



80s Era NBA + 40: Part One

Opening Weekend – October 1979

By Michael Hamel

In October 1979, the NBA was a league that needed saving.

Commissioner Larry O'Brien was publically expressing confidence, telling reporters that "we've had our highest season ticket sales ever,"¹ but the league was embroiled in contentious labor talks with the NBA Players Association, had refused to increase rosters from 11 players back to 12 (a cost-cutting move put in place two years earlier), and had rolled back a one-year experiment of using three referees per game in order to save \$750,000.² TV ratings for the NBA on CBS had fallen 26 percent in 1978-79; 20 percent of the network's affiliates had refused to carry that season's playoff telecasts.³ On the court, the infusion of talent from the merger with the ABA three years earlier – led by Julius Erving – was offset by the loss of Bill Walton to injury that derailed what could have been the NBA's dominant team of the late 1970's, the Portland Trail Blazers.

Against this dire backdrop, the arrival of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, the stars of the NCAA Championship Game back in March, was welcome news. Both made their pro debuts on Friday night, October 12, 1979.

In Boston, Roger Twibell and Bob Cousy were at the Boston Garden for WBZ Channel 4, which broadcasted Larry Bird's debut live at 7:30 pm local time, pre-empting NBC's prime time lineup of *Diff'rent Strokes*; *Hello, Larry!*; and Lauren Bacall's guest star appearance on *The Rockford Files*. One night after future Hall of Famer Ray Bourque had scored his first NHL goal for the Boston Bruins on the Garden ice, Bird brought a capacity crowd of 15,320 to their feet during player introductions – with one fan releasing a white dove for emphasis – and then again with 3:22 left in the first quarter when he found Cedric Maxwell with a nifty pass on a fast break.⁴ Bird shot just 6-for-12 from the floor, explaining that: "It's the first time I've shot at the baskets here and I wasn't used to the rims."⁵ (The Celtics, "tenants" of the Bruins, had played no exhibition games in the building that fall, and were not allowed to practice there on game days.) But Celtics head coach Bill Fitch was more complimentary: "[Bird's] poise, his passing – he contributed... He said he would do what it took to win, and he did."⁶

Despite spending the final seven minutes of the game on the bench after picking up his fifth foul, Bird finished with 14 points, 10 rebounds, and 5 assists. Moses Malone, the league's reigning MVP, scored 31 and added 16 rebounds, but the Celtics won 114-106, with Detroit Pistons refugees Chris Ford and M.L. Carr combining for 32 points and several key plays down the stretch. Ford even took advantage of the NBA's new three-point field goal rule, making the first one in an official game. Bird faced a barrage of reporters afterwards and managed to flash some humor; when asked about the dove-releasing fan, Bird replied: "They should have kicked that guy in the backside."⁷

Magic Johnson would make his debut later that night in San Diego. In between, there were eight other games on the NBA schedule.

The New York Knicks were in Atlanta for a rare road opener against the Hawks. Fidel Castro, the president of Cuba, was in New York that evening, hosting a diplomatic reception at the Cuban Mission in midtown Manhattan after delivering a fiery speech at the United Nations earlier in the day.⁸ It is unlikely that Castro's guests were watching the Knicks on local station WOR Channel 9 – though maybe Game 3 of the World Series on ABC drew some attention from the former Cuban baseball star – but those who did caught a glimpse of the team's new look. The Knicks had dropped orange from their color palette, taking the court wearing their garish new red, white, and blue uniforms with "NEW YORK" unusually positioned *underneath* the numbers on the front, in an homage of sorts to the jerseys popularized by Al McGuire's Marquette University teams.⁹ ("At least we'll be

patriotic this season,”¹⁰ said team president Mike Burke.) Despite 22 points from rookie center Bill Cartwright, the Knicks lost 121-104.

Meanwhile, the Philadelphia 76ers opened their season with a mild upset of the defending Eastern Conference champion Washington Bullets at the Capital Centre. Julius Erving led the Sixers with 27 points, and got credit for an assist on Darryl Dawkins’s game winning shot with 14 seconds left.¹¹ The 22-year-old Dawkins (24 points and 18 rebounds) had demonstrated his willingness to rededicate himself to the game by arriving at training camp 10 to 15 pounds lighter than the previous year. “I can’t change my personality,” said the colorful Dawkins, who had turned pro immediately after high school in 1975, “[b]ut I think I’m going to tone my act down some this year.”¹²

In Phoenix, the Suns took six threes and made four while defeating the Golden State Warriors, 97-89. “It’s a little unnatural,” said Paul Westphal, who made both of his long-range attempts, “but you can learn to back up in a hurry when they start giving you an extra point for it.”¹³ In Kansas City, where the Kings were forced to play in Memorial Auditorium because Kemper Arena’s roof had collapsed during a storm in June, the Milwaukee Bucks’ Brian Winters missed a three-pointer in the closing seconds, and the Bucks fell, 105-103. “We were definitely going to try to win it right there,” according to his coach, Don Nelson. “Brian had the option of trying the three pointer if he felt he was open and he had his rhythm.”¹⁴ (Winters would end the season as the league’s sixth-best three-point shooter.)

