



## 80s Era NBA + 40: Part Two

*Bird & Magic Meet Again – December 1979/January 1980*

By Michael Hamel

Through the fall of 1979, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson continued to adjust to life in the NBA, while fans and the media eagerly anticipated their first meeting on the court since the 1979 NCAA Championship Game. Bird and the Boston Celtics raced to a league-best 18-4 start by December 1, including a pair of six-game winning streaks. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Lakers were 16-9, trailing both the Phoenix Suns and Seattle SuperSonics by a half-game in a tightly contested Pacific Division. While the Celtics' record represented a more dramatic turnaround (a year earlier, Boston was 6-16, Los Angeles 16-7) each of the rookies had made a major impact.

On November 14, Bird posted his first career triple double (23 points, 19 rebounds, 10 assists) as the Celtics nearly gave away a 23-point fourth quarter lead before hanging on to defeat the Detroit Pistons 115-111.<sup>1</sup> Magic, who missed three games after suffering a minor right knee injury against Seattle on October 17,<sup>2</sup> scored 26 against the Kansas City Kings in his return. On November 9, he posted a season-high 31 points against the Denver Nuggets before recording his first triple-double against the Cleveland Cavaliers two days later.

The game against the Nuggets was the Lakers' first after head coach Jack McKinney was seriously injured in a bicycle accident. On the morning of November 8, en route to an impromptu tennis match with assistant coach Paul Westhead, McKinney's bike suddenly locked up, sending him crashing to the sidewalk headfirst. He was taken to a local hospital and placed in a medically induced coma, where he would remain for three days. It would take months for McKinney to physically and mentally recover from his injuries. Meanwhile, Westhead was named interim head coach, and former Laker Pat Riley left his broadcasting job with the team to serve as his assistant.<sup>3</sup>

The Lakers won Westhead's first three games, then slumped, going 4-5 to close out November. But as December began, Los Angeles won seven out of eight, losing only when Lloyd Free scored 42 points for the San Diego Clippers on December 7. In Boston, the Celtics won seven in a row including a tough home stretch against the Milwaukee Bucks, Philadelphia 76ers, and San Antonio Spurs. But starting on December 22, the Celtics would hit the road for their annual year-end trip which coincided with the Ice Capades' stay at the Boston Garden during Christmas school vacation week.<sup>4</sup> The highlight of the trip would be a stop at the Forum in Los Angeles on December 28.

Bob Ryan of the *Boston Globe* declared it "the single most awaited regular-season game in Laker history;" it would be the first sellout crowd at the Forum that season. A deluge of media requests forced Bird to sit through his first press conference on the road as a pro that Friday afternoon.<sup>5</sup> Bird tried to downplay his "rivalry" with Magic ("I consider Magic a better player than me, I consider everyone on my team a better player than me. I'm just one of the guys that fit in.")<sup>6</sup> but good friend and road roommate Rick Robey told reporters that Bird would "like a little revenge. You could tell it in his eyes... He's been looking forward to this game."<sup>7</sup>

The Celtics arrived in Los Angeles with a 28-8 record, still best in the NBA; the Lakers were 26-13. Both teams had won on the road the previous evening. Boston recovered from a loss in Philadelphia with a 118-97 blowout against the Clippers as Dave Cowens (27) matched Lloyd Free (28) shot-for-shot until the latter sat out the fourth quarter with the outcome no longer in doubt.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Los Angeles had defeated the Utah Jazz 124-116 despite 37 points from former Laker Adrian Dantley.

Bird and Magic both struggled early; neither scored in the first quarter. Boston held a 25-22 lead late in the period, but an 8-0 run by Los Angeles – with Magic on the bench – put the Lakers in front. Veterans were leading the way: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was frustrating Cowens, who was limited to just four points by a mixture

of good defense and foul trouble, while Norm Nixon hit five of his first seven shots. By the midpoint of the second quarter Los Angeles moved ahead by 13 points. Only the efforts of Cedric Maxwell (12 points in the third quarter, 19 with 16 rebounds for the game) kept the Celtics from falling further behind.<sup>9</sup>

