80s Era NBA + 40: Introduction
The "80s Era" Defined

By Michael Hamel

Three teams dominated the NBA in the 1980's: the Los Angeles Lakers, Boston Celtics and Philadelphia 76ers. They combined to win nine championships and appeared in the NBA Finals sixteen times during the decade. Their power was at its peak during the first eight years of that period when the three franchises combined to win every championship; other than the Houston Rockets in 1981 and 1986, no other team even reached the Finals. To me, these eight years form the "80s Era": beginning with the Lakers' selection of Magic Johnson in the June 1979 draft, and ending with their defeat of the Celtics in the 1987 Finals.

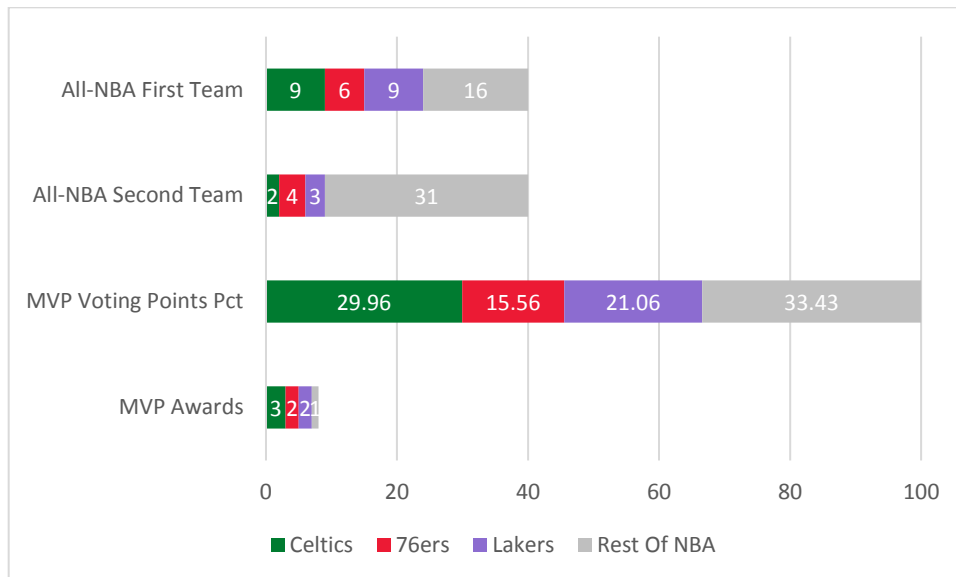| Season	Champion	Lost in Finals	Lost East Finals	Lost West Finals
1979-80	LAKERS	76ERS	CELTICS	SuperSonics
1980-81	CELTICS	Rockets	76ERS	Kings
1981-82	LAKERS	76ERS	CELTICS	Spurs
1982-83	76ERS	LAKERS	Bucks	Spurs
1983-84	CELTICS	LAKERS	Bucks	Suns
1984-85	LAKERS	CELTICS	76ERS	Nuggets
1985-86	CELTICS	Rockets	Bucks	LAKERS
1986-87	LAKERS	CELTICS	Pistons	SuperSonics

I argue that the years 1979 to 1987 were the most exciting years in the history of the NBA, second in importance only to the Bill Russell Era, when the game was transformed from a floor-bound, white-dominated sport into a more athletic and integrated NBA that laid the foundation for the game we still enjoy today. The 80s Era were not an idyllic time; the NBA overcame significant problems, including recreational drug use that ended the careers of many players prematurely, and several franchises suffered from poor ownership that contributed to their shaky financial status. However, in 1979-80 the NBA set a league attendance record and CBS reported that television ratings were up by fourteen percent—signs that the tide was turning.

The rivalry between the Celtics and Lakers stretched back to 1959, when Bill Russell and the Celtics swept rookie Elgin Baylor and the Minneapolis Lakers in four games. From 1959 through 1969, the Celtics played the Lakers (who moved to Los Angeles in 1960) in the Finals seven times and won every series. Boston's rivalry with Philadelphia also began in 1959, with the pro debut of Wilt Chamberlain that fall. The competition between Russell and Chamberlain was an instant sensation, and persevered as Wilt traveled between three different franchises. In 1959 the 76ers did not yet exist; Chamberlain began his career with the Philadelphia *Warriors*, who lost to the Celtics in the Eastern Finals twice. After the Warriors moved to San Francisco, Irv Kosloff and Ike Richman bought the Syracuse Nationals and moved them to Philadelphia, where they were re-christened as the 76ers. In 1965, the 76ers traded for Chamberlain, who made a triumphant return to the city. With Wilt in the fold, Philadelphia reached the Eastern Finals four years in a row, and won the NBA championship in 1967. But Chamberlain wore out his welcome with management, and in July 1968 he was traded to the Lakers to join Baylor and Jerry West. The trio of superstars led the Lakers back to the Finals, where they lost of the Celtics again.

Success came less frequently for the three franchises in the 1970's. Expansion had reduced the odds of all three clubs being good at the same time; in 1965 the NBA was a nine-team circuit, but by 1975 the league had doubled in size to eighteen teams, and the subsequent merger with the ABA added four more clubs. The Lakers, Celtics and 76ers all made the playoffs in the same season only *once*, in 1977. That season also featured the only playoff series between the rivals, as Philadelphia defeated Boston in the Eastern Conference Semifinals in seven games to end the Celtics one-year reign as champions.

