

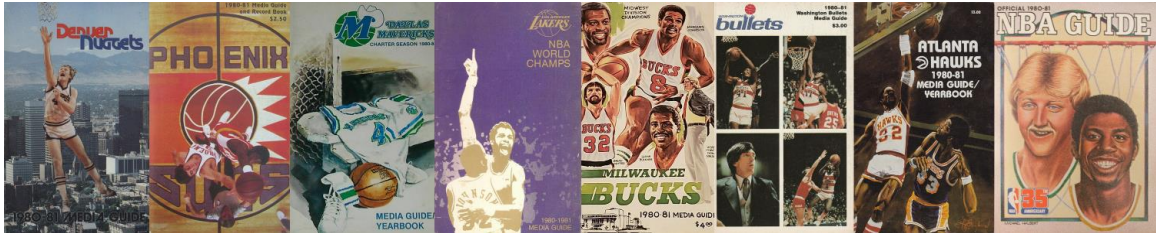


80s Era NBA + 40: Part Six

1980-81 Season Review

By Michael Hamel

1980-81 In Review



Finals: Boston Celtics def. Houston Rockets (4-2)

MVP: Julius Erving
ROY: Darrell Griffith

MVP Voting Top 5: Erving, Bird, Abdul-Jabbar, Malone, Gervin

All-NBA First Team

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Larry Bird, Julius Erving, George Gervin, Dennis Johnson

All-NBA Second Team

Tiny Archibald, Otis Birdsong, Adrian Dantley, Marques Johnson, Moses Malone

Players of the Week (Month)

- October** Adrian Dantley, Otis Birdsong (Magic Johnson)
- November** David Thompson, Elvin Hayes, Billy Knight, Artis Gilmore, Robert Parish (Julius Erving)
- December** Mike Dunleavy, Dan Roundfield, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Dennis Johnson (Freeman Williams)
- January** Bernard King, Tiny Archibald, Erving, Phil Ford (King)
- February** Kenny Carr, Caldwell Jones, Mike Newlin, Mike Mitchell (Calvin Murphy)
- March** Terry Tyler, Larry Smith, Moses Malone, Micheal Ray Richardson, Robert Reid (Kelvin Ransey)

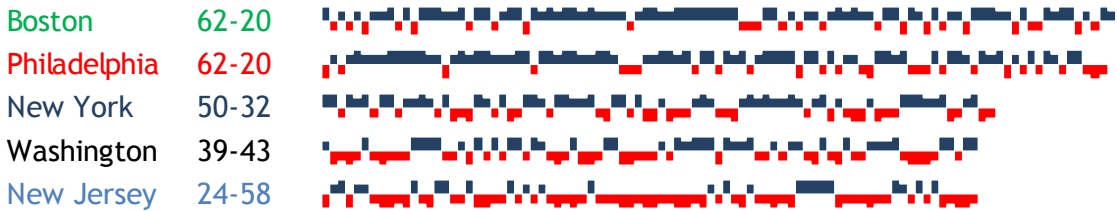
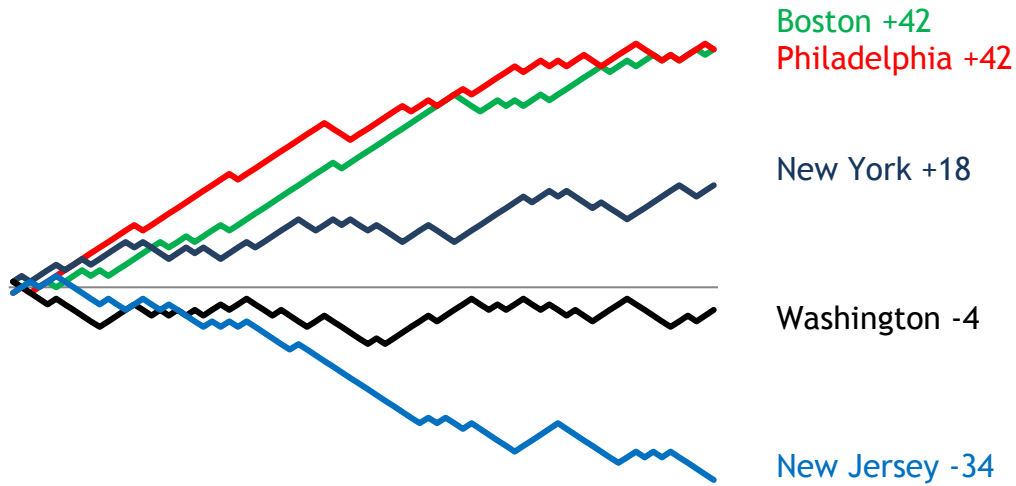
All-Defensive First Team

