16, 1978 (“The collapse of the Philadelphia 76ers, and injuries to Bill Walton and other Portland Trail Blazers, tainted the Bullets’ win over the Seattle SuperSonics.”); *cf.* Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 218-220. The Blazers started the next season 50-10, but then a host of injuries later in the season—most significantly to Walton while playing the 76ers—ensured the Blazers would not repeat. Friedman, “Chocolate Thunder,” 219; Bill Walton, *Back From the Dead*

(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 199. Even though the 76ers won five more regular season games than the year before, the team was unable to defend its Eastern Conference crown.

Walton would only play a total of 14 games over the next four seasons combined. Criblez, “Great White Hopes,” 378; “Bill Walton,” <https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/w/waltobi01.html>; Simmons, *Basketball*, 130 (“Walton’s injury was practically a death blow until Larry and Magic showed up.”). The very next year a *Sports Illustrated* article called into question Erving’s level of play. Curry Kirkpatrick, “Hey, What’s Up with Doc? Have Julius Erving’s Skills Diminished or is He the Victim of Clogging Defenses and His Teammates’ Inept, Selfish Play?,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 26, 1979; see also “Let’s Put Life Into the N.B.A.”

⁶⁵ Papanek, “Ill Wind”; see also Simmons, *Basketball*, 130 (“the ’78 and ’79 Finals were the only NBA Finals of the past half century that didn’t have a recognizable superstar or a big-market team.”). The Bullets team that year is routinely cited as the worst modern NBA Championship team. Ben Shapiro, “Power Ranking the 9 Worst NBA Championship Teams,” April 20, 2012, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1151905-power-ranking-the-9-worst-nba-championship-teams#slide0>; Ryan Davis, “15 Worst NBA Champions in Modern League History,” May 22, 2017, <https://www.sportscasting.com/nba/worst-nba-champions-in-league-history/>.

⁶⁶ In the fall of 1978, William Leggett of *Sports Illustrated* wrote:

CBS . . . went into the [1977-78] season hoping that the [television ratings] numbers would increase; after all, the 1977 Philadelphia-Portland championship series, starring Bill Walton and Julius Erving, had upped the pro basketball Niensens to alltime highs. . . . [S]ome CBS affiliates have reexamined the NBA TV package. What they have found is that in all but that Walton-Erving year, pro basket[ball] is unsuccessful as prime-time entertainment.

“Slam-Dunked.”

⁶⁷ Cf. Friedman, “Chocolate Thunder,” 227 (“The spirit of the ABA . . . played a major part in the 1980s renaissance . . . players such as Erving . . . were among the most successful and popular stars in the league”).

⁶⁸ The season has been likened to a “blender” and a “cannonball . . . splash . . . in a pool.” Lazenby, *NBA Finals*, 164; Simmons, *Basketball*, 128.

⁶⁹ Criblez, “Great White Hopes,” 374.

⁷⁰ Simmons, *Basketball*, 129 (“The Sixers were painted as . . . a product of the ABA and its ‘look at me’ culture”); Jackie MacMullan, Rafe Bartholomew and Dan Klores, *Basketball: A Love Story* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2018), 184 (quoting Bill Simmons: “You watch those tapes of the NBA from ’71 to ’76, it’s a very white sport. It’s slow; it’s played a certain way. The speed and dunker guys were all in the ABA. Then they came over and there’s the speed athletes, but you also have the old-school guys, and they’re all trying to figure out how to play with each other.”); MacMullan, Bartholomew and Klores, *Basketball*, 184 (quoting George Karl: the 1970s was when “the game got more integrated. We got the athlete into the game more. It just seemed like the NBA wasn’t taking the chances that the ABA was taking. And because of the chances that the ABA took, the game got better.”). 76ers Erving, McGinnis, Jones and Mix were all ABA products. Blazers Lucas and Twardzik played in the ABA before coming to Portland.

⁷¹ Cf. George, *Elevating the Game*, 181; Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 175. The rise of wing players is reflected in NBA MVP award winners. Beginning in the 1959-1960 season, centers won 20 out of the next 21 league MVP Awards. (Oscar Robertson being the exception for the 1963-1964 season). The hammerlock on the award by centers was finally broken by Erving in 1980-1981. Since Dr. J’s breakthrough, centers have won only 9 of the past 37 MVP awards and none in the past decade. (Obviously, the NBA’s adoption of the ABA’s three-point line in 1979-1980 played a major role in contributing to wing play by opening up spacing on the floor).

