



80s Era NBA + 40: Part Sixteen

The Los Angeles Lakers – How They Were Built

By Michael Hamel

It was the summer of 1976. The Lakers had missed the playoffs in back-to-back seasons for the first time in the history of the franchise. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar had just earned his fourth MVP award but star guard Gail Goodrich wanted out; Goodrich had skipped training camp and the first five games of the 1975-76 season before returning and playing out his option. Los Angeles had also surrendered their first round pick in 1976 to the Golden State Warriors two years earlier as compensation for signing an aging Cazzie Russell.¹ What followed was a pivotal two-month stretch in Lakers history:

August 4, 1976

Gail Goodrich signs with the New Orleans Jazz as a free agent.²

Goodrich was a Los Angeles-native who had starred at UCLA before being drafted by the Lakers in 1965. Three years later, displeased with a lack of playing time, he asked to be left unprotected in the expansion draft; the Phoenix Suns took him with the fourth overall choice.³ The Suns then traded him back to the Lakers in 1970 for Mel Counts. Reportedly, one reason Goodrich had selected the Jazz was because their head coach, Butch van Breda Kolff, had coached Goodrich during his final season in Los Angeles.

August 19, 1976

Los Angeles Lakers announce hiring of Jerry West as head coach. Former head coach Bill Sharman appointed assistant general manager.

West was a surprise choice. Not only did owner Jack Kent Cooke prefer UNLV coach Jerry Tarkanian, but West was suing Cooke, claiming that he was owed \$6 million in salary for the 1974-75 season despite having retired two weeks before it had started.⁴ But Tarkanian was uncertain about leaving the college ranks, and Cooke decided to move on. Sharman was shifted to the front office, and given a newly-created “assistant” position to general manager Pete Newell, though his duties seemed unclear.

September 17, 1976

Pete Newell resigns as Lakers general manager. Bill Sharman named new general manager.

Less than a month later, Newell voluntarily resigned, which took Sharman by surprise. “Bill didn’t expect the ascendancy to be quite so fast,’ a Laker spokesman said. ‘In fact, he’s been walking around all day saying that very thing. He’s a little shell-shocked.”⁵ Newell did not even hold a press conference. He released a written statement while at a coaching clinic in Chicago, explaining his desire “to do other things.”

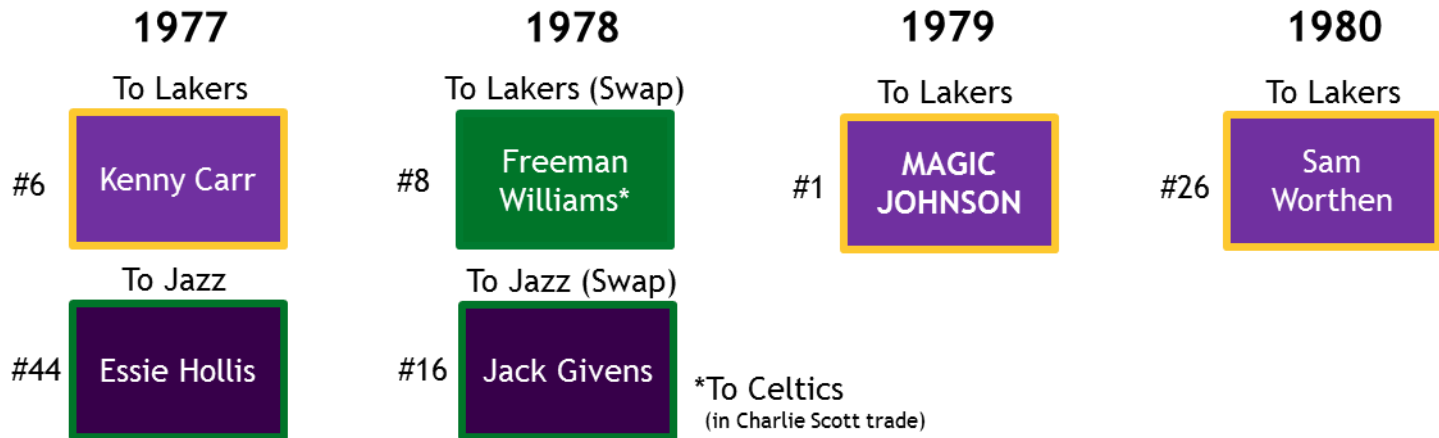
October 6, 1976

NBA Commissioner Larry O’Brien announces that Lakers and Jazz had agreed to compensation for the signing of Goodrich.

