



80s Era NBA + 40: Part Thirteen

The Boston Celtics – How They Were Built

By Michael Hamel

The most consequential trade of the 80s Era was actually a free agency compensation swap, triggered by the Celtics signing M. L. Carr away from the Pistons. Red Auerbach convinced Detroit general manager Dick Vitale to send two 1980 first-round draft picks to Boston in exchange for Bob McAdoo to complete the transaction in July 1979. The Pistons finished 16-66 that season, and the Celtics won the coin flip to earn the number one pick. Boston had reached the Eastern Conference Finals in 1980 before falling in five games to Philadelphia, and Auerbach was on the hunt for big men. The Celtics had just two players over 6'9" —backup centers Rick Robey (6'11") and Eric Fernsten (6'10")—while the 76ers started the duo of Darryl Dawkins (6'11" and built like a truck) and Caldwell Jones (6'11" but resembling a string bean), and the champion Lakers still had Kareem Abdul-Jabbar manning the middle. Plus, Boston's starting center, Dave Cowens, was turning thirty-two that fall, and had lost his speed advantage that had allowed him to outplay taller opponents during his younger days.

In the days leading up to the draft there were plenty of rumors, including speculation that the Celtics were interested in swapping the thirteenth pick (obtained from Washington via Detroit) for former Celtic guard Paul Westphal.¹ But head coach Bill Fitch was intrigued with seven-footer Robert Parish of the Golden State Warriors, who owned the third pick, and the Warriors were fearful of being unable to sign Parish to a contract extension. The Celtics agreed to send both the first and thirteenth selections to the Warriors for Parish and the third pick. Warriors executive Scotty Stirling praised Carroll as "one of the top center prospects of the past 10 years" while rival coaches wondered if Fitch could get Parish to live up to his potential.² When the Celtics took Kevin McHale at number three, they had acquired two future Hall-of-Famers to bolster their frontcourt. McHale's skills were accurately forecasted by the Phoenix Suns general manager Jerry Colangelo on the day of the draft: "He has excellent hands and good timing... You can't say he's a great jumper, but he makes up for it with his timing and playing so hard. Offensively, he has an assortment of shots."³ The trade also provided leverage in negotiations with free agent forward Cedric Maxwell, who later re-signed with the Celtics.⁴

The "Parish-McHale trade" is one of the cornerstones of the 80s Era, but it never would have happened if Celtics owner (and Auerbach nemesis) John Y. Brown had not acquired McAdoo in February 1979 without consulting his general manager. A month earlier, as the Celtics were spiraling downward during a dismal 29-53 season, Auerbach had obtained two additional

first-round picks in the 1979 draft by sending a fading Jo Jo White to the Warriors, and journeyman center Dennis Awtrey to the SuperSonics. In one move, Brown undid all of Auerbach's work, sending both of those picks *plus the Celtics own selection in 1979* to the Knicks for McAdoo. Fortunately, Vitale helped Auerbach recover from the damage.

However, a dynasty is not built on one trade alone. Five other trades yielded six additional members of Boston's 80s Era championship teams, and indirectly allowed the Celtics to acquire their most important player of all.

December 27, 1977

Boston Celtics trade Charlie Scott to Los Angeles Lakers for Don Chaney, Kermit Washington, and a 1978 first-round draft pick.

The thought of the Celtics and Lakers making a trade is nearly as unthinkable today as a Red Sox-Yankees swap. But in December 1977, the Celtics were 10-22 and the Lakers were 15-18, trailing their respective division leaders by over ten games. Chaney, a defensive-minded guard, was returning to Boston; he had been a little-used rookie on Bill Russell's final championship team in 1969 (partly due to a stint in the army reserves), but was a starter on the 1974 champs before jumping to the ABA. Washington was tainted by his recent fight with Rudy Tomjanovich that nearly killed the Rockets star, but Auerbach knew the twenty-six-year-old Washington, D.C.-native personally and felt that his quiet cerebral persona was far different than the thuggish image the press and the league was allowing to fester.⁵ Scott had slipped since his prime years in the first half of the decade, and the Celtics were eager to deal him away, and Boston was desperate for a rebounder like Washington. Auerbach had gone behind the backs of Bill Sharman and Jerry West of the Lakers by asking owner Irv Levin to negotiate with Lakers' owner Jack Kent Cooke over dinner (showing that Auerbach had no qualms about having ownership negotiate deals as long as he was pulling the strings). At the time, the draft pick was seen as a surprising throw-in, and Bob Ryan wrote in the *Boston Globe* that it could become the most important facet of the deal.