⁷² Jacobson, “Doctor” (Erving “successfully transmuted the black playground and brought [it] to its most sumptuous fruition. He once and for all . . . blackified pro basketball.”). The 76ers showed that individual brilliance can carry a team deep into the playoffs, draw fans, and media interest, increase television viewership, and drive marketing efforts. (This is not unlike Wilt Chamberlain with the Philadelphia and San Francisco Warriors in the early 1960s, Michael Jordan with the Chicago Bulls in the late 1980s, Allen Iverson with the 76ers in 2001, LeBron James with the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2007 and 2018). At the same time, the Blazers proved again the notion that individual brilliance can only carry a team so far. Some level of teamwork coupled with overall team talent is required to win an NBA title.

⁷³ Portland’s cultural legacy in the state of Oregon was significant. See, e.g., *Red Hot and Rollin*, ’45-56, 63-78, 89-91, 93-95, 105-122. From a broader cultural perspective, however, Portland did not blaze a new trail so much as carry on the winning tradition of the 1960s and 1970s Celtics and the early 1970s Knicks. In many ways, the modern NBA reflects a synthesis of the Portland and Philadelphia styles.

⁷⁴ Friedman, “Chocolate Thunder,” 216; cf. Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 137-138.

⁷⁵ Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 175-176; MacMullan, Bartholomew and Klores, *Basketball*, 185. NBA stalwart Walt Frazier commented that “the ABA came in and the transition to a speed, showtime type game really took off.” George, *Elevating the Game*, 181. Nelson George reflected: “[t]hat whole period [after the merger] was the most radical change in basketball that I’d ever seen. The NBA game basically became old-fashioned in a three-year period In the ABA, the three-point shot [was] opening the floor, and these above-the-rim

players were changing the game completely. Everyone feels like it happened with Magic and Bird, [but] it was happening all along.” MacMullan, Bartholomew and Klores, *Basketball*, 184.

⁷⁶ Houck, “Attacking the Rim,” 156-157.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 158-162, 165-167.

⁷⁸ Shawn Fury, “How NBA Entertainment Helped Save the League and Spread a Renaissance,” June 15, 2016, found at https://sports.vice.com/en_us/article/mgzgg3/how-nba-entertainment-helped-save-the-league-and-spread-a-renaissance.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; Smith, “Gifts,” 14-15; Fortunato, *Assist*, 67-68. ABC, which had broadcast NBA games in the early 1970s, had emphasized matchups between players rather than teams. Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 182. When CBS took over broadcasting rights from ABC in the mid 1970s, it got away from this approach and focused on regional matchups as opposed to games of national interest with star players. *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁰ “1987 – America’s Game – One On One,” https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=nba+action+is+fantastic+one+on+one. Notable is what the ad campaign did not feature. It did not play Canned Heat’s “Let’s Work Together” or a related song. The ad did not emphasize team rivalries, still less pick and rolls, crisp outlet passes or help defense. While another 1980s NBA ad did feature the Pointer Sisters’ song “Hot Together,” that ad did not promote team play either. The “together” conveyed a commonality between fans and players rather than among players. “NBA Action, It’s FANTastic – Hot Together Commercial (1988),” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLMzZoXVV6o>.

Other Stern-era NBA promotional efforts (e.g., “Inside Stuff,” “NBA Jam Session”) as well as a variety of private basketball-related ventures (e.g., *Slam* magazine) drew heavily upon the dunk. Houck, “Attacking the Rim,” 158-162. Indeed, it has become a familiar refrain that modern players are obsessed with the dunk to the detriment of fundamental skills. *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸¹ When the ad did show passing, the passes were creative and spectacular, not traditional, two-hand chest passes.

⁸² “NBA on CBS 1970s FULL Theme Song.3gp,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9yZhBTiFI>.

⁸³ *The Doctor Documentary* (quoting Michael Wilbon: “Even though the Trail Blazers won that series, by the time that finals was played Julius Erving was the star of the NBA.”); see also Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 144. Erving’s dunking and mid-air acrobatics were a sign of things to come in the likes of later players such as Michael Jordan, Dominique Wilkins, Vince Carter, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James. At the same time, given Walton’s injuries and aloofness and Abdul-Jabbar’s own standoffishness, Erving immediately became the league’s premier draw and public ambassador. *The Doctor Documentary*.