The details were not announced at the time, and were not made public until Alan Rothenberg, an attorney for the Lakers, gave an interview at the All-Star Game in February. Rothenberg wanted to set the record straight, since Jazz general manager Barry Mendelson had been claiming since November that New Orleans had given up only a first-round pick in 1977 and a second-round pick in 1980, in exchange for a second-rounder from the Lakers in 1977. In reality, the Jazz had also agreed to give the Lakers the option of swapping first-round selections in 1978, and an additional first-rounder in 1979.⁶

The transaction changed NBA history.

Not only did the Lakers acquire the pick that they would use to take Magic Johnson, but they would flip the Jazz’s 1978 choice to the Celtics, and *that* pick played a role in the Boston selecting Larry Bird (see Part Thirteen).



The Gail Goodrich compensation package

The Lakers also selected Norm Nixon with their own first round pick (#22) in 1977, who served as a bridge to the Magic era and finished in the top five in the NBA in assists in each of his first five seasons.

In September 1979, Sharman made arguably his biggest mistake as general manager, shipping former Rookie of the Year and future Hall of Fame forward Adrian Dantley to Utah in exchange for Spencer Haywood. But Jack McKinney wanted a bigger forward to team with Jamaal Wilkes, and Haywood fit the bill. However, Haywood lasted just one season in Los Angeles as his drug-laced partying ruined the tail end of a productive pro career.⁷

Sharman compensated for his misstep by fleecing the Cleveland Cavaliers, who loved to trade first-round picks even before Ted Stepien became their majority owner. On February 15, 1980, with the Lakers holding the third-best record in the league, but in second place behind the Seattle SuperSonics in the Pacific Division, Sharman sent his 1980 first-round pick and Don Ford to the Cavaliers for their 1982 first-round choice and Butch Lee. (The Cavaliers had already dealt their own first-round selection in 1980 to the Clippers for veteran guard Randy Smith.) The Lakers went on to win the championship (with little contribution from Lee), and two years later, while the Lakers were en route to another title, the Cavaliers finished 15-67. Los Angeles won

the subsequent coin flip with San Diego to claim the number one overall pick. There was speculation that Dominique Wilkins, dubbed the “Human Highlight Film” and compared with Julius Erving, would be a good fit for the Lakers’ high-flying offense, but the Lakers chose James Worthy, who had lesser college stats than Wilkins but opened eyes with a 28-point, 17-rebound performance in the NCAA title game for North Carolina.⁸

By the time Worthy was selected the other three players involved in the trade were out of the league:

Chad Kinch	The Cavaliers used the Lakers 1980 pick to draft Kinch, whose NBA career consisted of 41 games for the Cavaliers and the expansion Mavericks in 1980-81.
Butch Lee	Lee had been a star in college at Marquette, winning the 1977 Final Four Most Outstanding Player award on the NCAA champs, and was the AP Player of the Year in 1978. After a respectable rookie season in the NBA, injuries ruined his career. A knee injury had limited him to 3 games with the Cavaliers in 1980, and after the trade he played just 11 regular season games with the Lakers, and six minutes in the playoffs. Lee never played in the NBA again.
Don Ford	Ford was a valuable defensive player who was able to control some of the league’s top scorers. ⁹ Ford played just 106 games for the Cavaliers before being released in January 1982.