The pick ended up being the eighth overall selection, giving the Celtics the latitude to select Larry Bird with their own choice at number six.

August 4, 1978

*Irv Levin trades the Boston Celtics to John Y. Brown for the Buffalo Braves. Boston sends Kevin Kunnert,⁶ Kermit Washington, Sidney Wicks, and Freeman Williams to Buffalo for **Tiny Archibald**, Marvin Barnes, Billy Knight, a 1981 second-round pick (**Danny Ainge**), and a 1983 second-round pick.*

In hindsight, this looks like a steal for the Celtics, with Archibald and Ainge both becoming starters on championship teams while a collection of lesser talent moved to the Braves, who were relocated by Levin to San Diego to become the Clippers. No one in Boston shed any tears about the selfish Wicks being shipped out of town, but Celtics fans had a lot to gripe about this deal at the time. The Celtics had drafted Williams with the 1978 pick obtained from the Lakers; he had averaged 35 points a game as a senior and was being counted on to improve the backcourt. Similarly, their frontcourt was weakened by the loss of Washington and the recently-signed Kunnert. In exchange, Boston acquired Archibald, who had missed the 1977-78 season with an Achilles injury and had played just 34 games the year before, and the eccentric Barnes, who was full of talent but historically unreliable.

The most important aspect of this trade was who was *not* included: the Celtics other first-round pick in 1978, Larry Bird. Brown chose not to consult Auerbach about the deal, and gave Levin his choice of Williams or Bird because the Celtics had taken two players in the first round of the draft. Levin chose Williams because Bird's junior-eligible status meant that there was a risk he would be unable to sign him, and Levin felt that if Bird failed to sign it would damage the credibility of the newly created Clippers.⁷

January 16, 1979

*Boston Celtics trade Billy Knight to the Indiana Pacers for **Rick Robey**.*

Boston fans hated Billy Knight because they thought he was a soft player. Robey was the dictionary definition of the *opposite* of a soft player, and he spent the next four seasons backing up Dave Cowens and Robert Parish, filling a role similar to what Auerbach had originally envisioned for Washington and/or Kunnert.

January 14, 1983

*Boston Celtics trade Darren Tillis and a 1983 first-round draft pick to the Cleveland Cavaliers for **Scott Wedman**.*

Tillis had been the Celtics' first-round pick in 1982, but quickly washed out of the league. Wedman was an eight-year veteran and two-time All-Star who accepted his new role as a key reserve and spot starter on the 1984 and 1986 champs before a series of injuries ended his career.

June 27, 1983

*Boston Celtics trade **Rick Robey**, a 1983 second-round draft pick obtained from the Clippers, and their own 1983 second-round draft pick, to the Phoenix Suns for **Dennis Johnson**, a 1983 first-round pick (**Greg Kite**), and a 1983 third-round pick.*

Rumors about the Celtics shopping Robey had started during the playoffs,⁸ and this deal was considered a steal on the day it was made. It is difficult to understand why Suns general manager Jerry Colangelo was so in love with Robey. “The place you win in this league is up front,” Colangelo said after the trade, adding that “[w]e got stripped in the [first round of the] playoffs last year. We needed more power.”⁹ But at the same time, Colangelo mentioned that James Edwards, Alvan Adams, Larry Nance and Maurice Lucas were also on the Suns roster, and as it turned out, all would play far more minutes than Robey during the upcoming season after he was slow to recover from knee surgery in November.¹⁰ The Suns slipped from 53 wins to 41 but advanced to the Western Conference Finals, losing to the Lakers in six games.