In the 80s Era these dormant rivalries re-emerged. By 1984 former players K.C. Jones, Billy Cunningham and Pat Riley were the head coaches, and throughout this period the men in charge of the front office of each team had had long-time associations with their respective franchises (Red Auerbach, Jerry West/Bill Sharman and Pat Williams), which added some extra spice to their encounters. The three teams faced each other in the playoffs ten times, and their dominance of the Celtics, Lakers and 76ers extended to the regular season as well.
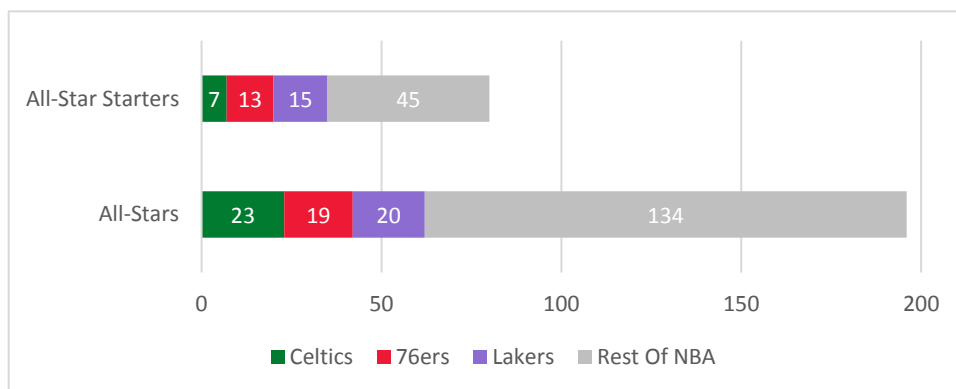
80s Era NBA Awards

MVP Awards

80	JABBAR
81	ERVING
82	Malone*
83	MALONE
84	BIRD
85	BIRD
86	BIRD
87	MAGIC

*With Rockets

All-Star Starters
(As voted by fans)

8	Erving (80-87)
7	Jabbar (80-86)
6	Magic (80,83-87)
6	Bird (82-87)
4	Malone (83-86)*
2	Worthy (86-87)
1	Archibald (82)
1	Cheeks (83)

*Also 80 (with Rockets)
 and 87 (with Bullets)

80s Era Regular Season Winning Percentages

Team	W	L	Pct.
Boston Celtics	641	244	.724
Los Angeles Lakers	634	248	.719
Philadelphia 76ers	552	289	.656
Milwaukee Bucks	512	310	.623
Portland Trail Blazers	417	360	.537
Atlanta Hawks	415	368	.530
Denver Nuggets	410	383	.517
Phoenix Suns	402	381	.513
Seattle SuperSonics	398	389	.506
Detroit Pistons	392	402	.494
San Antonio Spurs	382	397	.490
Dallas Mavericks	341	360	.486
Houston Rockets	393	415	.486
Washington Bullets	366	402	.477
Utah Jazz	344	435	.442
New York Knicks	331	431	.434
KC-Sacramento Kings	329	433	.432
Chicago Bulls	329	435	.431
New Jersey Nets	325	434	.428
Golden State Warriors	293	455	.392
Indiana Pacers	290	454	.390
Cleveland Cavaliers	272	475	.364
SD-Los Angeles Clippers	235	503	.318

The 80s Era also saw the NBA rise from a chaotic struggle with the ABA in the 1970's, as the merger between the leagues in 1976 and the dawn of (limited) free agency dramatically reshaped the process of building and maintaining a championship team. The arrival of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, and their fortunate placement with two of the NBA's classic franchises was only one factor; the growth of cable television, which brought increased coverage and millions of dollars in rights fees, was another. But the style of play, wide-open, fast-break basketball inspired by Magic and the Lakers, and complimented by the half-court, physically intense brand of basketball more commonly seen in the Eastern Conference, created a sport that was truly fun to watch. Bird and Magic were the centerpieces, seemingly able to do it all: score, rebound effectively, and ignite the fast break or find the open man in the half-court game with a sizzling pass. The rivalries between these three teams—Celtics, 76ers, Lakers; your favorite team was always listed first when you recited their names—raised the level of play even higher. The 76ers peaked in the first half of the 80s Era, playing the Celtics three years in a row in the Eastern Conference Finals, while the Lakers were dominant throughout, facing the 76ers in three bruising matchups in the Finals followed by three classics against the Celtics.

A comment about the selection of the years 1979 through 1987 as the focus of this series. Declaring that the 80s Era began with the arrival of Bird and Magic in the 1979-80 season is easy, but deciding when the 80s Era concluded is more difficult. 1987 fits best for three reasons. First, the Magic-led Lakers and the Bird-led Celtics played their last Finals series against each other that season; the two franchises would not meet again for the championship until 2008. (It would be up to the Pistons to face the Lakers in 1988 and 1989.) Second, Michael Jordan won his first MVP award in 1988, an early turning point as the "Jordan Era" began to take precedence. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the achievements of the 76ers in this period; too often the Celtics and Lakers take all of the attention away from the excellent teams in Philadelphia that gave both of them all they could handle. The 76ers faded after head coach Billy Cunningham resigned following their defeat in the Eastern Conference Finals in 1985, and two years later they were barely relevant in Julius Erving's farewell season. In 1988 they missed the playoffs for the first time in thirteen years. Ending the 80s Era with Erving's retirement is a more fitting conclusion.

Next time: Bird and Magic begin their NBA careers.