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Dennis Johnson, Bobby Jones, Caldwell Jones, Micheal Ray Richardson

All-Defensive Second Team

Dudley Bradley, Quinn Buckner, Michael Cooper, George Johnson, Dan Roundfield, Kermit Washington

1980-81 Atlantic Division



32-2

Philadelphia's record from 10/15/1980 through 12/26/1980, which included a 12 game winning streak and a pair of 10 game streaks

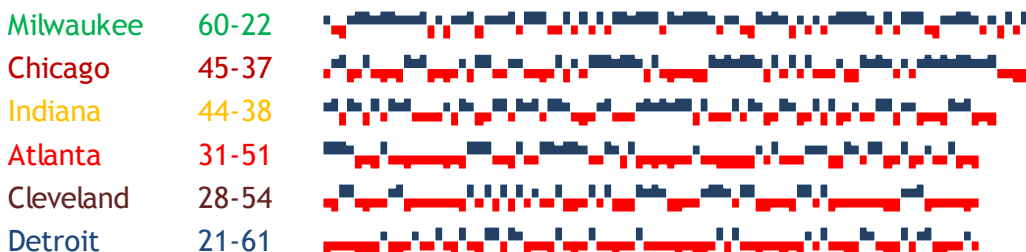
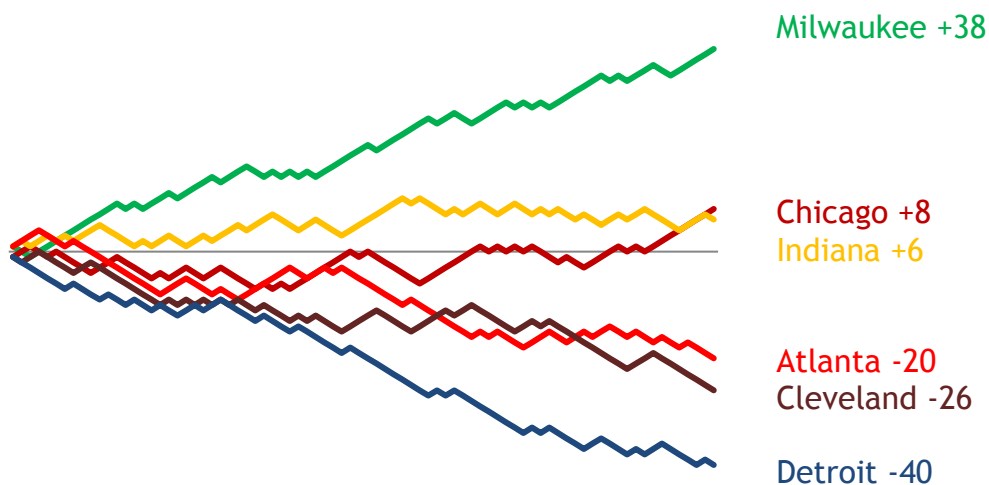
4-32

Record of the expansion Dallas Mavericks during the same time period

25-1

Boston's record from 12/9/1980 through 1/28/1981, which culminated with a victory over Philadelphia to pull the Celtics into a virtual tie for first in the division