In other action, the Detroit Pistons, led by their big man duo of Bob Lanier (20/10) and Bob McAdoo (23/7), overwhelmed the undersized Indiana Pacers, 114-105. Detroit coach Dick Vitale, who had spent the preseason bemoaning his team’s inconsistency, gushed after the game that “[Lanier] was just brilliant defensively,” and McAdoo “simply amazes me with some of the things he can do.”¹⁵ (Unfortunately for Dickie V, he was fired four weeks later after a 4-8 start.¹⁶) Meanwhile, New Jersey Nets fans went home happy – and with coupons for free chicken dinners – courtesy of a 102-95 victory over Cleveland. The free dinner promotion, which paid off when the Cavaliers failed to reach 100 points, was tied to an appearance by Ted Giannoulas in costume as “The Chicken,” formerly of San Diego.¹⁷

The newly-relocated Utah Jazz, who had contributed to the NBA’s increase in season ticket sales by setting a new franchise record, lost to the Portland Trail Blazers, 101-85. Portland fans were anticipating a rough start to the season. Bill Walton had signed with the San Diego Clippers as a free agent after missing over a year with a foot injury, then 24-year-old center Mychal Thompson broke his leg. But Kermit Washington, acquired from the Clippers as part of the free agency compensation package for Walton, helped the Blazers start the season 9-0 before the team leveled off. Adrian Dantley, acquired by the Jazz from the Lakers four weeks earlier, led Utah with 26 points, while their other big offseason acquisition, Bernard King, scored just 11; King’s season would end in December, when he admitted himself to a substance abuse treatment facility to deal with his alcohol and drug problems.¹⁸

In Los Angeles, Lakers fans needed a ticket if they wanted to watch Magic Johnson’s debut against the San Diego Clippers live, since CBS affiliate KNXT Channel 2 broadcast the game on tape delay at 11:30 pm Pacific time, three hours after it had begun. (The game was carried live on KLAC 570 radio with Chick Hearn and Pat Riley on the call.) CBS preferred to air their usual Friday night prime time lineup of the *Dukes of Hazzard* and *Dallas*, though *Incredible Hulk* star Bill Bixby took a night off from his role as Bruce Banner to host *Yabba Dabba Doo II*, a celebration of Hanna-Barbera cartoons, from 8 to 9 pm.¹⁹ Obviously, CBS considered Fred Flintstone and Scooby Doo better draws than Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Fans on the East Coast, including Larry Bird, who returned home from the Garden in time to watch with his girlfriend, got to see the game live, with Brent Musburger and Hot Rod Hundley of CBS.²⁰

Only 8,503 fans showed up at the San Diego Sports Arena, but that was better than the Clippers average attendance of 7,605 the previous season. The Clippers had moved from Buffalo in 1978, and the former Braves felt like a second-rate franchise. Even their logo at half court of the Sports Arena looked like a cut-rate patch job; the adjoining floor boards were noticeably lighter in color than the rest of the floor, which was also used by the San Diego Aztecs basketball team.²¹

Magic was nervous early in the game, and Lakers' head coach Jack McKinney, who was also making his debut, along with their flamboyant new owner Jerry Buss, had to pull his young star out of the game less than nine minutes into the contest. "At the start, I didn't want the ball, tried to give it to Norm [Nixon] every time down the floor," Magic said afterward. "Finally, the coach pulled me out and said, 'Look, just relax and have some fun.'"²² Meanwhile, Lloyd Free was torching the Lakers, scoring 22 in the first half as the Clippers sprinted to a 42-27 lead midway in the second quarter.

But by halftime, their lead was down to four, and the game remained tight the rest of the way. The Lakers did not move ahead until a traditional three-point play (basket and free throw) by Jabbar gave them a 99-98 lead with under two minutes left. Later, with just 16 seconds remaining, San Diego had the ball and a 102-101 lead, but Freeman Williams lost the ball out of bounds off his foot while being guarded by Michael Cooper. Los Angeles called timeout and ran a play to get Jabbar in position for his famous sky hook, which he drained to win the game, 103-102. Jabbar finished with 29 points while Magic (who celebrated on the court as if the Lakers had won the title) added 26 to offset 46 by Free, who had spent the offseason fighting with creditors and a former agent over his considerable debts.²³ Clippers fans could only wonder if Bill Walton would have helped matters, since he had suffered another setback with his troublesome left foot and spent the night on the bench in a blue jacket and gray slacks, destined not to return until late January.²⁴