⁸⁴ Darren Rovell, “Julius Erving sells majority rights to ‘Dr. J’ name, image,” http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17651611/julius-erving-sells-majority-rights-dr-j-name-image, September 27, 2016 (“Erving [is] considered the father of the slam dunk.”).

⁸⁵ “Definitive Dunks: The 30 greatest dunks in NBA history,” FOX Sports, June 30, 2017, found at <https://www.foxsports.com/nba/story/definitive-dunks-the-30-greatest-dunks-in-nba-history-091916>.

⁸⁶ Kahlil Thomas, “Darryl Dawkins, the NBA’s First Premier Power Dunker, Dies at Age 58,” August 27, 2015, found at <https://doublegsports.com/darryl-dawkins-the-nbas-first-premier-power-dunker-dies-at-age-58/>; Houck, “Attacking the Rim,” 154-155, 159, 161.

⁸⁷ “Darryl Dawkins: Left Handed Slam Over Bill Walton,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih4vPh2rV4M>; “Darryl Dawkins Top Twenty Dunks,” Nos. 5 and 9, found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V7z1UY1WbE>.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., John Keilman, “This gadget really was a slam-dunk,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 4, 2005.

⁸⁹ Gus Johnson took down at least two backboards in the late 1960s and early 1970s and Chuck Connors did the same in 1946 in a pregame layup line. David Whitley, “Shattered: Dawkins made dunking history 39 years ago today,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 13, 2018; Fran Blinebury, “Thirty years ago, Dawkins dunked his way into immortality,” November 13, 2009, found at https://www.nba.com/2009/news/features/fran_blinebury/11/12/dawkins.dunk/.

⁹⁰ Whitley, “Shattered”; Blinebury, “Dawkins.” One author has written that Dawkins’ backboard breaking “was ground zero for the era when dunking became a celebrated art form and a staple for the nightly TV highlights.” Blinebury, “Dawkins.”

⁹¹ Evan Grossman, “Remembering Darryl Dawkins, and the Rims He Punished,” August 28, 2015, found at <https://www.mensjournal.com/adventure/remembering-darryl-dawkins-and-the-rims-he-punished-20150828/>.

⁹² Whitley, “Shattered” (“in a way, Dawkins invented an entire sporting good sub-industry. Every time a kid shoots at a rim, he or she pays a little homage to what happened Nov. 13, 1979 [when Dawkins shattered his first backboard].”)

⁹³ *Ibid.*, John Walters, “Backboard-Shattering NBA Legend Darryl Dawkins Dies at 58,” August 27, 2015, found at <https://www.newsweek.com/darryl-dawkins-366399>; Arin Spits, “How NBA Basketball Nets Evolved Over The Years,” November 12, 2016, <https://spoutly.com/editors-choice/how-nba-basketball-nets-evolved-over-the-years/>.

⁹⁴ Keilman, “Gadget” (breakaway rims “helped bring basketball into the age of the monster jam . . . [the invention] let increasingly athletic players power the ball through the hoop with little fear of breaking their wrists or shattering the backboard. Of course, it also gave them the chance to dangle after their slams, wagging their tongues, kicking their legs and driving purists nuts. . . . coaches . . . said the rims have encouraged players to spurn layups in favor of spectacular slams, confident they will emerge uninjured and ready to preen for the crowd.”).

⁹⁵ Goldaper, “Contrasting Styles.”

⁹⁶ Coffey and Biracree, *Pride*, 70.

⁹⁷ These include the mid-2000s Los Angeles Lakers with the additions of Pao Gasul and Lamar Odom, the 2007 Boston Celtics with the additions of Kevin Garrett and Ray Allen, the 2010 Miami Heat with LeBron James and Chris Bosh, and the 2019 Golden State Warriors with Kevin Durant and DeMarcus Cousins. They also include less successful attempts such as when the Lakers signed Karl Malone and Gary Payton in 2003, when Oklahoma City signed Carmelo Anthony and Paul George in 2017, and when the Brooklyn Nets signed the aging Boston duo of Pierce and Garrett in 2013.

There had been what might be considered “proto-superteams” before the 1977 76ers, such as the late 1960s and early 1970s Lakers, which added Chamberlain and the early 1970s Bucks, which added Robertson, and even the 1982 76ers, which added Moses Malone, but those teams added only one major player. The 76ers of 1976-77 broke the mold by adding *two* top players in just over a year through lucrative deals. This massive influx of outside talent for the 76ers marked a departure from the earlier supposed “superteams.” Cf. Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 10-11, 157-158, 178-79.