1980-81 Central Division

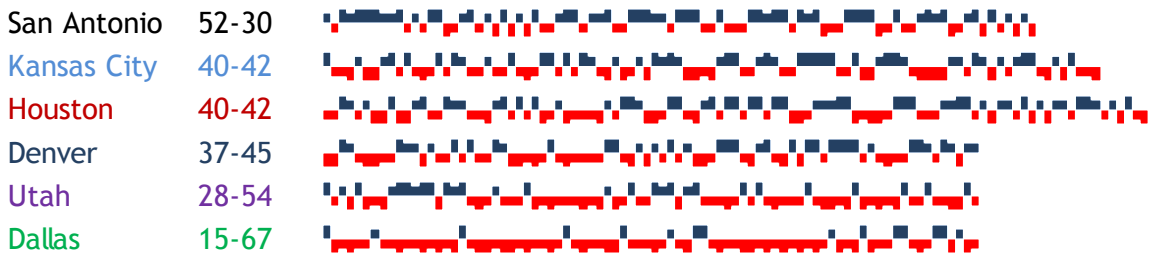
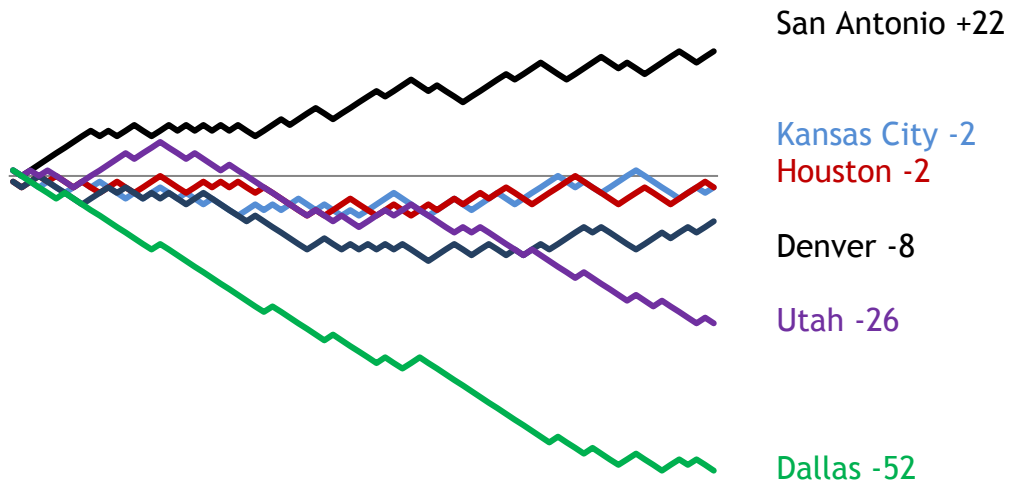


Best of the Rest

The 1980-81 Bucks were the only team during the 80s Era to fail to reach the Conference Finals after winning 60 games in the regular season, losing to the 62-win 76ers in the semifinals. Seven other teams with 55 or more wins would also fall short:

1979-80	Phoenix Suns	55-27	Lost to Los Angeles (60 wins) in semifinals
1980-81	Phoenix Suns	57-25	Lost to Kansas City (40) in semifinals
1981-82	Milwaukee Bucks	55-27	Lost to Philadelphia (58) in semifinals
1982-83	Boston Celtics	56-26	Lost to Milwaukee (51) in semifinals
1984-85	Milwaukee Bucks	59-23	Lost to Philadelphia (58) in semifinals
1986-87	Atlanta Hawks	57-25	Lost to Detroit (52) in semifinals
1986-87	Dallas Mavericks	55-27	Lost to Seattle (39) in first round