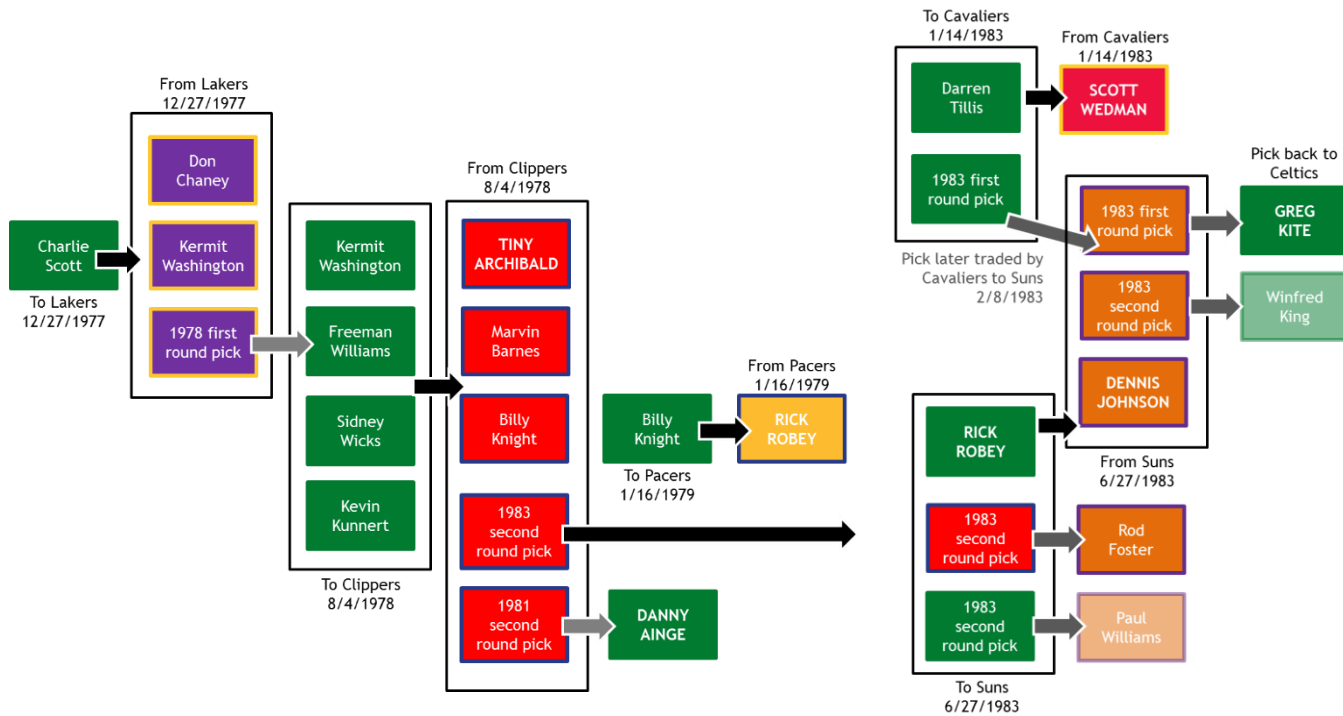
Dennis Johnson had been branded as a “difficult” player who would take some games off mentally and had worn out his welcome in two cities. But Auerbach claimed that Johnson’s former coach Lenny Wilkens had vouched for his work ethic and his contributions for Seattle during the 1979 Finals which earned him MVP honors. Celtics fans would grow to love him, partly because Larry Bird adored him, and any friend of Larry’s was deserving of affection. Auerbach was practically gleeful after the trade, telling reporters, “We’ve solidified our backcourt. We had to get a good defensive guard and now we’ve got a guy that can play Magic [Johnson] and [George] Gervin and [Reggie] Theus and [Andrew] Toney. We now feel our backcourt is as good as any in the league.”¹¹ The trade also allowed Boston to move up seven spots in the draft and take center Greg Kite, who ultimately proved to be a back-of-the-rotation player instead of a true replacement for Robey.

The Robey-for-Johnson trade also ties together several other deals, as shown below. Robey had been obtained for Knight, and both Knight and the 1983 second-round pick that was sent to the Suns had arrived in Boston as a result of the franchise swap with the Braves/Clippers. And the first-round pick that was sent by Phoenix to Boston for Robey was originally the *Celtics first-round pick*, which they had sent to Cleveland in the Wedman deal. The Suns had acquired it from the Cavaliers on February 8 along with James Edwards in exchange for Jeff Cook, their own first-round pick (which ended up being one pick higher, at number 20) and a third-round selection.

Unfortunately, Auerbach’s brilliance waned after this series of moves. Other than the Cedric Maxwell-for-Bill Walton trade in 1985, and the ill-fated Cedric Henderson-for-Len Bias exchange, Auerbach was unable to bolster the Celtics roster via trades.