Meanwhile, the Lakers had gone through three coaches in three years. Jack McKinney had suffered significant injuries in a bicycle accident in November 1979, and was succeeded by his former assistant Paul Westhead. Westhead initially took over as interim coach, but during the 1980 Finals Buss announced that McKinney would not be coming back. Buss issued a statement saying that since both men were qualified, “I could not make a basketball decision. This selection was made upon with whom I felt I could have the most fun. My actions in not allowing Jack to return earlier this season have perhaps strained our relationship and I don’t think I could have as much fun with McKinney.”¹⁰

Two years later, Westhead lost the head coaching job in a power struggle with Magic Johnson. Buss then attempted to force Jerry West back into coaching by publicly announcing that West had agreed to be the “offensive captain” for the Lakers, but West, who was at the dais alongside Buss and Pat Riley, quickly contradicted him. “I’m going to be working with and for Pat Riley,” West said. “He is the head coach. I hope my position will be short-lived.”¹¹

A month after Riley was hired, Sharman took another gamble, sending a 1983 second-round pick to the New Jersey Nets for Bob McAdoo. The Lakers were desperate for a backup center when Mitch Kupchak, who they had signed to a seven-year, \$6

million contract that summer, was lost for the season with a knee injury. McAdoo's fall from NBA stardom had been as swift as his rise. Named Rookie of the Year in 1973, he led the NBA in scoring for three consecutive years, including 34.5 points a game in 1975 when he won the MVP honors. McAdoo was traded to the Knicks in 1976, beginning a five-year odyssey with unhappy stops in New York, Boston, Detroit and New Jersey. His experience in Detroit was particularly painful. Not only did fans blame all of the Pistons troubles on him, but McAdoo's marriage was falling apart and his father died during the season.¹² McAdoo also struggled with injuries. From 1979 through 1981 he played in 60, 58 and 16 games, respectively.

But McAdoo was far from finished. "People still don't believe me," said Riley in May 1982, "when I tell them that I expected McAdoo to be this good. But I figured, with his shooting and rebounding skills, it was a perfect situation for him ... The one thing you don't worry about here is guys putting out. There is too much peer pressure, and I've learned over the years that our guys respect that more than the coaches themselves. I never worried about McAdoo. The guys wouldn't let him fail, and now everybody is benefitting from it."¹³ McAdoo averaged just under 10 points in 18-plus minutes a game during the regular season, then increased his production in the playoffs (averaging 17 points in 28 minutes) to help the Lakers win the 1982 title.

That summer, Sharman was promoted to team president and Jerry West replaced him as general manager. Worthy was the only major addition to the team that offseason. Following a disappointing loss to the 76ers in the 1983 Finals, West made a bold move that October, dealing point guard Norm Nixon to the San Diego Clippers for rookie guard Bryon Scott and veteran center Swen Nater. "We made that trade because Byron was better for Magic Johnson. He [Magic] needed the ball in his hands just about all the time,"¹⁴ Jerry West later said, a reference to the fact that Scott was a traditional shooting guard, and that the pairing of Johnson and Nixon had run its course. Nixon was a fan favorite and loved the Los Angeles nightlife; the night Nixon was traded, a party was held in his honor (his birthday was the next day) at Mr. Chow's in Beverly Hills. The guest list included his former teammates and celebrities such as Jack Nicholson and Burt Bacharach.¹⁵ The trade turned into a coup. Nixon's career would be cut short by a pair of season-ending injuries in 1986-87 (left knee) and 1987-88 (Achilles tendon).¹⁶ Meanwhile, Scott started for the Lakers for next ten years.

West extended the Lakers' dominance in the 80s Era by continuing to find new talent. In 1985 he selected forward A.C. Green from Oregon State with the 23rd pick. By his second season, Green had replaced Kurt Rambis in the starting lineup. Green's durability became legendary; he missed three games during that season (1986-87) and didn't miss another one until 1998. By then Green had moved on, first to the Suns and then the Mavericks, but he returned to Los Angeles to play 82 games for the champion Lakers in 2000.