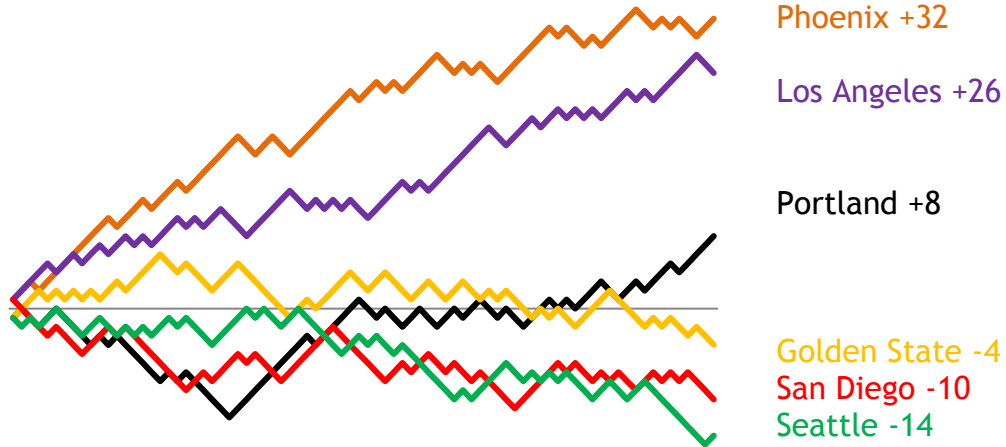
1980-81 Midwest Division



Off the Court

November	Ronald Reagan defeats incumbent President Jimmy Carter
December	John Lennon murdered in New York City
January	Lech Walesa visits Pope John Paul II at the Vatican; Iran Hostage Crisis ends with release of all 52 remaining hostages after Reagan takes oath of office
March	Reagan shot by John Hinckley in assassination attempt
April	First launch of US Space Shuttle program (Columbia)
May	Pope John Paul II nearly assassinated in St. Peter's Square

1980-81 Pacific Division



Phoenix	57-25	
Los Angeles	54-28	
Portland	45-37	
Golden State	39-43	
San Diego	36-46	
Seattle	34-48	

Opening Tip: Bill Laimbeer, Kevin McHale, Andrew Toney, and the Dallas Mavericks

Final Buzzer: Henry Bibby, Doug Collins, Gar Heard, Wes Unseld, and the Nuggets
"Maxie the Miner" logo¹

14-5

Lakers record on November 18 when Magic Johnson suffers knee injury versus Kings²

43-22

Lakers record on February 27 when Magic returns to play against the Nets (29-17 in his absence)

NBA 35th Anniversary Team

On October 30, 1980, at Gallagher’s Steakhouse in Manhattan, the NBA unveiled the results of a poll of Pro Basketball Writers Association of America members that selected the 11 best players in NBA history. Each writer was asked to select 10 players from a pre-determined list of 50, one coach from a list of 15, and to pick one team as the greatest NBA team of all-time.³ Just two active players were on the ballot: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius Erving; ten years earlier, when the Silver (25th) Anniversary team had been selected, only retired players had been eligible.⁴

Commissioner Larry O’Brien led off the press conference but quickly turned to Red Auerbach, who had been selected as the head coach of the team, to introduce the other honorees. Auerbach lavished praise on all of them, especially Bill Russell, who had earned the most votes and was designated as the “greatest” player. “You could fool him once, maybe, but not twice in an entire season,’ Auerbach said. ‘He always – not usually, always – made the big play. ... We’ve remained good friends over the years because, actually, where would I be without him?’”⁵

The selections were dominated by former and current members of the Celtics, Lakers, and 76ers:

Player	NBA Teams
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Bucks-Lakers
Elgin Baylor	Lakers
Wilt Chamberlain	Warriors-76ers-Lakers
Bob Cousy	Celtics-Royals
Julius Erving	76ers
John Havlicek	Celtics
George Mikan	Lakers
Bob Pettit	Hawks
Oscar Robertson	Royals-Bucks
Bill Russell	Celtics
Jerry West	Lakers

Russell had been the only unanimous selection on the Silver Anniversary team, so this most recent accolade was not a surprise, though rumor had it that Chamberlain was unhappy about being passed over for the honor.⁶ All of the retired players, except for Chamberlain and West, appeared at Gallagher’s (Abdul-Jabbar and Erving had games to play the next day); Chamberlain and West also skipped a halftime ceremony at the All-Star Game on February 1.