Coupled with a poor draft record, outside of selecting Reggie Lewis in 1987, this would lead to Boston's slow decline in the late 1980's.

Boston Celtics Five Key Trades (Illustrated)



Note: Players listed in ALL CAPS were part of a Celtics championship team in the 80s Era

Boston Celtics Roster Timeline

	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87
		1981 Round 2 Pick 31	Danny Ainge	Danny Ainge	Danny Ainge	Danny Ainge	Danny Ainge	Danny Ainge
Trade from Clippers (Aug 1978)	Tiny Archibald	Tiny Archibald	Tiny Archibald	Tiny Archibald	Released (Jul 1983), Signed with Bucks (Aug 1983)			
1978 Round 1 Pick 6	Larry Bird	Larry Bird	Larry Bird	Larry Bird	Larry Bird	Larry Bird	Larry Bird	Larry Bird
		1981 Round 1 Pick 23	Charles Bradley	Charles Bradley	Released and Signed with Superonics (Oct 1983)			
		Trade from Bucks (Sep 1982)		Quinn Buckner	Quinn Buckner	Trade to Pacers (Sep 1985)		
				1984 Round 3 Pick 70	Rick Carlisle	Rick Carlisle	Rick Carlisle	Rick Carlisle
Free Agent (Jul 1979)	M. L. Carr	M. L. Carr	M. L. Carr	M. L. Carr	M. L. Carr	M. L. Carr	Retired	
Trade from Lakers (Dec 1977)	Don Chaney	Retired		1983 Round 4 Pick 91	Carlos Clark	Carlos Clark	Released (Oct 1985)	
1970 Round 1 Pick 4	Dave Cowens	Retired					Free Agent (Dec 1986)	Darren Daye
	Free Agent (Dec 1980)	Terry Duerod	Terry Duerod	Released and Signed with Warriors (Oct 1982)				
Free Agent (Jun 1979)	Eric Fernsten	Eric Fernsten	Eric Fernsten	Released (Oct 1982)				
Trade from Pistons (Oct 1978)	Chris Ford	Chris Ford	Chris Ford	Retired	Assistant Coach			
Free Agent (Jun 1979)	Gerald Henderson	Gerald Henderson	Gerald Henderson	Gerald Henderson	Gerald Henderson	Trade to Superonics (Oct 1984)		
		1981 Round 2 Pick 25	Tracy Jackson	Sold to Bulls (Dec 1981)			Free Agent (Jan 1987)	Conner Henry
			Trade from Suns (Jun 1983)		Dennis Johnson	Dennis Johnson	Dennis Johnson	Dennis Johnson
1978 Round 2 Pick 30	Jeff Judkins	Drafted by Mavericks (Expansion)						
				1983 Round 1 Pick 21	Greg Kite	Greg Kite	Greg Kite	Greg Kite
	1979 Round 3 Pick 53	Wayne Kreklow	Released (Jan 1981)					
Free Agent (Jan 1980)	Pete Maravich	Retired						
1977 Round 1 Pick 12	Cedric Maxwell	Cedric Maxwell	Cedric Maxwell	Cedric Maxwell	Cedric Maxwell	Cedric Maxwell	Trade to Clippers (Sep 1985)	
	1980 Round 1 Pick 3	Kevin McHale	Kevin McHale	Kevin McHale	Kevin McHale	Kevin McHale	Kevin McHale	Kevin McHale
	Trade from Warriors (Jun 1980)	Robert Parish	Robert Parish	Robert Parish	Robert Parish	Robert Parish	Robert Parish	Robert Parish
Trade from Pacers (Jan 1979)	Rick Robey	Rick Robey	Rick Robey	Rick Robey	Trade to Suns (Jun 1983)		Trade from Jazz (Sep 1986)	Fred Roberts
					Trade from Pacers (Oct 1985)		Jerry Sichting	Jerry Sichting
					Free Agent (Sep 1985)		David Thirdkill	David Thirdkill
			1982 Round 1 Pick 23	Darren Tillis	Trade to Cavaliers (Jan 1983)			
							Free Agent (Nov 1986)	Andre Turner
								Released (Nov 1986)
						1985 Round 1 Pick 20	Sam Vincent	Sam Vincent
						Trade from Clippers (Sep 1985)	Bill Walton	Bill Walton
		Trade from Cavaliers (Jan 1983)	Scott Wedman	Scott Wedman	Scott Wedman	Scott Wedman	Scott Wedman	Scott Wedman
				Free Agent (Feb 1985)	Ray Williams	Signed with Clippers (Sept 1985)		
					Free Agent (Sep 1985)	Sly Williams	Released (Dec 1985)	