Slowly, Bird and Magic improved their play, though Celtics coach Bill Fitch would say after the game that “neither was instrumental”<sup>10</sup> in the outcome and that his team “didn’t play smart.”<sup>11</sup> Bird missed his first four shots before making four in a row, finishing with 16 points but only four rebounds. Meanwhile, Magic started off 2-for-10, but scored 13 of his 23 points in the decisive fourth quarter. Boston had closed to within eight by holding Los Angeles to four points in the first four minutes. With under three minutes remaining, Magic drove for the basket and was knocked to the floor by Bird, resulting in their first (heated) conversation of the night.<sup>12</sup> “If he thought I was going to lay down for him he was crazy,” Bird said later.<sup>13</sup> The Lakers pulled away to win easily, 123-105. Paul Westhead declared that the “difference in this game was defense” and labeled it “our best individual defensive effort of the year.”<sup>14</sup>

The two teams would meet again in 17 days.

Earlier on December 28, President Jimmy Carter had also met with the media, for a far more serious purpose. For the past six weeks, the Carter administration had been attempting to resolve the deepening hostage crisis at the United States embassy in Iran, where over 50 embassy officials were being held by militant Islamic fundamentalists who had taken control of that country. Now, Carter had a new problem: the Soviet Union had escalated its military operations in neighboring Afghanistan, backing a pro-Communist faction within the government.<sup>15</sup> Carter’s statement focused on efforts by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to raise both issues at the United Nations. (The White House also announced that due to the hostage crisis, Carter was skipping a presidential debate scheduled for January 7 in Iowa.<sup>16</sup>) But a week later, with little hope of the Soviets reversing course, Carter began floating the idea of boycotting the 1980 Summer Olympic Games, scheduled to be held in Moscow in July.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, preparations continued for the 1980 Winter Olympics in upstate New York. On December 27, the U.S. hockey team won their second straight game against Torpedo Gorky, 4-2, in Colorado Springs. “I don’t want us to be lulled into thinking this is the sort of team we’ll be playing at Lake Placid (the site of the Olympics),” head coach Herb Brooks said after the first game in Omaha, recognizing that the visitors from the Soviet Union were hardly on the same level as their comrades on the legendary Red Army team.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. defeated Torpedo Gorky again on December 30, as Buzz Schneider completed a hat trick during a 10-3 rout in Bloomington.<sup>19</sup>

The Lakers followed up their victory over the Celtics by defeating the Phoenix Suns 113-105, then headed on the road for a five-game trip that would conclude in Boston on January 13. After splitting the first two games against the Indiana Pacers (win) and Milwaukee Bucks (loss), the Lakers headed to Landover, Maryland to play the Washington Bullets. Late in the third quarter, Magic drove to the hoop for a layup. As the ball was swatted away by Greg Ballard, Magic got entangled with the Bullets’ Kevin Grevey, who inadvertently kicked the star rookie in the groin. Magic immediately went to the floor along the end line, where Lakers’ trainer Jack Curran began tending to him, and did not return to the game.<sup>20</sup> The Lakers lost 103-101. Two days later, not wanting to disappoint his hometown fans who had traveled to the Silverdome to watch the Lakers only appearance in Detroit that season (the crowd of 28,146 nearly doubled the old attendance record), Magic played 32 ineffective minutes. He made just 4 of 16 shots but the Lakers blew out the hapless Pistons anyway, 123-100.

Meanwhile, Bird was dealing with multiple minor injuries. He sprained an ankle in early January, then jammed a knuckle on his right index finger during halftime warmups at home against the Knicks on January 9, which limited him to just 27 minutes as the Celtics won easily, 112-95. Two days later, Dave Cowens and Tree Rollins were ejected for fighting late in the first quarter, but Boston defeated the Atlanta Hawks 108-93 as backup center Rick Robey scored 22 points and added 10 rebounds. Bird shot just 7-for-18 from the floor, but contributed 13 rebounds.