80s Era Demographics

24

Number of players during the 80s Era who were born outside of the United States

108

Number of players at the start of the 2019-20 season who were born outside of the United States (from 38 different countries)⁷

A significant change between 1960 and the 80s Era was the racial composition of the league, which had undergone nearly a 180 degree reversal in a generation.⁸ A milestone in that transition occurred just as the 80s Era was getting underway, when the New York Knicks and Detroit Pistons met at the Pontiac Silverdome on October 18, 1979.⁹ Neither team had a white player on their roster, the first time that had ever happened in NBA history. The Pistons later traded Bob Lanier for Kent Benson in February and signed Steve Malovic in March, but the Knicks roster would remain all-black for two seasons. No other team during the 80s Era would do the same.

24.24%

Percentage of black players in the NBA in 1960

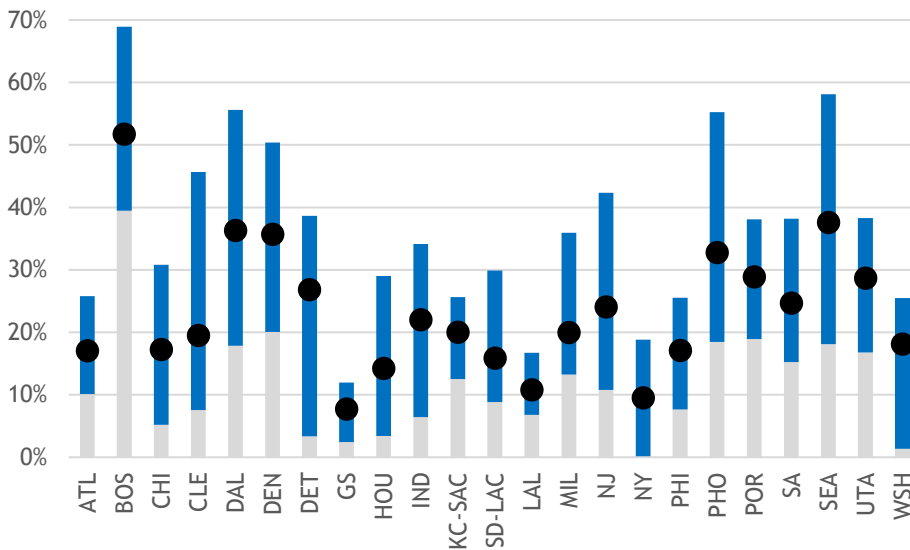
27.25%

Percentage of white players in the NBA during the 80s Era

One of the ongoing topics of conversation in the 80s Era centered on the Boston Celtics' use of white players in a much greater proportion than the rest of the league. An examination of the years 1979-80 through 1986-87 shows that, on average, white players played 20 to 26 percent of the total minutes each season, peaking in 1980-81, and dropping over time.

Season	% of Minutes (Whites)
1979-80	25.11
1980-81	26.09
1981-82	24.70
1982-83	23.75
1983-84	22.63
1984-85	21.46
1985-86	21.72
1986-87	20.89

The Celtics average for these eight seasons was 51.49%, much higher than the league average, and fifteen points higher than the Dallas Mavericks, who come in second. In fact, the Celtics low water mark for the percentage of minutes played by whites, 39.45% in 1982-83, would have represented the *high water mark* for sixteen other NBA teams. In contrast, the Lakers and 76ers both used white players much less frequently.



Note: Blue bars illustrate the spread between the maximum and minimum % of a team’s minutes played by white players in a single season during the 80s Era. Black dot indicates team average for the eight seasons.