While Magic had three days off before his next game in Chicago, it was back to work for Bird the next night in Cleveland. For Celtics head coach Bill Fitch, the evening was a homecoming. Five months earlier, he had held an emotional press conference to announce his resignation as the Cavaliers head coach and general manager after having held both posts since the franchise's birth in 1970. Two days later, he was introduced as the new head coach in Boston by Red Auerbach. It was the first time Auerbach had gone outside of the Celtics "family" for the job, though the two men had gotten to know each other in the summer of 1975 during an NBA All-Star exhibition tour of Hawaii and Japan, and Auerbach had watched Fitch lead the Cavaliers against the Celtics in the Eastern Conference Finals the following year.²⁵

On Saturday evening, 15,443 Cleveland fans booed Fitch during introductions, then watched the Celtics take apart the Cavaliers, 139-117. New Cleveland head coach, and former Lakers assistant, Stan Albeck, had promised the fans more offense after the team finished third from the bottom in scoring in 1978-79, but Boston had too much firepower of its own. Larry Bird had decided that his shooting woes in the opener were related to how he was taping his right index finger, which had been mangled during a pickup softball game that spring. As he explained in his autobiography, *Drive*, "I really wasn't that pleased with the feeling. I couldn't get a good grip on the ball. I stopped taping the finger from top to bottom before the second game of the season. I just taped the top joint in order to give it more flexibility..."²⁶ The result was 28 points on 12-for-17 shooting, along with 7 rebounds and 5 assists. Dave Cowens (20/10, with 18 in the second half) and a slimmed-down Nate "Tiny" Archibald (20/12 assists) both posted double-doubles, and M. L. Carr added 22 points. The Celtics led by 11 at halftime, at which time Ron Howard, of *Happy Days* and *American Graffiti* fame – the forgettable sequel *More American Graffiti* was currently in theatres – was scheduled to take part in a giveaway promotion.²⁷ The Cavaliers would rally from a 17-point third quarter deficit to close within three early in the fourth before the Celtics put the game away.²⁸

The rest of the NBA's opening weekend slate was less compelling. Only the debut of the defending champion Seattle SuperSonics – who lost to the Clippers 98-93 – and an NBA-career high 44 points by Julius Erving against

the Rockets gained much national attention. There was considerably more drama in the World Series. The Baltimore Orioles had taken a 3-1 lead in the series on Saturday afternoon by scoring six runs in the eighth inning to rally from a 6-3 deficit, but the Pittsburgh Pirates won 7-1 on Sunday to stave off elimination. While millions watched those games on television, 4,115 die-hard hockey fans squeezed into the Hibbing (Minnesota) Memorial Building on Saturday evening to see Mike Eruzione and the U.S. Olympic Team continue their epic 61-game exhibition tour with a 7-2 victory over the Canadian national team.²⁹

Political junkies were similarly enthralled by the very early stages of the 1980 presidential race. In Florida, President Jimmy Carter held off a challenge from Senator Edward Kennedy in a non-binding Democratic caucus, while former CIA director George H.W. Bush triumphed in a Republican straw poll in Ames, Iowa, largely because California governor Ronald Reagan declined to attend.³⁰ Carter had been struggling in the face of an unprecedented national energy crisis, and had announced on Friday – despite reports of Iran “drastically reduc[ing] its oil exports in recent days” – that the United States had sufficient supplies of home heating oil for the upcoming winter.³¹

The debuts of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson represented a new beginning for the NBA. As Bob Ryan of the *Boston Globe* wrote in the conclusion of his game story about the Celtics-Cavaliers game: “Hey, it really looks like it’s going to be fun this year.”³² Ryan was talking about the rejuvenated Celtics, but his words could have applied to the entire league.

Next time: Bird and Magic renew their “rivalry” on the court.

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¹ Alex Sachare (AP), “NBA Said More Stable Than Ever,” *Tampa Tribune*, October 13, 1979.

² Bill Livingston, “Here Comes The NBA!” *Sporting News*, October 13, 1979. The Women’s Professional Basketball League would sign 12 of the now unemployed referees for their league: Stan Isle, “NBA Players Say No to Limit on Payroll,” *Sporting News*, October 13, 1979.

³ Wire story, “Dampier, Rick Wilson get cut,” (*Louisville*) *Courier-Journal*, October 12, 1979.

⁴ Bob Ryan, “Celtics break fast with a win, 114-106,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1979.

⁵ Dick Braude (AP), “Bird’s Celtic debut hit with the fans,” *Lansing State Journal*, October 13, 1979.

⁶ Buck Harvey, “Celtics beat jitters, Rockets,” *Boston Herald*, October 13, 1979.