Los Angeles Lakers Roster Timeline

	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87
Trade from Bucks (Jun 1975)	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar	K. Abdul-Jabbar
		Free Agent (Apr 1983)		Billy Ray Bates	Released (Apr 1983)			
Trade from Nuggets (Jun 1978)	Ron Boone	Trade to Jazz (Oct 1979)					Free Agent (Sep 1986)	Adrian Branch
Trade from Trail Blazers (Oct 1980)	Jim Brewer	Jim Brewer	Retired				Free Agent (Oct 1986)	Frank Brickowski
Free Agent (Oct 1979)	Marty Byrnes	Drafted by Mavericks (Expansion Draft)						
1977 Round 1 Pick 6	Kenny Carr	Trade to Cavaliers (Oct 1979)						
			Free Agent (Aug 1983)		Calvin Garrett	Retired		
1980 Round 2 Pick 37	Butch Carter	Trade to Pacers (Oct 1981)						
Trade from Cavaliers (Oct 1979)	Jim Chones	Jim Chones	To Bullets as compensation for Kupchak (Jul 1981)					
		Free Agent (Sep 1982)		Joe Cooper	Released (Nov 1982)			
1978 Round 3 Pick 60	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper	Michael Cooper
1975 Round 6 Pick 92	Don Ford	Trade to Cavaliers* (Feb 1980)						
	Free Agent (Jul 1980)		Alan Hardy	Released (Oct 1981)			1985 Round 1 Pick 23	A. C. Green
Trade from Jazz (Sep 1979)	Spencer Haywood	Released (Aug 1980)				Free Agent (Mar 1986)	P. Gudmundsson	P. Gudmundsson
1979 Round 1 Pick 14	Brad Holland	Brad Holland	To Bullets as compensation for Kupchak (Jul 1981)					
1980 Round 4 Pick 87	Tony Jackson	Released (Nov 1980)				Free Agent (Mar 1986)	Jerome Henderson	Released
	Free Agent (Apr 1982)		Clay Johnson	Clay Johnson	Released (Nov 1983)			
1979 Round 1 Pick 1	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson	Magic Johnson
		Trade from Bulls (Feb 1983)		Dwight Jones	Retired			
					1984 Round 1 Pick 23	Earl Jones	Sold to Spurs (Oct 1985)	
Trade from Nets (Nov 1980)	Eddie Jordan	Eddie Jordan	Eddie Jordan	Eddie Jordan	Eddie Jordan	Trade to Clippers (Oct 1983)		
	Free Agent (Jul 1981)		Mitch Kupchak	Mitch Kupchak	Mitch Kupchak	Mitch Kupchak	Mitch Kupchak	Retired (Sept 1986)
Trade from Bulls (Feb 1980)	M. Landsberger	M. Landsberger	M. Landsberger	M. Landsberger	Released (Nov 1983), Signed with Hawks (Dec 1983)			
Trade from Cavaliers* (Feb 1980)	Butch Lee	Released (Jun 1980)			Free Agent (Nov 1984)	Ronnie Lester	Ronnie Lester	Sold to Supersonics (Oct 1986)
1979 Round 2 Pick 25	Ollie Mack	Trade to Bulls (Feb 1980)			Trade from Suns (Aug 1985)		Maurice Lucas	Released, Signed with Supersonics (Sep 1986)
	Trade from Nets (Dec 1981)		Bob McAdoo	Bob McAdoo	Bob McAdoo	Bob McAdoo	Signed with 76ers (Jan 1986)	
	1981 Round 1 Pick 19	Mike McGee	Mike McGee	Mike McGee	Mike McGee	Mike McGee	Mike McGee	Trade to Hawks (Jun 1986)
	1981 Round 4 Pick 88	Kevin McKenna	Released (Oct 1982)				Free Agent (Oct 1986)	Wes Matthews
		Free Agent (Apr 1983)		Steve Mix	Retired			
		Trade from Clippers (Oct 1983)		Swen Nater	Retired			
1977 Round 1 Pick 22	Norm Nixon	Norm Nixon	Norm Nixon	Norm Nixon	Trade to Clippers (Oct 1983)			
	Free Agent (Aug 1980)		Myles Patrick	Released (Dec 1980)		Free Agent (Sep, Mar)	Chuck Nevitt	Released (Nov 1985)
	Free Agent (Sep 1981)		Kurt Rambis	Kurt Rambis	Kurt Rambis	Kurt Rambis	Kurt Rambis	Kurt Rambis
		Trade from Clippers (Oct 1983)		Byron Scott	Byron Scott	Byron Scott	Byron Scott	Byron Scott
		Free Agent (Aug 1983)		Larry Spriggs	Larry Spriggs	Larry Spriggs	Larry Spriggs	Retired
						Free Agent (Nov 1986)		Mike Smrek
						Trade from Hawks (Jun 1986)		Billy Thompson
						Trade from Spurs (Feb 1987)		Mychal Thompson
Free Agent (Jul 1977)	Jamaal Wilkes	Jamaal Wilkes	Jamaal Wilkes	Jamaal Wilkes	Jamaal Wilkes	Jamaal Wilkes	Released (Aug 1985), Signed with Clippers (Sept), Retired (Dec)	
		1982 Round 1 Pick 1 (from Cavaliers*)		James Worthy	James Worthy	James Worthy	James Worthy	James Worthy