⁹⁸ Moses Malone had gone straight to the ABA out of high school the year prior to Dawkins. Bill Willoughby was drafted after Dawkins in the same 1975 draft. Friedman, “Chocolate Thunder,” 209-10 (“the signings of Malone, Dawkins, and Willoughby paved the way for” Garnett).

⁹⁹ Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 179. Later high school players would include Kevin Garnett, Kobe Bryant, Tracy McGrady and LeBron James.

¹⁰⁰ As a white player and one of the league’s biggest stars, Walton stood to reap major rewards from commercial endorsements but his antipathy (for a time) to corporate America, his left-wing political views, and his injuries foreclosed such opportunities. That said, in retirement, Walton put aside his qualms and did endorsements. “1993 - Reebok - Shaq, Russell, Chamberlain, Kareem, Walton” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nwb-ighjXZ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nwb-ighjXZ8;);

“Good Feet TV Commercial Featuring Bill Walton and Mary Lou Retton,” <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/7nLy/good-feet-featuring-bill-walton-and-mary-lou-retton>.

¹⁰¹ Rovell, “Julius Erving sells” (“In many ways, Erving was the original athlete-businessman for NBA players. His first deal with Converse was worth an unprecedented \$20,000. Erving was also part of the first licensed video game ‘Dr. J vs. Larry Bird,’ which was released by Electronic Arts in 1983.”); 1977 NBA Finals Broadcast; Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 141. That same year, Erving was pitching for Colgate toothpaste and Spalding basketballs. “1977 Colgate Toothpaste Ad: Julius ‘Dr. J’ Erving,” found at <http://www.atticpaper.com/proddetail.php?prod=1977-colgate-toothpaste-ad-julius-erving>; “1977 Rick Barry Dr. J Jack Davis Spalding basketball vintage print ad,” found at <https://www.ebay.com/itm/1977-Rick-Barry-Dr-J-Jack-Davis-art-Spalding-basketball-vintage-print-ad-/312562020514>. Within a few years of the 1977 Finals, Erving was endorsing Crest toothpaste, Coca-Cola, Dr. Scholl’s, Wilson sweat suits, Starter jackets, Lil’ Sport Basketball Hoops, Cigna Insurance, Sun Life of Canada, and Chapstick. *Doctor Documentary*; Samantha Stevenson, “Dr. J Playing a New Game,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1978; “Sports Studio,” found at <http://sportsstudio.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/6-27-1988-Dr-Scholls-Dr-J-2.jpg>; “Julius Erving—Dr. J for SunLife Insurance Print Ad—1978,” found at

<https://www.ebay.ca/itm/Julius-Erving-Dr-J-for-SunLife-Insurance-PRINT-AD-1978-Sun-Life-Assurance/192085980917?trkparms=aid%3D222007%26algo%3DSIM.MBE%26ao%3D2%26asc%3D20180124145912%26meid%3D6830a1016ccc43878d31bd013b737d3f%26pid%3D100005%26rk%3D2%26rkt%3D2%26sd%3D191849405842%26itm%3D192085980917&trksid=p2047675.c100005.m1851>; “Vintage 1980’s DR. J Starter Jacket Magazine Print Ad,” found at <https://www.collectors.com/sports-item/vintage-1980s-dr-j-starter-jacket-magazine-print-ad-sixers/-2527434845940518051>; “1983 Dr. J Julius Erving photo Lil’ Sport Basketball hoop net vintage print ad,” found at <https://www.ebay.com/itm/1983-Dr-J-Julius-Erving-photo-Lil-Sport-Basketball-hoop-net-vintage-print-ad-/312446491466>; “1985 Dr. J Julius Erving Cigna Original Vintage Photo Ad,” found at <https://www.ebay.com/itm/1985-Dr-J-Julius-Erving-Sixers-6-Basketball-Court-CignaOriginal-Vintage-Photo-Ad/153434674918?trkparms=aid%3D111001%26algo%3DREC.SEED%26ao%3D1%26asc%3D20180816085401%26meid%3Df02d313f5fd84200b211bfa83df8a06a%26pid%3D100970%26rk%3D1%26rkt%3D12%26sd%3D153434674918%26itm%3D153434674918&trksid=p2481888.c100970.m5481&trkparms=pageci%3A765032ff-6078-11e9-b1ab-74dbd1805251%7Cparentrq%3A277c2e0316a0a9e82f0ae907ffefaa39%7Ciid%3A1>. In retirement, Erving endorsed Dr. Pepper,