The Celtics and Lakers second meeting was assured of a higher profile when CBS placed the game on their schedule as their first Sunday afternoon telecast of the season.<sup>21</sup> But in Boston, the game would be carried on Channel 38 instead of the city's CBS affiliate, due to Channel 7's annual commitment to broadcast the United Cerebral Palsy telethon that weekend.<sup>22</sup> Brent Musburger and Hot Rod Hundley were at the Boston Garden to call the action.

Boston began the afternoon by sprinting to a 15-6 lead. Tiny Archibald pushed the ball aggressively throughout the first half, and Bird made all six of his shots while being guarded primarily by Jamaal Wilkes. The Celtics' lead peaked at 54-40 late in the second quarter as Boston shot 63 percent from the floor. Meanwhile, a still hampered Magic had attempted only one field goal, and he remained on the bench as the third quarter began.<sup>23</sup>

His teammates then took over the game. The Celtics briefly regained a 14-point lead at 67-53, then proceeded to go scoreless for over seven minutes. Meanwhile, the visitors poured in 21 unanswered points. "Our defense triggered it, but when it's going like that it's a reciprocal thing between the offense and the defense," Westhead said after the game.<sup>24</sup> He reserved special praise for Michael Cooper, who shut down Bird (0-for-2 in the third quarter). "I couldn't have stopped him all by myself," Cooper admitted later. "I concentrated on denying him the ball. I'm quicker than he is, but I'm in trouble if they [the Celtics] start lobbing passes over my head. They never did."<sup>25</sup> It took a three-pointer from Chris Ford in the final seconds of the period to pull Boston back to within 77-74; Los Angeles had held Boston to 5-for-28 shooting.<sup>26</sup>

Still, the Celtics regained the lead at 80-79 on a runner by Dave Cowens early in the fourth, and despite falling into a 98-91 hole with two minutes remaining, rallied to force a 98-98 tie with 21 seconds left when Cedric Maxwell laid the ball in off the glass on a fast break. On the ensuing Lakers possession, Archibald was called for a foul on Nixon with three seconds remaining; Nixon made two free throws to put Los Angeles back in front. Fitch was not pleased with the call: "The man has both hands at his sides and they call a foul. This one will be hard to digest."<sup>27</sup> Since Fitch had used his final timeout at the 2:12 mark, the Celtics had to inbound the ball under the basket instead of being able to advance the ball to half court. Cowens' attempt at a game-winning heave from just inside the three-point line bounced off the rim at the buzzer, and the Lakers had won again, 100-98. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar led the Lakers with 33 points and 12 rebounds.

The next day, the NBA announced the All-Star voting results. In the Western Conference, George Gervin garnered top honors, followed by Kareem and Magic. All of them would start for the West. Bird and Cowens had finished fourth and third, respectively, in the voting at their positions in the East, so the Celtics had to wait until January 22 to hear that Bird, Cowens, and Tiny Archibald had been selected by the coaches as reserves.<sup>28</sup>

On January 21, President Carter had prevailed in an election with higher stakes, the Iowa Caucuses, the official kick-off of the Presidential primary season, turning back a challenge by Senator Edward Kennedy by nearly 28 points. On the Republican side, George H.W. Bush narrowly defeated Ronald Reagan by a two-point margin.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, on January 15, the Carter administration had hardened its position regarding Afghanistan, as Secretary Vance delivered an ultimatum to the Soviet Union to withdraw their troops by mid-February or the United States would boycott the Summer Olympics and impose other sanctions.<sup>30</sup> The intertwining of sports and politics would continue into the summer.

By the time the NBA All-Star Game was played on February 3, the Celtics were back in front in the Atlantic Division by a game-and-a-half over the 76ers with a 40-13 record, already well ahead of their win totals in each of the past two seasons. Out West, Los Angeles was still within a half-game of Seattle, and the consensus around the league was that these four teams would be fighting it out for the title that spring.

Next time: The playoffs.