Not every move was a success. After the 1985 season, West declined to bring back Jamaal Wilkes and Bob McAdoo, and turned down Bill Walton when he inquired about joining the champs. Instead, West traded two second-round picks for Maurice Lucas, who clashed with Riley and his teammates, and was released a year later after a stunning loss to the Houston Rockets in the 1986 playoffs.

West's most strategic heist was obtaining Mychal Thompson from the Spurs in February 1987. Both the Celtics and Lakers needed to improve their frontcourt depth as the playoffs approached. After the death of Len Bias the previous summer, the best Red Auerbach could do was acquire Fred Roberts. Now West outmaneuvered his old rival. Thompson was 6'10" and perfectly suited to back up Kareem. Magic had been lobbying for Thompson and even suggested his name to Jerry Buss, not just because of his basketball skills, but also because of his personality. A decade earlier, Johnson had quickly befriended Thompson during a thoroughly enjoyable campus visit to the University of Minnesota.¹⁷ After the trade was made, Riley was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* trying to downplay expectations. "[Thompson is] a shooter who can fit right into the low-post offense we run for Kareem. He's also an excellent defensive player, he's very strong and smart and a fine passer. He's not a one-dimensional player. But any talk that this [trade] is going to guarantee something . . . people are making a big mistake."¹⁸

Actually, people were not making a mistake. Thompson had played against Kevin McHale in practice when they were both at Minnesota and knew how to guard him, a fact that then-Pacers coach Jack Ramsey mentioned in the same article in the *Times*. The Spurs were willing to trade him for virtually nothing—Frank Brickowski, Petur Gudmundsson (who was out for the year due to back surgery) plus future first- and second-round picks that were destined to be of little value due to the strength of the Lakers—because San Antonio was struggling and were hoping to win the draft lottery to get the rights to the Naval Academy's star center David Robinson. (It worked. The Spurs ended the season with the fourth-worst record in the NBA and won the top choice in the lottery.¹⁹) Meanwhile, Thompson helped the Lakers defeat the Celtics in the Finals. Larry Bird, who had not considered the Thompson trade to be significant when it was made, had dramatically changed his mind by the time the Lakers had finished off his Celtics. "They made changes and we didn't," Bird said after the series was over. "They came up with Mychal Thompson and the Celtics just couldn't do anything."²⁰

Bird was right, but if the Celtics had been interested in matching West's offer for Thompson, by including—assuming that salary cap restrictions would not have gotten in the way—Fred Roberts (a year younger than Brickowski and with better stats to that point) and Greg Kite (similar to Gudmundsson), they likely would have shipped their 1987 first-round pick to the Spurs

in the deal. Instead, they selected Reggie Lewis with that choice, who was used sparingly as a rookie by K.C. Jones but then compiled five very solid seasons in Boston before tragically passing away in the summer of 1993 due to a heart condition. If the Celtics traded for Thompson, they may have won another title with the Big Three of Bird/McHale/Parish, and the late 1980's would have unfolded much differently in Boston. Bird's lost season of 1988-89 would have likely resulted in McHale or Parish being dealt instead of Ainge (there would have been little need to acquire Ed Pinckney and Joe Kleine if Thompson was still around, and without Lewis the Celtics would have coveted Ainge's outside shooting) which may have accelerated the rebuilding process. But in the summer of 1987, the only thing the Celtics knew for sure was that Jerry West had outsmarted them.