Wheaties, and Crown Royal. “Dr. J in Dr. Pepper commercial,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45CtQxlvnhM>; “Dr. J Soars Onto the Wheaties Box” found at <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/julius-dr-j-erving-during-dr-j-soars-onto-the-wheaties-box-news-photo/115402494>; “Crown Royal Dr. J Reign On 30,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ghoB4Eh5XY>.

¹⁰² *Doctor Documentary*; Stevenson, “New Game”; David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made* (New York: Random House, 1999), 135-47, 156-57, 177-84, 356. Despite Erving’s popularity, race remained the largest factor in making advertisers wary of associating their products with the NBA in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Smith, “‘Gifts,’” 14.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, African-American NBA players slowly began to do mainstream commercial endorsements. In 1966, Wilt Chamberlain began his association with Volkswagen with a famous television spot. “Wilt Chamberlain VW Commercial,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8s4BAB5fEY>. In 1969, Wilt Chamberlain and Oscar Robertson were part of a multi-sport

television spot for Maypo oatmeal. “Mickey Mantle and Other Professional Sports Figures in Maypo Commercial (1969),” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3rM2PLajEY>. In 1971, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Adidas inked an endorsement deal. Criblez, *Tall Tales*, 62. In 1973, Walt Frazier did the same with Puma. Jake Woolf, “Walt ‘Clyde’ Frazier is Still the NBA’s Greatest Style God—and He Knows It,” *GQ*, found at <https://www.gq.com/story/walt-clyde-frazier-puma-sneakers-style>. In 1973, Bill Russell did television commercials for ATT/Bell. “Bell System Commercial—1973—Bill Russell,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qla6WrmPXs0>. In 1976, Chamberlain did television commercials for Miller Lite. “Miller Lite ‘Wilt Chamberlain’ Commercial (1976),” found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZmvZ3_0zOQ. K.C. and Sam Jones did the same in 1977. “Retro 1977 Miller Beer KC Jones Sam Jones Commercial,” found at <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5t4056>.

¹⁰³ Jacobson, “Doctor.”

¹⁰⁴ This came after he had tried unsuccessfully to promote the moniker the “Prince of Midair.”

¹⁰⁵ Depending on the story, Dawkins either nicknamed himself “Chocolate Thunder” or Stevie Wonder did. Williams, *Ahead of the Game*, 214; Martin, “Dime Q&A: Darryl Dawkins Reveals The Origin of His Nickname And Recalls His First Dunk,” August 4, 2011, found at <https://uproxx.com/dimemag/dime-qa-darryl-dawkins-reveals-the-origin-of-his-nickname-and-recalls-his-first-dunk/2/>.

¹⁰⁶ The first shattered backboard dunk prompted Dawkins to christen it the “Chocolate Thunder Flyin’, Robinzine Cryin’, Teeth Shakin’, Glass-Breakin’, Rump Roastin’, Bun Toastin’, Wham, Bam, Glass Breaker I Am Jam.” Blinebury, “Dawkins.” Dawkins also claimed to be a resident of the Planet “Lovetron” where “interplanetary funkmanship” was the order of the day. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Dawkins, *Chocolate Thunder*, x-xi (quoting Charley Rosen) (“all of the subsequent high-stepping flamboyant personalities and boisterous dunkers, from Charles Barkley to Dennis Rodman to Vince Carter, owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Darryl Dawkins.”). Kobe Bryant, O’Neal and Dwight Howard would later follow Dawkins’ lead and give themselves monikers. Blinebury, “Dawkins.” Dennis Rodman constantly changed his hair color and took to wearing extravagant outfits, effectively using his image to promote himself. Rodman’s commercials capitalizing on his self-branding were legion. “Dennis Rodman Converse Commercial,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxGQ0JOAVY8>; “1996 Kodak Advantix Camera Dennis Rodman TV Commercial,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knbXgcEahXc>; “Dennis Rodman Foot Action commercial,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIZ17a8St9E>; “David Robinson and Dennis Rodman—1990’s Commercial,” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNYzbesuUX0>.