Boston also claims four of the top nine spots in a table of individual teams in the 80s Era with the highest percentage of minutes played by white players:

Season	Team	% of Minutes
1985-86	Boston Celtics	68.92
1986-87	Boston Celtics	63.98
1984-85	Seattle SuperSonics	58.09
1980-81	Dallas Mavericks	55.60
1979-80	Phoenix Suns	55.22
1979-80	Boston Celtics	53.79
1983-84	Seattle SuperSonics	52.71
1984-85	Boston Celtics	51.30
1982-83	Denver Nuggets	50.38

However, these figures need to be placed in the proper context. Under Red Auerbach's leadership, the Celtics broke many barriers that stood against full integration of the NBA: they drafted the first black player (Chuck Cooper in 1950), started the first all-black lineup (in December 1964), and hired the first black coach (Bill Russell in 1966). While Boston's image was still tarnished by the city's reputation of being openly hostile to blacks, Auerbach had not shied away from drafting Cedric Maxwell in 1977, or trading for Robert Parish in 1980, or shipping fan favorite Rick Robey (who was white) to Phoenix in 1983 for Dennis Johnson, who was viewed as a locker room malcontent that might have trouble "fitting in" in Boston, despite his obvious talent. Five of the Celtics first-round picks during the 80s Era were also black.

By the spring of 1985, with Cedric Maxwell sidelined with knee trouble, and Bird, McHale and Ainge all starting (and soon playing marathon minutes) the Celtics became predominately a white team. The trade of Maxwell for Bill Walton that summer, an exchange of damaged goods, further tipped the scales. The 1985-86 Celtics featured Scott Wedman, Walton and Jerry Sichting as their top three bench players, with Rick Carlisle, another white player, as the fourth. A year later, the Celtics became more racially balanced due to injuries, and if Len Bias would have lived, there would have been an even more dramatic shift.

Since basketball teams play just five players at a time, one player can make a dramatic difference in terms of playing time and other statistics. If, for the sake of argument, you substituted Adrian Dantley or another black player for Larry Bird, and assume that he would have played the same minutes, the Celtics' average percentage of minutes played by white players during the 80s Era would have dropped to just over 36 percent. That would still have ranked high, but would place Boston right in line with Dallas, Denver, Phoenix and Seattle.

The Celtics lack of black players was made even more noticeable by the dearth of white faces on the benches of their main rivals in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. There were a few exceptions. The Lakers had signed Mitch Kupchak in 1981 with the intent of making him a major piece of their lineup. But Kupchak suffered a significant knee injury after just 26 games and never played a full season in Los Angeles. Kupchak's minutes were partially filled by Kurt Rambis, who became the most significant white contributor on the Lakers after the departure of Mark Landsberger. The 76ers used Bobby Jones as a sixth man and an occasional starter, and then, after trading Darryl Dawkins in 1982, acquired Marc Iavaroni to start at power forward on their championship team.

Ultimately, the fact that the Celtics drafted two white Hall of Famers (Bird and McHale) who grew to be coveted by most of the rest of the NBA should not be used as "evidence" to claim that the team was racist.

Next Time: The Milwaukee Bucks and their ill-fated chase for a title

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Notes

¹ Maxie the Miner: http://www.nba.com/history/uniforms_nuggets.html

² The Lakers defeated the Kings anyway on November 18, to raise their record to 15-5.

³ Alex Sachare (AP), "NBA Takes Stab at Selecting All-Time Team," (*Zanesville, Ohio*) *Times Recorder*, October 30, 1980.

⁴ <http://apbr.org/oldtimrs.html>

⁵ Bob Ryan, "Russell's self-revelation – he really does care," *Boston Globe*, October 31, 1980.

⁶ Dick Weiss, "Tiny Excels in Land of the Giants," *Philadelphia Daily News*, February 2, 1981. Bob Ryan, "San Diego Chicken was a star, too," *Boston Globe*, February 2, 1981.

⁷ "NBA rosters feature 108 international players in 2019-20," <https://www.nba.com/news/nba-rosters-feature-108-international-players-2019-20>

⁸ All of the graphics and tables in this section were created by the author, using data from John Grasso's biographical database, available online at <http://apbr.org/NBAData1.xls> and <http://apbr.org/NBAData2.xls>

⁹ "One Year After Pacers-Pistons Fight, Tough Questions of Race and Sports," by Harvey Araton, *New York Times*, October 30, 2005; the article was adapted from Araton's book, *Crashing the Borders: How Basketball Won the World and Lost Its Soul at Home*. The *New York Times* article is available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/sports/basketball/30borders.ready.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0