Next Time: The 1985 NBA Finals

© 2025 Michael Hamel, MichaelHamel.net

Portions adapted from *Pride and Passion: The 80s Era in the NBA*, © 2014 Michael Hamel

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Notes

¹ The Warriors used the pick to select Robert Parish.

² Ted Green, "Gail Goodrich Signs to Play with Jazz," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1976.

³ Verne Boatner, "Suns Stress Youth in Draft Choices," *Arizona Republic*, May 7, 1968.

⁴ Ted Green, "Lakers Go West for Their Coach," *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1976; Mal Florence, "West Leaves 'Em Asking for More," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1974. During his introductory press conference, West stated that the lawsuit had been settled. Tarkanian would also be pursued by future Lakers' owner Jerry Buss in 1979 to coach the team.

⁵ Ted Green, "Newell Resigns; Sharman Named," *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1976.

⁶ Wire story, "Lakers May Get Three Top Picks for Goodrich," *Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1977. Mendelson, who claimed he had hid the full extent of the deal to prevent the Players Association from objecting to the lavish compensation (which could be seen as having the potential to limit future free agent movement), had fired van Breda Kolff in December after a 14-12 start, and would be fired himself in March. David Rosenthal (AP), "Medelson fired by NO Jazz," (*Shreveport, Louisiana Times*), March 24, 1977.

⁷ Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. New York: Gotham, 2014, p79-84, 87-90.

⁸ Simmons, Bill. *The Book of Basketball*. New York: Ballantine/ESPN, 2010, p176. After making the selection, Lakers owner Jerry Buss admitted that the team tried to trade the pick to get a first-rounder in 1983 in hopes of landing a replacement for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

⁹ John Papanek, "An Office Party To Remember," *Sports Illustrated*, April 23, 1979. Papanek wrote about Ford's performance in the 1979 playoffs against the Nuggets, stating that "Next to Abdul-Jabbar's domination of the final two games, Ford's defensive job on Issel was the key to the series."

¹⁰ Bob Ryan, "Lakers' 1981 Coach Won't Be McKinney," *Boston Globe*, May 14, 1980. Still, Westhead would not be officially named as the Lakers head coach for 1980-81 until after the 1980 Finals were over.

¹¹ See Pearlman, p149-153. West's quote is from a wire story, "Los Angeles Fires Westhead," *Toledo Blade*, November 20, 1981. Another wire story, "Magic turns the boos to cheers," *Miami News*, November 21, 1981, also mentions the details of the supposed co-coaching arrangement, but mentions that Riley "apparently has been charged with directing the team."

¹² Bruce Newman, "Mac Has Been A Real Blast From The Past" *Sports Illustrated*, May 24, 1982.

¹³ Larry Whiteside, "McAdoo: Requiem For A Heavyweight" *Boston Globe*, May 18, 1982.

¹⁴ Lazenby, Roland. *Jerry West: The Life and Legend of a Basketball Icon*. New York: ESPN, 2009, p371.

¹⁵ Bruce Newman, "No Glitz, But Maybe Glory," *Sports Illustrated*, November 21, 1983.

¹⁶ Nixon suffered the knee injury while playing in a charity softball game in Central Park in New York along with members of the cast of *Sweet Charity*, a Broadway show that starred his wife, Debbie Allen. Jack McCallum, "An Ear To The Ground," *Sports Illustrated*, November 3, 1986.

¹⁷ Bird, Larry, and Magic Johnson with Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, p19-20, 206.

¹⁸ Gordon Edes, "Lakers Trade a No. 1 to Find a No. 2: L.A. Gets Mychal Thompson in Exchange for Picks, Players," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1987.

¹⁹ In 1987 the original lottery rules were still in place, so each of the seven teams that didn't make the playoffs had an equal shot at the top pick. At the time of the trade, the Spurs were five games out of the playoffs; they ended the season nine games back. Robinson had to honor a two-year military commitment, so he could not join the Spurs until the 1989-90 season. Brickowski and Gudmundsson helped fill the void until Robinson arrived, playing on two of the worst San Antonio teams in their history.

²⁰ Roy S. Johnson, "Celtics Can Smile Despite Sad Ending", *New York Times*, June 15, 1987.