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- <sup>1</sup> Bob Ryan, "Bird, Celtics soar, 115-111," *Boston Globe*, November 15, 1979. The Celtics led 95-72 with 9:13 remaining.
- <sup>2</sup> Roger Underwood, "Jack, James Star as Sonics Tip L.A." *Daily Olympian (Washington)*, October 18, 1979. The injury was first thought to be a torn MCL, which would have required two months or more of recovery time.
- <sup>3</sup> Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. New York: Gotham, 2013, p73-79.
- <sup>4</sup> The Ice Capades were in Boston from December 26 through January 6. "Places to go," *Boston Globe*, December 21, 1979.
- <sup>5</sup> Bob Ryan, "LA agog over Bird vs. Magic," *Boston Globe*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>6</sup> Scott Ostler, "Larry Bird Says 'Magic' is Better," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>7</sup> Buck Harvey, "Bird vs. the Magic Man," *Boston Herald American*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>8</sup> Joe Hamelin, "Celtics Run Clippers Out of Arena," *San Diego Union*, December 28, 1979. Cowens outscored Free 18 to 17 in the first half; for the game, Cowens shot 13-for-20, Free 11-for-17.
- <sup>9</sup> Buck Harvey, "Magic's Lakers make Bird's Celtics go 'poof'," *Boston Herald American*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>10</sup> Wire story, "Like magic, Johnson bests Bird," *Milwaukee Journal*, 12/29/1979.
- <sup>11</sup> Scott Ostler, "Lakers and Johnson Winners, 123-105," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>12</sup> Bird, Larry and Magic Johnson with Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, p79.
- <sup>13</sup> Lee Daniel Levine, *Bird: The Making of an American Sports Legend*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988, p220.
- <sup>14</sup> Frank Brown, "Defense Keys Lakers Past Boston, 123-105," *The (Sumter, South Carolina) Daily Item*, 12/29/1979.
- <sup>15</sup> "Carter's Statement on Iran and Afghan Situations," *New York Times*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>16</sup> Adam Clymer, "Carter Pulls Out of Forum in Iowa, Saying the Iran Crisis Gets Priority," *New York Times*, December 29, 1979.
- <sup>17</sup> "Transcript of President's Speech," *New York Times*, January 5, 1980.
- <sup>18</sup> Wire story, "U.S. Olympians Triumph Again," (*Washington, DC*) *Evening Star*, December 27, 1979.
- <sup>19</sup> Wire story, "Olympic Team Trips Russians," *Sacramento Bee*, December 31, 1979.
- <sup>20</sup> Photos of the injury sequence in (*Washington, DC*) *Evening Star*, January 10, 1980.
- <sup>21</sup> Jack Craig, "Who will fill void left by Lobel?" *Boston Globe*, December 30, 1979. CBS would also broadcast the Celtics game against the defending champion Seattle SuperSonics a week later, on Super Bowl Sunday.
- <sup>22</sup> Rick Stewart, "The NBA on CBS on TV-38," *Boston Herald American*, January 13, 1980. Channel 7 had been a long-time ABC affiliate, and that network had encouraged stations to carry the telethon. The station changed ownership in 1982, and in January 1984, the telethon began airing on the ABC station in Boston, Channel 5.
- <sup>23</sup> A complete video of the game is available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eUyMFzagt4> (accessed November 3, 2018).
- <sup>24</sup> Bob Ryan, "Great Game, Tough Call Go Lakers' Way; Celtics Stall after Half, Fall, 100-98," *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1980.
- <sup>25</sup> Larry Whiteside, "Cooper Was Super Guarding Bird," *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1980.
- <sup>26</sup> Bob Ryan, "Jabbar earns totals," *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1980.
- <sup>27</sup> Bob Ryan, "Great Game, Tough Call Go Lakers' Way; Celtics Stall after Half, Fall, 100-98," *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1980.
- <sup>28</sup> Larry Whiteside, "Celtics add 3 to All-Star Team," *Boston Globe*, January 23, 1980. Cowens would miss the game due to a hyperextended left big toe, and rookie Bill Cartwright of the Knicks was tapped to replace him. Bob Ryan, "Henderson strikes again," *Boston Globe*, January 31, 1980.
- <sup>29</sup> "Caucus history: Past years' results," <http://caucuses.desmoinesregister.com/caucus-history-past-years-results/>, accessed November 20, 2018.
- <sup>30</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Vance Sets Deadline for Soviet to Avoid Threat to Olympics," *New York Times*, January 16, 1980.