Next Time: The 1984 NBA Finals

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Notes

¹ Bob Ryan, "Celtics to Deal for Westphal? Fitch, Auerbach Deny Rumor," *Boston Globe*, May 8, 1980. The Celtics might have lost their chance at the number one pick had the Dallas Mavericks expansion ownership group been able to convince the NBA to award them that selection. But Auerbach and owner Harry Mangurian helped quash that proposal. The Mavericks got the eleventh pick instead. See Will McDonough, "Celtics, Suffolk Downs Zero In On New Arena," *Boston Globe*, February 7, 1980.

² Bob Ryan, "Celtics Get Parish from Golden State," *Boston Globe*, June 9, 1980. Parish and Carroll were both represented by Bob Woolf, who had represented many Boston-based athletes and had negotiated Larry Bird's rookie contract a year earlier. The Warriors used the thirteenth pick to select center-forward Rickey Brown, who averaged 4.4 points and 3.5 rebounds during his disappointing five-year career.

³ Bob Ryan, "Celtics Take McHale, Hallman, Then Perry," *Boston Globe*, June 10, 1980.

⁴ On June 11, 2012, Cedric Maxwell, while a guest on WEEI-FM 93.7 radio in Boston (*Big Show with Glenn Ordway and Michael Holley*), stated that before the Warriors traded Parish and the #3 pick to the Celtics, Al Attles of the Warriors called him and said that Golden State was thinking of signing Maxwell as a free agent and drafting Kevin McHale. While the author believes Maxwell's story, the Celtics would have been owed compensation if the Warriors signed Maxwell, and it is likely that they would have asked for Parish, given Boston's interest in him. This may have derailed the Warriors plan, or perhaps Attles was trying to gain leverage of his own in negotiations for the number one pick by threatening to sign a key Celtic free agent if the trade was not completed.

⁵ Feinstein, John. *The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, and the Fight That Changed Basketball Forever*. Boston: Back Bay, 2002, p98-99 and p99-101, respectively.

⁶ It is an indication of Auerbach's opinion of Washington that he would sign Kunnert, the Rockets center who was the antagonist in the Tomjanovich fight, to play alongside him. A postscript to the franchise swap: the Celtics had to give up a second-round pick to Houston as compensation for having signed Kunnert even though he never played for them.

⁷ Connelly, Michael. *Rebound! Basketball, Busing, Larry Bird, and the Rebirth of Boston*. Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2008, p176-177 says that Levin's attorney Frank Rothman convinced him to take Williams. Also see Peter May, "Freaky Friday, N.B.A. Style: When the Clippers

Were the Celtics,” *New York Times* ‘Off the Dribble’ blog posting, May 22, 2012. (May covered the 80s Era Celtics for the *Boston Globe*.)

Note that by the time Bird won his first title in Boston, Levin had already sold the Clippers to Donald Sterling for a healthy profit.

⁸ Dan Shaughnessy, “Celtics Notebook,” *Boston Globe*, April 25, 1983.

⁹ Wire story, “Suns looking to rise higher with Robey’s added muscle” *Reading Eagle*, June 28, 1983.

¹⁰ David Cataneo, “Musburger slight caps horrendous season for Robey,” *Boston Herald*, May 26, 1984. During the Lakers-Suns series, Musburger told a national TV audience that Robey was, essentially, fat and out of shape. Robey took exception and confronted Musburger about the comment. The article also mentions that Robey was planning to have surgery on his right Achilles tendon, and expected to be ready for the start of the 1984-85 season, but Robey would play only four games early in the year before being shut down for a second operation on the same heel. Wire story, “Suns lose Rick Robey for season,” *Times Record News (Wichita Falls, TX)*, November 7, 1984. Robey came back for 46 games in 1985-86 and was released after the season, ending his career.

¹¹ Dan Shaughnessy, “Robey Traded For Johnson,” *Boston Globe*, June 27, 1983.