⁷ Dick Braude (AP), “Bird’s Celtic debut hit with the fans,” *Lansing State Journal*, October 13, 1979.

⁸ Edward Schumacher, “3,000 March Protesting Castro Visit, 500 Backing It,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1979.

⁹ Mike Douchant, “Basketball Bulletin,” *Sporting News*, October 27, 1979.

¹⁰ Thomas Rogers, “Sports World Special: More Colorful Knicks,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1979.

¹¹ Marc Markowitz, “‘Dr. J,’ Dawkins team up as 76ers edge Bullets 93-92,” *The (Allentown, PA) Morning Call*, October 13, 1979.

¹² Dick Weiss, “Dawkins Sings a Different Tune,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, October 12, 1979.

¹³ Bob Eger, “Suns take advantage of three-point goals,” *Arizona Republic*, October 13, 1979. In addition to Westphal, Don Buse shot 2-for-2, while Mike Bratz and Alvin Scott each missed their only attempts.

¹⁴ Wire story, “Bucks Go For Win With Three-Point Try, But Come Up Short,” *The Sheboygan Press*, October 13, 1979.

¹⁵ Charlie Vincent, “Piston record perfect after opener,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 13, 1979.

¹⁶ Charlie Vincent, “Vitale lived, died with Impossible Dream,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 9, 1979. Vitale and the Pistons had gone 32-50 in 1978-79.

¹⁷ Jim Lacey, “Chicken gives ‘coop-de-grace’ to Nets fans,” *The Bridgewater, NJ (Courier-News)*, October 13, 1979.

¹⁸ Mike Douchant, “Basketball Bulletin,” *Sporting News*, October 27, 1979. The loss was softened somewhat by the fact that the Nets, King’s previous employer, had included enough cash in the deal to pay his salary for the season.

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- ¹⁹ The special ran in the *Hulk's* normal timeslot and was a sequel of sorts to a special hosted by Gene Kelly on Thanksgiving Day 1977. On the East Coast, the special aired opposite Game 3 of the World Series that drew 17 million viewers. See: "The Hanna-Barbera Hall of Fame: Yabba Dabba Doo II (1979)" <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0298356/> ; "Yabba Dabba Doo! The Happy World of Hanna-Barbera (1977)" http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2349136/?ref=fn_al_tt_1 ; and "Nielsen Ratings," *Santa Cruz (California) Sentinel*, October 17, 1979.
- ²⁰ Bird, Larry and Magic Johnson with Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, p78.
- ²¹ Magic's debut is available on YouTube in its entirety: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEExi0iSm2U> .
- ²² Mike Granberry, "Walton Out - Jabbar Hooks the Clippers," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1979.
- ²³ Mike Douchant, "Basketball Bulletin," *Sporting News*, November 13, 1979.
- ²⁴ Walton would not return until January 29, then played just 14 games before shutting himself down for the next two seasons.
- ²⁵ Auerbach and Fitch served as the coaches for the 1975 tour.
- ²⁶ Bird, Larry with Bob Ryan. *Drive: The Story of My Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1989, p72.
- ²⁷ Sheldon Ocker, "Cavs' Walker is out for now," *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 12, 1979. Ad in *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 12, 1979. Howard was currently starring in his final season on *Happy Days* before focusing on his directorial career. *More American Graffiti* IMDB page: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079576/?ref=fn_al_tt_1 .
- ²⁸ Bob Ryan, "'New' Celtics rout Cavaliers, 139-117," *Boston Globe*, October 14, 1979. Buck Harvey, "Celtics clout Cavs, 139-117," *Boston Herald*, October 14, 1979.
- ²⁹ Irwin Curtin, "U.S. Olympic team routs Canadian six," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 13, 1979. The victory raised the U.S.'s record to 9-6-1. See <https://history.vintagemnhockey.com/page/show/1166356-1980-pre-olympic-tour-schedule-results> for a (partial) list of results. See <http://www.hibbing.mn.us/residents/city-facilities-for-public-use/memorial-building-arena> for description of the arena.
- ³⁰ Jeffrey Rodack, "Dade swings Carter victory," *Fort Lauderdale News*, October 19, 1979. Reagan was leading in the polls for the Iowa Caucuses scheduled for early 1980; see Daniel Pedersen, "Reagan lead widens to 40% in Iowa Poll," *Des Moines Register*, October 14, 1979, and Wire story, "Bush Tops Straw Poll," *Des Moines Register*, October 16, 1979.
- ³¹ Warren Weaver Jr, "House Votes to End Federal Controls on Gasoline Prices," *New York Times*, October 13, 1979. Martin F Nolan, "Carter: There's enough fuel oil," *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1979.
- ³² Bob Ryan, "'New' Celtics rout Cavaliers, 139-117," *Boston Globe*, October 14, 1979.